Washback of an English Language Assessment System in a Malaysian University Foundation Programme

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Abstract

Washback refers to the influence of language assessment on teaching and learning. In contrast to the wealth of studies involving external large-scale language examinations, scant research has been conducted to explore the influence of internal language assessment on instruction, particularly in the context of a university foundation programme. This qualitative study investigated the washback effects of an English language assessment system (ELAS) on the teaching and learning of English in a Malaysian university foundation programme. Apart from an in-depth analysis of official documents on the ELAS, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with three curriculum and assessment developers, three English language instructors, four students and four alumni of the foundation programme and analysed the collected data using Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for qualitative data analysis. Findings indicated that the ELAS, with its different assessment forms, exerted an overall positive washback on various aspects of English teaching and learning. Yet, a number of factors related to the assessment, teachers, students as well as context mediated the extent of washback experienced. Based on the findings of the study, we put forward a few recommendations on how to encourage positive washback.

Keywords

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Keywords: washback, internal assessment, English Language Foundation Programme, semi-structured interviews

Introduction

Testing is commonly believed to have an effect on teaching and learning. A case in point would be a teacher's adaptation of teaching materials and methodology to assist students preparing for an exam. When a test has an impact on the educational process involving the teacher and the students, it is generally termed as "backwash" (Hughes, 1989); though, the term "washback" is more widespread in the language testing and assessment field (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng et al., 2015). Depending on whether that impact proves harmful or beneficial, a distinction is drawn between negative and positive washback. A test is said to have negative washback when a restricted definition of linguistic competence is taken as a basis for the development of its content or design, which results in teaching and learning contexts becoming narrow in scope. Alternatively, positive washback occurs when a test stimulates good teaching and learning practices (Taylor, 2005).

Empirical studies on washback in the field of language testing have been rapidly increasing in number over the past decades since Alderson and Wall (1993) posited the 15 Washback Hypotheses (e.g., Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Andrews et al., 2002; Cheng, 1997, 1998; Fox & Cheng, 2007; Pan, 2014; Qi, 2004, 2005; Watanabe, 1996). Overall, they have highlighted the high complexity of such a phenomenon as washback. At the same time, they have shown different aspects of learning and teaching are influenced by language tests

with a variety of factors being involved in the washback process, which necessitates a careful study of how certain assessment procedures operate within specific settings (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017; Watanabe, 2004). However, a review of pertinent literature reveals the majority of studies on washback have focused on the effects of external large-scale one-off language examinations, which are of great consequence academically and professionally. By the same token, little investigation has been conducted into the impact of internal teacher-led assessment on language teaching and learning, as it is also acknowledged by Cheng et al. (2015). In particular, there have been only few attempts to explore the washback effects of internal language assessment in the context of a university foundation programme (e.g., Buyukkeles, 2016; Köktürk, 2015).

Furthermore, although current models of washback (e.g., Alderson & Wall, 1993; Hughes, 1993) include multiple stakeholders as participants of washback mechanisms, a larger number of previous studies have focused on the effects of tests on various aspects of teaching alone. In contrast, relatively little research to date has been conducted on the effects of assessment on learners - "the key participants whose lives are most directly influenced by language testing washback" (Bailey, 1999, p. 14), in particular on their perceptions, learning processes, and learning outcomes (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). Moreover, despite the growing number of washback studies worldwide, only a few studies have investigated the effects of language assessment on teaching and learning within the Malaysian educational context, and, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no washback study to date has been conducted in the context of a Malaysian university foundation programme.

The present study set out to help fill these gaps in the literature by examining the washback of an internal English language assessment system (ELAS) in a Malaysian university foundation programme from the perspective of teachers and students. In particular, it was of interest to ascertain how the assessment system affects teachers' instructional practices and students' language learning. Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the intended washback of the ELAS on the teaching and learning of English in the Malaysian university foundation programme?

2. How do the teachers perceive the ELAS and its washback on their English language teaching?

3. How do the students perceive the ELAS and its washback on their English language learning?

It is hoped that the present explorative study will contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of the washback of internal language assessment and be of benefit to all parties involved in English language foundation programmes in Malaysia and worldwide. It is noteworthy that similar programmes are increasingly prevalent in countries where English is spoken as a second or foreign language and proficiency in English is a requirement for university entry.

Washback in Language Assessment

The Concept and Nature of Washback

Washback refers to a controversial phenomenon, whose scope and complexity has been extensively researched by numerous applied linguists in various educational contexts over the

last three decades. Indeed, as Cheng et al. (2015) note: "No area of language assessment research in the past 20 years has received a greater increase in attention than washback research" (p. 436). Even though there is a general consensus among researchers on the existence of washback per se, views differ widely on the precise definition of this concept.

Some researchers narrow the extent of washback to interaction of teachers and students in classrooms (e.g., Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Messick, 1996), while others hold a broader view of the phenomenon that spreads beyond classroom to society at large (e.g., Brown & Hudson, 1998; Andrews et al., 2002). It is noteworthy that some researchers (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 1997), who distinguish between "test washback" and "test impact," regard washback as an aspect of "impact," where the latter refers to "any of the effects that tests may have on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system, or society as a whole" (Wall, 1997, p. 291). However, for the purposes of this study, washback and impact will be used interchangeably as the focus is limited to the language classroom. The definition of the term "washback" as "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (Messick, 1996, p. 243) is also adopted.

Theorists often discuss test washback as being either "negative" or "positive" depending on whether they inhibit or promote language development respectively. According to Alderson and Wall (1993) as well as Cheng and Curtis (2004), tests and particularly language tests are oftentimes blamed for having an adverse influence or "negative washback" on teaching and learning. Similarly, Vernon (1956) and Davies (1968) hold examinations responsible for causing distortions of the curriculum and rendering learning experience restricted and dull, forcing students to practice "exam techniques rather than language learning activities" (Wiseman 1961, p. 159). Noble and Smith (1994) maintain teaching towards the tests, especially high-stakes tests, which are of great importance to individuals and institutions, has a direct and unfavourable effect on teachers and point out "teaching test-taking skills and drilling on multiple-choice worksheets is likely to boost the scores but unlikely to increase general understanding" (p. 6). Brown (2002) points out washback will become negative "when there is a mismatch between the construct definition and the test or between the content (e.g., the material/abilities being taught) and the test" (p. 12).

"Advocates of beneficial washback" (Green, 2007, p. 14), on the other hand, hold changing test formats will lead to the enhancement of learning and teaching practices. Pearson (1988) believes tests can serve as "levers for change" (p. 101) and as instruments for the improvement of curriculum and teaching. According to Alderson (1986), potential washback of tests is determined by their characteristics and utilization. Based on this interpretation, "if a bad test has negative impact, a good test should or could have positive washback" (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001, p. 214). As stated by Bachman (1990), beneficial washback takes place when the exam represents the content and competencies taught in the classroom.

Besides, from the viewpoint of washback proponents, teaching to the test can be justifiably regarded as stimulating instructional reform as long as the test represents the curriculum (Noble & Smith, 1994). It should be noted that "teaching to the test," which is referred to as "curriculum-teaching" by Popham (2001, p. 16), means "teachers direct their instruction toward a specific body of content knowledge or a specific set of cognitive skills represented by a given test." It should be clearly distinguished from "teaching the test" or "item-teaching," where "teachers organize their instruction either around the actual items found on a test or around a set of look-alike items" (Popham, 2001, p. 16).

According to Messick (1996), positive washback will become more probable when classroom activities are identical to those used in the test: "for optimal positive washback there should be little, if any, difference between activities involved in learning the language and

activities involved in preparing for the test" (pp. 241–242). Furthermore, Messick (1996) states the likelihood of positive washback increases if tests include criterion samples: "authentic and direct samples of the communicative behaviours of listening, speaking, reading and writing of the language being learnt" (p. 241), thus minimizing "the two major threats to construct validity" (p. 247) - namely, "construct under-representation" (e.g., when a test of communicative competence does not test interactive language ability) and "construct-irrelevant variance" (e.g., when a test of communicative competence contains a high proportion of decontextualized grammar probes).

Adopting a relatively neutral standpoint, Alderson and Wall (1993) maintain the "quality of the washback might be independent of the quality of a test" (p. 118). They contend that other factors besides the test characteristics can influence the absence or presence of washback, which emphasises the necessity to differentiate between washback effects and other effects. Given the complexity of teaching and its proneness to the influence of various factors, Messick (1996) argues only effects that are explicitly relatable to the test ought to be deemed washback: "washback is a consequence of testing that bears on validity only if it can be evidentially shown to be an effect of the test and not of other forces operative on the educational scene" (p. 242). However, he warns against confusing evidence of washback with that of poor or good teaching and stresses the necessity to distinguish "…test-linked *positive* washback from *good* teaching regardless of the quality of the test and *negative* washback from *poor* teaching" (Messick, 1996, p. 243, emphasis added).

Theories and Research on Washback

Hughes (1993) argues tests inherently affect attitudes and perceptions towards teaching and learning. In an attempt to illustrate the mechanism of test washback, he further uses the participant-process-product trichotomy as major components that are affected by washback. "Participants" include students, teachers, administrators, materials developers and publishers; "processes" denote actions taken by the participants that may contribute to the process of learning, such as the development of materials, syllabus design, and teaching methods; while "products*"* constitute what is learned and the quality of the learning (Hughes, 1993).

Alderson and Wall (1993), on the other hand, elaborate on micro-facets of teaching and learning, which could be influenced by exams in elucidating the washback mechanism. Based on their seminal Sri Lankan study (Wall & Alderson, 1993) as well as the review of previous case studies in the Netherlands, Turkey and Nepal, they formulated 15 hypotheses on test washback effects in relation to teachers, learners, teaching content, teaching methodology, quality, and quantity of teaching and learning as well as the link between the extent of washback and test status. Subsequently, these hypotheses were revisited and refined by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) as follows: "Tests will have different amounts and types of washback on some teachers and learners than on other teachers and learners" (p. 296).

Having congruently synthesized relevant literature along with the Washback Hypotheses by Alderson and Wall (1993) as well as Hughes' (1993) participant-process-product trichotomy, Bailey (1996) advanced her "basic model of washback" presented in the form of a diagram with an addition of "researchers" into the "participants" category. In her model, Bailey (1996) corroborates Hughes' (1993) idea that "the ultimate product of beneficial washback is the improved learning of the construct being measured" (Bailey, 1996, p. 11).

The participant-process-product trichotomy proposed by Hughes (1993) is reflected in the focus of many studies on washback effects published since the early 1990s. A review of the relevant literature also indicates that washback studies can be classified into two broad categories: (1) studies on traditional large-scale, standardized, multiple-choice tests, which are generally perceived to have adverse effects on teaching and learning; and (2) studies on newly-

introduced or revised tests designed to bring about positive impact on teaching and learning (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). The latter can be further divided into two groups: (a) an overwhelming majority of studies investigating the impact of external (national and international) one-off language examinations and (b) a smaller number of studies exploring the washback effects of internal teacher-led language assessment. This study focuses largely on the latter of these two groups and hence this review of past research will generally highlight the findings of studies with a similar context and focus according to washback effects on participants, processes, and products.

In one such study, Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) investigated the washback of a classroom-based oral assessment system at a language centre of a private university in Colombia. Data collected through student and teacher surveys, classroom observations, as well as external evaluations of students' speaking performances indicated positive impact of the classroom assessment on different aspects of teaching and learning. This study highlighted the importance of institutional support in order to promote positive feedback as the authors concluded that the on-going guidance and support for teachers allowed the internal assessment system at the centre to generally succeed.

Teacher factors are also prominent in the study conducted by Watanabe (1996) who investigated the influence of an in-house Japanese university entrance examination on teaching methods. Data collected through interviews with teachers, classroom observations as well as analyses of examinations of English suggested minimal relationship between the test and the teaching methodology used in the classroom. Watanabe, however, concluded teacher factors, such as personal beliefs, academic background, as well as teaching experience suppressed the washback of the test on the choice of methodology by teachers. Teachers often are in the position to exercise some degree of agency over test washback as indicated by Larsson and Olin-Scheller (2020) who describe how teachers choose to adapt to some parts of a national test in first-year Swedish and simultaneously express resistance to other parts.

Just as teachers may respond in different ways to tests, students too have also shown varied responses as well, depending on learner characteristics and attributes. In a study by Buyukkeles (2016), for example, an internal high stakes exit test on students' learning motivation at the EFL preparatory school of a Turkish university had a greater motivational effect on higher proficiency than on lower proficiency students. The test, designed to assess students' core language skills along with vocabulary and grammar knowledge, was used to decide the eligibility of students for university admission. Based on data from a questionnaire administered to 366 students and standardised interviews with 6 students, the researcher concluded the test had exerted negligible washback on both higher and lower proficiency students' intrinsic motivation for learning English. However, the test also exerted a significant impact on the extrinsic motivation of students in both groups, affecting higher proficiency students to a greater extent.

In terms of how washback can affect the processes related to tests, Yu's (2010) study provides some interesting insights especially with respect to the implementation of School Based Assessment (SBA). The study examined the impact of a SBA component introduced as a part of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in English on the teaching and learning of English in a secondary school. Designed to assess students' speaking skills, the SBA component was intended to become an integral part of instructional processes as well as strengthened core assessment practices such as providing continuous feedback to students on their performance. The results of the case study involving interviews, surveys and classroom observation indicated SBA affected the amount of classroom activities and assessment practices, though it was treated by teachers as a separate exam. With regards to students, the study suggested some washback of SBA on students' learning activities outside the classroom.

However, contrary to expectation, the students did not perceive the benefits of teacher and peer feedback, which they regarded as superficial and not useful.

Finally, many studies have also examined the assessment format used by the tests. The study by Hung (2012), for example, explored the washback of e-portfolio assessment on student teachers' learning. The portfolio project was introduced as an alternative assessment project in a teacher training course of a national university in Taiwan and involved 18 students taking the Master TESOL programme. From the analysis of data derived from interviews combined with observations and document analysis, the author concluded that the portfolio assessment exerts positive washback on learning by helping the project participants build a community of practice, facilitate peer learning, improve content knowledge acquisition, encourage professional development, and foster critical thinking. Nevertheless, they also noted e-portfolio assessment caused negative washback as well by raising anxiety in the learning process due to larger audiences in their work and the technical know-how required in the use of technology.

In the Turkish context, the study by Köktürk (2015) investigated the washback effects of quizzes and mid-term exams on teaching and learning at a Turkish university EFL preparatory school. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 464 students, interviews with 10 students and 6 instructors. The results suggested that the quizzes had mainly negative washback effects, whereas the mid-term exams had both positive and negative effects on learning and teaching. As the quizzes administered mainly dealt with lexical and grammatical aspects, the researcher believed that they would not be able to assess students' skills that were directly related to language use. As a result, "instead of learning, the students memorize the rules and the words" (p. ix). Mid-term exams, on the other hand, assessed the four language skills and were found to help the students enhance their communicative competence and language use. However, Köktürk regarded that the assessment situation also led to negative washback as both the instructors and students were found to neglect grammar and vocabulary in classes owing to the absence grammar and vocabulary sections in the mid-term exam.

There have been few attempts to explore the impact of internal language assessment on teaching and learning within the framework of a university foundation programme (Buyukkeles, 2016; Köktürk, 2015), and specific language teaching and learning situations can exert different kinds and levels of washback. In this respect, there is a lack of studies on washback in the Malaysian educational context. The present study aims to help fill these gaps in the literature by examining the washback of an internal English language assessment system on teaching and learning in a Malaysian university foundation programme, specifically from the perspectives of teachers and students. As stated by Tsagari (2007), to gain a complete understanding of washback, it is imperative to examine the impact of a given test from multiple perspectives, including "at least the two central participants involved: teachers and students" (p. 59).

The English Language Assessment System (ELAS)

The English language assessment system (ELAS) under consideration is part of a one-year English language preparation programme offered in a Malaysian university's centre for foundation studies that the language centre of the university developed over a period of more than 12 years. Students in the centre for foundation studies are required to take two English language courses in the ELAS over a period of a year in addition to courses in the sciences and mathematics. Although the students are required to sit for a standardized national English language examination as an entry requirement into the university's degree programme, the ELAS is not a direct test preparation programme but rather focuses on raising student language

proficiency. Students in the ELAS programme are generally exposed to an assessment system that differs from the national standardized examinations that they sat for at the end of their secondary school education as well as the one they will take in order to enter the university as an undergraduate.

The ELAS consists of various assessment formats, such as student-centred learning (SCL) tasks, portfolio assessments as well as formal tests designed to evaluate students' general and academic language abilities over two 18-week semesters. In both courses, evaluation is divided into continuous assessment, which involves a series of assignments, tasks and short tests, and the final course examination, both having equal contribution to the final grade. The weightings for each mode of assessment are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Weightings of Continuous Assessment and Final Examination

SEMESTER 1 (Course 1)		SEMESTER 2 (Course 2)	
Continuous Assessment (50%)		**Continuous Assessment (50%)**	
W*2-18	**SCL** tasks (10%)** *Speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary*	W1-17	**SCL tasks (10%)** *Speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary*
W7	**Test 1 (10%)** *Listening and note-taking*	W7	**Test 1 (10%)** *Listening and note-taking*
W8-17	**Writing Portfolio (15%)** *1. Report writing* *2. Essay writing*	W8-12	**Academic Portfolio (30%)** *1. Opinion Forming (individual) 5%* *2. Information Gathering & Organisation (pair work) 20%* *3. Poster Presentation (pair work) 5%*
W14	**Test 2 (15%)** *Reading comprehension*		
Final Examination (50%)		**Final Examination (50%)**	
W15	**Speaking Assessment (15%)** *1. Individual presentation* *2. Group discussion*	W18	**Written Test (50%)** *1. Writing 35%* *2. Reading comprehension 15%*
W18	**Written Test (35%)** *1. Report writing 15%* *2. Essay writing 20%*		

Note. *W = Week, **SCL = student-centred learning

Toward the end of the first semester of the foundation programme, all students are required to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which is an external English language proficiency examination set as a prerequisite for admission to all public universities in Malaysia. MUET is broadly similar to other criterion-referenced language proficiency tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, and consists of four components: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006). Test takers can achieve the maximum aggregate score of 300, which is made up of scores of 45 for listening and likewise for speaking, 120 for reading and 90 for writing. Depending on the total scores achieved across the four components, test takers will receive a band score showing their level of proficiency, which range from Band 1 (Extremely limited user) to Band 6 (Excellent user). The minimum set for entry to most universities in Malaysia is MUET Band Score 3, while Band Score 4 is required for admission to degree programmes as TESL, English Literature, Medicine and Law, which require higher proficiency in the language.

The fact that the ELAS is embedded in the curriculum indicates a difference between internal classroom assessment and external testing, which should be considered in the present study. As pointed out by Goldstein (1989), the main difference between external testing or

"separate assessment" and classroom assessment is "its deliberate attempt to avoid connection with particular learning environments" (p. 140). Classroom evaluation is closely connected with learning processes and given that the ELAS is integrated with classroom instruction, its impact on learning and teaching is likely to differ from the influence of an external exam, especially considering that teachers are encouraged to deal with the test content in pursuance of the curriculum objectives (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010).

An important feature of the ELAS is that information from various assessment formats is used both for formative and summative purposes, which is in harmony with the underpinning principles of "assessment *for* learning." Accordingly, students' learning is promoted through providing "information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black et al., 2003, p. 2). As stated by Biggs (1998), there is a "powerful interaction" between summative assessment (SA) and formative assessment (FA), which "could usefully be incorporated in an overall synthesis, so that both backwash (from SA) and feedback (from FA) are conceptualized within the same framework" (p. 105). He argues this type of synthesis can potentially bring about a significant enhancement of learning by virtue of allowing to engineer positive washback from summative assessment "supporting" the feedback from formative assessment (p. 105).

Although we believe the ELAS positively influences teaching and learning in the foundation programme, there is no empirical evidence to support this claim. Nevertheless, the approach taken by the ELAS to assign equal weight to continuous assessment and the final examination underscores the increasing belief in the importance of classroom-based assessment in Malaysian educational institutions. These institutions have long relied on end of programme or summative assessments to assess student learning. The first author of this article is a graduate student in Language Education while the second is a staff member of the Language Centre at the university. As educationists, we subscribe to the belief that washback can provide many positive effects on teaching and learning and consider a study on the washback of the ELAS as an opportunity to investigate how components in the education setting – the participants, processes, and products – are affected by washback. Since there are various factors mediating washback in addition to the assessment itself, it is important to understand them in order to gauge whether the intended positive effects of the ELAS are realized. As Alderson and Wall (1993) point out, "washback needs to be studied and understood, not asserted" (p. 68).

Methodology

In this study we aimed to explore teachers' and students' perspectives on the impact of the ELAS and qualitative research methods were deemed most appropriate to yield data that would best suit the research purpose. Researchers have increasingly employed qualitative research approaches in the field of language teaching and learning, and this is also becoming more apparent in research on washback (Watanabe, 2004). In contrast to quantitative research, which is characterized by the gathering of data with the aim of testing hypotheses about phenomena, qualitative research seeks to explore and understand the phenomena from the participants' point of view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Qualitative methods are also more flexible compared to quantitative research methods in that they allow greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participants (Mack et al., 2005).

Among different qualitative research strategies, we adopted the qualitative case study design to answer the research questions in the present study. A qualitative case study is "an in-depth analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 42), where bounded system denotes "a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 38). In terms of the

research process, Yin (2014) defines case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context" (p. 16). Similarly, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) see the case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 28). Given the purpose of this study was to investigate the washback of a language assessment system on the teaching and learning of English in a Malaysian university foundation programme, which is a bounded context, qualitative case study stood out as the most suitable research design. We believed that adopting this research strategy would help us understand not only how the ELAS influences teaching and learning, but also why it has such an impact in this particular context.

Research Participants

In accordance with the research objectives, three types of participants were involved in this study: (1) curriculum and assessment developers, (2) English language instructors, and (3) students. We used maximum variation sampling, which involves "purposefully picking a wide range of cases to get variation on dimensions of interest" (Patton, 2015, p. 267) to select the participants in order to enhance the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings and, more importantly, to investigate the role of various factors mediating the washback of the assessment system under consideration, in particular those related to the teachers and to the students.

All the participants in the study were recruited by first approaching their immediate supervisors to obtain permission to meet and interview the relevant staff members and students. Despite the management being aware of the purpose of and participants involved in the study, we felt it was still useful to maintain participant anonymity so as to obtain greater openness in their responses. Consequently, we informed all participants that their identities would be protected, and they would remain anonymous in the reporting of the research. We also made it clear to them that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that each of them had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. All the research participants indicated their willingness to participate in the study and signed an informed consent form prior to the interviews. At the time of the research, no institutional review board approval was required to conduct the study.

Curriculum and Assessment Developers

Three curriculum and assessment developers from the university's language centre, who were responsible for English courses at the centre for foundation studies, participated in the study. The names of the curriculum and assessment developers were replaced with the pseudonyms CAD-1, CAD-2 and CAD-3. The average teaching experience of the curriculum and assessment developers was around ten years. All of them had previously taught various English courses at the university's language centre and centre for foundation studies and held relevant academic requirements to teach English in Malaysian universities. The main reason for including the curriculum and assessment developers in the study was to understand the intended washback of the assessment system on teaching and learning.

English Language Instructors

Six English language instructors were teaching at the centre at the time of the research. From this total, we selected three instructors, largely on the basis of their ability and willingness to take time off from work and be involved in the study. The pseudonyms used to refer to the English language instructors are ELI-1, ELI-2, and ELI-3. For the sake of simplicity, the

English language instructors will also be referred to as "teachers" in the study. The main criteria for selecting English language instructors were their qualifications, previous teaching experience, experience of teaching English at the centre for foundation studies, and willingness to participate in the study. All three teachers had formal teaching qualifications from local universities in Malaysia, two of them holding a bachelor's degree (ELI-1, ELI-3) and one holding a master's degree in TESL (ELI-2). One of the language instructors had more than 20 years of experience in teaching English at secondary and tertiary levels (ELI-1), while each of the other two language instructors had been teaching English mainly at tertiary level for around 10 years. At the time of this study, all of them had been teaching the English preparatory programme at the university's centre for foundation studies for several months.

The fact it was the very first time the English language instructors were implementing the ELAS, which as a whole was significantly different from their previous assessment practices, was expected to afford a favourable opportunity to explore the washback effects the ELAS had on their teaching. Although the main purpose of including English language instructors as research participants was to ascertain their understanding of how the assessment system in question influenced their teaching, they were also asked about their views with regards to its washback on students and their learning.

Students

The English language instructors suggested several students based on a set of criteria that we listed. From the names provided, we selected a total of eight students to participate in the study. Four of them were enrolled in the foundation programme at the time of this research, while the other four had recently completed the preparatory programme and were pursuing their undergraduate studies at the university. The main reason for including alumni of the foundation programme was to elicit their overall perception of the assessment system and its long-term impact on their language skills. We felt that they were in a unique position to provide valuable information on the implementation of the ELAS as they had completed the programme and were also more likely to provide honest opinions about it. Apart from their perception of the washback of the assessment system on their learning, both groups of students were also asked about their opinion as to its washback on teachers and their instructional practices.

The main criteria for selecting students were the secondary school they attended, group enrolled in, their self-reported perceived level of proficiency in English (at the time of this study) and willingness to participate in the study. Table 2 below provides information on the student respondents, including the pseudonyms used.

Table 2
Characteristics of Student Participants

	CURRENT STUDENTS				ALUMNI			
Pseudonym	LPS-1	MPS-2	HPS-3	HPS-4	LPA-5	MPA-6	MPA-7	HPA-8
Gender	M	F	M	M	F	F	F	F
Age	18	19	19	18	20	20	20	20
Perceived level of English proficiency (1-6)	3	4.5	5	5	3	4	4	5
MUET score	3	3	5	5	4	4	3	4

In order to examine the role of language proficiency level in mediating the washback of the ELAS, we categorized the students into three groups based on their perceived level of English proficiency:

- low proficiency students (3): LPS-1, LPA-5
- medium proficiency students (4/4.5): MPS-2, MPA-6, MPA-7
- high proficiency students (5): HPS-3, HPS-4, HPA-8

The final letters "S" and "A" in the pseudonyms refer to current students and recent alumni of the foundation programme respectively.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method used in the study was face-to-face interviewing. Compared to other data collection methods, interviewing provides more scope for in-depth enquiry, taking into account that each person is the best authority on his or her own experience of certain phenomena or situations (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Apart from being "the most often used method in qualitative inquiries" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 134), interviewing is also one of the most frequent data collection methods in washback research (Banerjee & Tsagari, 2016; Watanabe, 2004). In comparison with unstructured and structured interviews, semi-structured interviews afford respondents opportunities to present their views more comprehensively, whereby the entire interview remains controlled by the interviewer (Denscombe, 2014). We developed the interview guides for each group of participants based on the research questions and the review of washback literature. The interview guide for curriculum and assessment developers consisted of demographic questions related to their personal background and open-ended questions about the intended washback of the ELAS on teaching and learning as well as its implementation. Similarly, the interview guides for teachers and students included demographic questions on their personal background and open-ended questions designed to elicit their perception of the ELAS and its washback on teaching and learning. In view of the central role of the teachers and the students in the present study, we conducted two pilot interviews with one non-research participant from each group, which allowed us to refine the interview questions before they were actually used in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

We conducted 40–55-minute interviews over a period of four months with the different groups of participants. The curriculum and assessment developers and the alumni of the foundation programme were interviewed once. However, interviews with the students and the teachers consisted of two rounds as they represented the primary sources of data in this study. The first-round interviews were conducted after the first semester of the foundation programme and aimed at exploring the language instructors' and students' perceptions of the impact of the assessment in the first English course. The second-round interviews took place towards the end of the second semester and were mainly focused on the perceived impact of the assessment in the second English course. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed for analysis. In addition to interviews, official documents related to the curriculum and the assessment system such as the University Senate approved course outlines, educational programme outcomes, course assessment rubrics, as well as sample tests and assignments were analysed to investigate the degree of compatibility between the assessment system and the curriculum in terms of content, objectives and format. In doing so, the aim was to determine the kind of washback the assessment system was meant to produce and how it was expected to be implemented (Watanabe, 2004). The documents also served as a source of data to triangulate the findings from the interviews. The access to the

documents was provided by the Centre for Foundation Studies offering the English preparation programme.

Data Analysis

In the present study, data collection and analysis went concurrently, helping to build on and strengthen each other. The researchers adopted the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) to analyse data gathered from interviews and documents. The systematic analysis of the qualitative data was carried out in three iterative stages: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

At the beginning, the entire body of data went through the processes of organization and meaningful reconfiguration. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe this initial stage of analysis as "data reduction," which refers to "the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data" (p. 10) that appear in interview transcripts, documents, and other materials. This process, which can also be seen as "data condensation" (p. 11) organizes the data in such a way that they are manageable and comprehensible with respect to the matters being discussed. The procedures conducted at this stage included writing summaries of documents related to the ELAS, transcribing interviews, coding interview data and developing themes. Summaries of documents focused especially on goals and objectives of the ELAS as they were essential in understanding the system. We also gave particular attention to the descriptions of how the assessment was to be carried out. The analysis of interviews started after transcribing and familiarisation with the data from the first interview. As we read down through the transcripts, we wrote memos to record emerging ideas. Coding was done manually using a word processing programme and consisted of two cycles. In the First Cycle coding, we employed "initial coding" (originally referred to as "open coding" in earlier publications in grounded theory), which denotes "breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). During the initial coding, we identified any data that pertained to our research questions. For example, we highlighted responses that occurred frequently in the data that indicated different kinds of influence of the ELAS - whether positive, negative, or negligible - on teaching and learning. In the Second Cycle coding, we applied "pattern coding," which aimed at grouping First Cycle codes into "a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). During the pattern coding, we clustered the codes from initial coding into meaningful categories and themes based on the research questions. We carried out the same coding process for each subsequent set of interview data.

The second stage of data analysis, "data display" was intended to yield "an organized, compressed assembly of information," that would allow conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). In order to facilitate the search of cogent links between the processed data, we arranged the information coded earlier in a case-level meta-matrix through juxtaposition of the themes and categories developed in the previous stage in a chart. We then explored links between data within individual interviews and then ascertained the existence of the links across all interviews. At this stage, we further developed the earlier themes relating to participant responses to the ELAS, such as attitudes, test formats, teaching techniques and learning, through careful reading and rereading of the transcribed data. We then used the higher-level themes that emerged during this stage of data analysis to form the basis for the arrangement and presentation of the findings. Data display also facilitated the triangulation of data from interviews with different groups of participants and document summaries.

The third stage of data analysis consisted in "conclusion drawing and verification." "Conclusion drawing" requires the researcher to mentally withdraw from the process in order to review the meaning of the data analysed and to ponder the possible implications they carry

for the research questions. "Verification," which is intrinsically connected to conclusion drawing, requires the reconsideration of the data with the aim of double-checking or verifying the conclusions drawn. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1994), "the meanings emerging from the data have to be *tested* for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their 'confirmability' - that is, their *validity*" (p. 11, emphasis in original). We employed several strategies to enhance the validity of the findings obtained and the conclusions reached. Throughout the data analysis process, we constantly compared emerging themes, going back and forth between the data and the research questions in order to ensure that the findings are grounded in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Another important measure we took to draw and verify conclusions was the triangulation across data sources and methods (Denzin, 1978). We employed the strategy of data source triangulation by comparing and cross-checking data collected from interviews with different groups of participants. In addition, methodological triangulation was applied by checking information obtained from the interviews against the documents relevant to the ELAS. Yet another measure we took to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings was member checking, which is considered to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). We provided the respondents with the interview scripts and requested them to verify the correctness of the transcriptions and interpretations made. All the participants responded to the request for member checks and confirmed that the transcriptions fully reflected their views. Three respondents (two curriculum and assessment developers and one teacher) requested minor corrections.

Findings

We organize the results of the study according to the three research questions posed at the beginning of this article. In so doing, we identify and elaborate on the themes that we have identified through the three stages of data analysis described earlier in the previous section.

Research Question 1: Intended Washback of the ELAS

Three main themes that relate to the intended washback of the ELAS emerged from the analysis of data obtained through interviews with curriculum and assessment developers and documents concerning the ELAS: (a) development of general and academic language skills, (b) continuous assessment for learning, and (c) student-centred and meaningful language teaching and learning.

(a) Development of General and Academic Language Skills

Although both courses in the English preparation programme aim to equip students with various language-related skills needed for their future academic studies, there are some differences in terms of the focus of assessment for each course. The first course focuses on the development of students' general language proficiency, while also preparing them for the MUET (Malaysian University English Test, which is an external English language proficiency examination set as a prerequisite for admission to all public universities in Malaysia), as the following comment by CAD-1 suggests: "Since this course covers all the four skills in language learning (listening, speaking, reading and writing), it also aids the students in answering the MUET exam later before they go for their degree programme" (CAD-1). This is also reflected in the assessment of the first course (semester 1), where most of the assessments measure a single learning outcome / skill, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
*Learning Outcomes and Assessments in Semester 1*
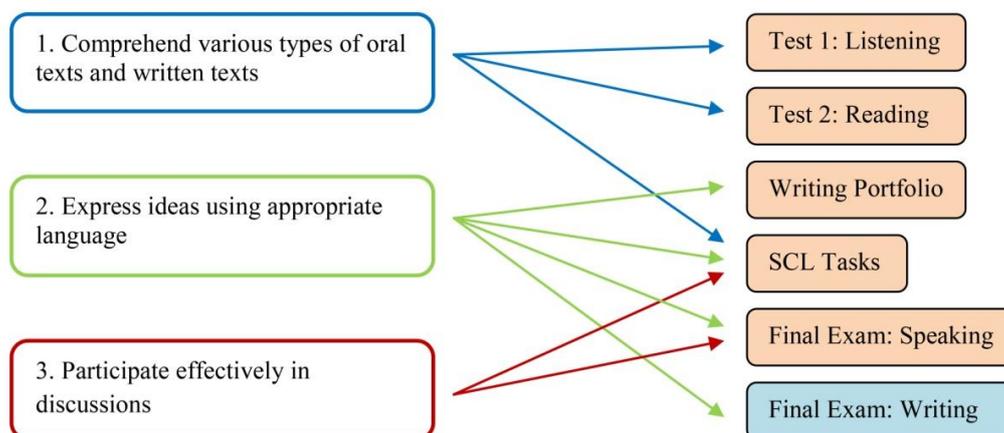
According to CAD-1, the ELAS is structured in such a way that learning outcomes are assessed by specific assessment formats which allow both teachers and students to clearly understand what particular skill or ability is being assessed:

> Each mode of assessment in our course is categorised by a separate skill and measures an individual skill, so the students know exactly what to do to prepare for an assessment form and they learn the necessary material in a focused manner. ... From the teachers' perspective, we may have a better focus in assessing them when we only need to examine the achievement of one or two learning outcomes as compared to analysing four learning outcomes in a paragraph of their answer. *(CAD-1)*

In comparison, the second course (semester 2) is more academic oriented and is specifically designed to develop students' academic skills, such as note-taking, note-making, and summarizing skills, which are essential for degree-level study. In this process, developing language is essential, but it primarily serves as a means to an end. Unlike the first course, the assessments in the second course are fewer in number and integrate several learning outcomes/skills, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2
Learning Outcomes and Assessments in Semester 2
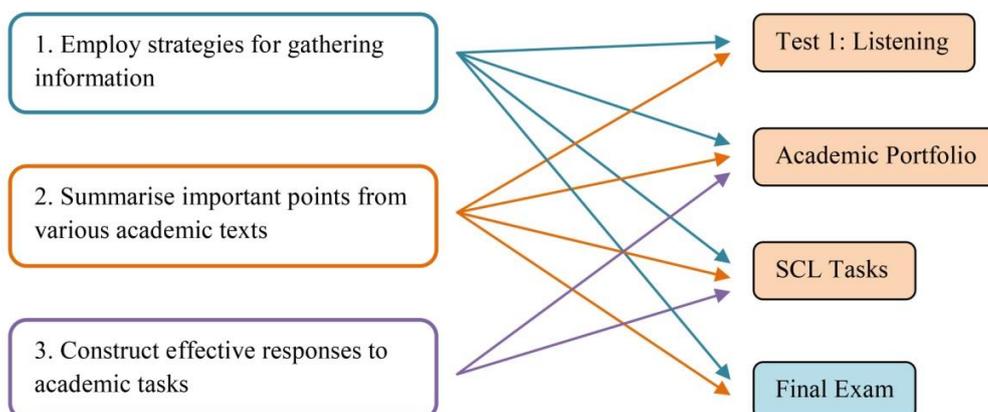
For example, the final examination in the second course includes integrated skill tasks assessing students' note-making and summarizing skills as well as reading comprehension. Similarly, the Academic Portfolio consists of three separate tasks assessing different skills. In the first individual task, students are given an excerpt and have to provide a short oral response to it. In the second pair work task, students are required to find two academic texts related to a given topic and summarize them using a note-making form. In the final task, students have to produce a poster based on the summarized notes and present it in the class. According to CAD-3, the Academic Portfolio is intended to help students develop academic writing, research, and presentation skills:

> The main purpose of the academic portfolio is to train the students how to research a topic in a way that most of undergraduates would do, where they have to read up and then write a report and also to present - so that's how our academic portfolio has been arranged. (CAD-3)

The difference between both courses in terms of their focus is also evident in the SCL tasks given to students as guided revision (see Table 3 below). Whereas each SCL task in the first course focuses on a single skill, most of the SCL tasks in the second course are designed to enable students to integrate several skills.

Table 3
SCL Tasks in Semester 1 and 2

SEMESTER 1 (Course 1)	SEMESTER 2 (Course 2)
Task 1 Listening: Analysing group discussion	**Task 1** 1. Sources of academic information 2. / 3. Academic vs. non-academic language 4. Analysing academic and non-academic reading texts
Task 2 Listening for main ideas and specific information	
Task 3 Online grammar and writing exercises	**Task 2** Listening and note-taking skills
Task 4 Reading comprehension	
Task 5 Online grammar and writing exercises	**Task 3** 1. Listening and note-taking skills 2. Question-and-answer session (pair work) - *video recording*
Task 6 Listening for main ideas and specific information	
Task 7 Reading comprehension	**Task 4** Note-making and reading skills, summarising and paraphrasing information from reading texts
Task 8 Online writing exercises	**Task 5** 1. Reading comprehension 2. Individual presentation - *video recording*
Task 9 Constructing outline for opinion essay	
Task 10 Reading comprehension	**Task 6** 1. Reading comprehension 2. Opinion essay
Task 11 Individual presentation and group discussion - *video recording*	
Task 12 Listening for main ideas and specific information	

Thus, it can be stated that the main intended washback of the ELAS is to promote the development of students' language-related skills needed for their academic study, where the assessments in the first course are intended to promote the development of general language skills, while the assessments in the second course are focused on the development of students' academic skills. Considering that the ELAS includes group and pair work tasks as well as tasks assessing higher order thinking skills, it can be inferred that it is also intended to contribute to the development of students' teamwork and interpersonal skills as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

(b) Continuous Assessment for Learning

Despite the differences in terms of content of assessments in both courses, the ELAS has a number of general characteristics: it is criterion-referenced, involves direct assessment, uses open-ended items and includes authentic tasks and authentic texts (lectures, journal articles). However, the main feature of the ELAS is that, apart from the final examination, it includes assessment done throughout the semester, incorporating a variety of assessment formats, such as portfolios, individual presentations, group discussions, pair work tasks and poster presentations in addition to formal tests, which enables a comprehensive evaluation of students' language skills.

According to CAD-1 and CAD-2, one of the main benefits of continuous assessment is that it provides fairer judgment of students' language abilities. Similarly, CAD-3 believed that continuous assessment is more beneficial for learning than one-off tests, because it enables teachers to provide personalized feedback on students' work. With regard to the rationale for including different types of assessment in the ELAS, all three respondents pointed out that the various assessment formats are designed to cater to different types of learners. For example, CAD-1 stated: "The various forms of assessment are designed to give each student a chance to perform. Some students may perform better under pressure, whereas some others may do well in a more relaxed environment" (CAD-1). The main assessments that are used throughout the semester in the ELAS before the final examination is given are: Writing Portfolio (in the first course), Academic Portfolio (in the second course) and SCL tasks (in both courses).

In the Writing Portfolio, which is completed in ten weeks and composed of two parts, students produce different types of texts. Teachers are required to provide formative feedback on the outlines as well as summative feedback on the final drafts. It also includes a self-assessment section (in the second part) where students have to evaluate their first drafts based on a checklist.

According to CAD-2, the main benefit of the Writing Portfolio is it reflects the learning process and keeps students focused throughout the course. Similarly, CAD-1 believed the Writing Portfolio is authentic as it allows students to complete the writing tasks at a suitable time in a relaxed manner without any pressure that is typical of exams. She also noted it enables teachers to track their students' progress.

The Academic Portfolio in the second course is done over the period of seven weeks and includes both individual and pair work tasks assessing students' opinion forming, information gathering and presentation skills. As with the Writing Portfolio, teachers are supposed to provide continuous feedback on students' progress as they work their way through the Academic Portfolio. As pointed out by CAD-2, the portfolios in both courses involve more teacher feedback than other assessment forms in the ELAS:

In fact, most of the feedback would come under the portfolio. ...It is in the portfolio where the teachers have the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback to the students. ... The portfolio is where the teachers take a more active role in helping the students with their learning. (CAD-2)

Finally, the SCL tasks in both courses are spread over the whole course duration and include a multitude of tasks assessing students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. Unlike portfolio assessments, however, SCL tasks do not require any supervision on the part of teachers. Rather, they are intended to encourage self-directed learning, as the following comment by CAD-2 indicates: "SCL is actually more like a scaffolding activity, where they learn in class, then go home and do exercises to strengthen what they have learned. Also, SCL is actually providing students with the opportunity for self-directed learning" (CAD-2).

Although teachers are not involved in the SCL tasks, they are supposed to provide answer keys after students have submitted their work. In addition, the teachers are encouraged to provide feedback on SCL tasks assessing speaking skills. CAD-3 believed that SCL tasks as part of continuous assessment in both courses should involve teacher feedback:

As for SCL, it is important for teachers to not just show the answers, but to discuss and explain why the answers are such. So, there should be feedback for SCL because it is formative assessment. However, the teachers are not required, but only expected to give feedback. (CAD-3)

All three respondents pointed out teachers are also encouraged to provide feedback after summative assessments conducted throughout the courses, aside from formative assessments. This applies especially to the Speaking Assessment in the first course, which includes individual presentation and group discussion.

Overall, the curriculum and assessment developers indicate through their responses that the ELAS is intended to serve largely as continuous assessment for learning. Apart from helping students adapt their learning activities according to their identified strengths and weaknesses, the assessment information is also supposed to enable teachers to adjust their instruction in order to address their students' needs.

(c) Student-Centred and Meaningful Language Teaching and Learning

According to CAD-1 and CAD-2, the assessments in both courses are intended to promote student-centred instruction that encourages students to take ownership of their language learning and to become more independent learners. The portfolios and SCL tasks in both semesters were designed to promote the students' independent language learning, as the following comments suggest:

I'd also like to believe that they will become more independent learners because of the way the assessment is run, especially due to the portfolio and SCL components. In these continuous components, the students are given a length of time to complete the tasks and so they do not feel constrained to complete the tasks within just a day or two. (CAD-2)

The SCL activities serve as homework and to encourage autonomous learning. (CAD-1)

According to CAD-2, the assessments in both courses are also intended to provide students with a meaningful context for learning and using English, especially the collaborative tasks. Similarly, CAD-1 pointed out that the various assessment forms in the ELAS evaluate students' language skills by measuring "applied proficiency" rather than content knowledge, thus promoting meaningful learning:

> So, knowing only the content is not enough for this subject, they must also be able to present the content, and they need the language to do this. For example, when the students are told to speak about a familiar topic related to daily routine, they are challenged to demonstrate their speaking skills rather than content knowledge. (CAD-1)

CAD-2 stated the assessments are likely to increase students' motivation to practice English outside the classroom since they reflect different real-life situations. Recognizing the pivotal role of teachers in the implementation of the ELAS, all three respondents noted the teachers were provided with continuous support and guidance in order to ensure they exploit fully the assessment system for the benefit of students' learning.

Research Question 2: Teachers Perceived Washback of the ELAS

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of interviews regarding the perceived impact of the ELAS on the teachers and their teaching: (a) positive views on and good understanding of the ELAS, (b) alignment between teacher beliefs and the content and method of teaching, (c) support for appropriate feedback practices in assessment, and (d) teacher motivation and professional development. In addition to the teachers' perceptions of the washback, this section also includes the students' perspectives on the impact of the ELAS on teaching.

(a) Positive Views on and Good Understanding of the ELAS

All three teachers held positive views on the ELAS and expressed their satisfaction with the ELAS, highlighting some of its features, such as being based on the learning outcomes and being in line with the curriculum, incorporating authentic tasks and texts, including self-assessment and integrated skills tasks, evaluating higher order thinking skills and involving various assessment formats. They also acknowledged the importance of having continuous and formative assessment as part of the ELAS, which they believed benefited both the students and the teachers. The teachers' comments suggested that the ELAS was in line with their beliefs about assessment and understanding of an effective assessment system. When we asked ELI-2 about how she felt about the ELAS, she expressed a general satisfaction towards it and pointed out that assessment tasks tended to not only reflect the content, but also the format of instructional activities:

> An effective assessment system should meet the course objectives and also the learning outcomes that have been set for the course. So, it shouldn't measure anything that the students haven't learned, anything that they are unfamiliar with. They should be familiar with the format, not only the content. (ELI-2)

In terms of knowledge and understanding of the ELAS, all three teachers reported they were well-acquainted with the assessment requirements and criteria, describing in some detail

the nature of the ELAS, such as the use of both formative and summative assessment and the different kinds of assessment formats used (e.g., portfolios, SCL, and oral presentations). They also reflected on the nature of the courses and assessments. For example, the teachers described the first course as "more rigidly structured" (ELI-2) and "very goal-oriented" (ELI-3) and the second as "a little bit of everything," "is all task-based," (ELI-2) as well as "hands-on" (ELI-3). They furthermore pointed out they were provided with support with regard to the implementation of the ELAS in order to ensure that the assessments are conducted in the most effective way possible.

(b) Alignment Between Teacher Beliefs and the Content and Method of Teaching

Teachers' comments suggested the ELAS had a facilitative impact on the teaching content as it helped them focus more on the development of skills that the programme was intended to develop. They pointed out, however, the content of teaching was not solely determined by the assessments. All the teachers made comments that indicated that their teaching methods had not been significantly influenced as they were already in line with the ELAS. The teachers favoured an interactive teaching method that allowed for student activity, task-based language teaching, as well as a greater focus on student expression of their opinions. In this respect, the ELAS encouraged the communicative language teaching approach and was intended to promote student-centred instruction. For example, one of the teachers pointed out:

> Generally, we always try to adopt the student-centred learning approach in our teaching. So, you must make sure that you give more power to the students rather than the teacher doing a lot of teacher talk in the classroom. In its turn, that involves a lot of creativity on the students' side, so you have to give more chances for students to be involved in your teaching as well. (ELI-1)

The teachers also reported they incorporated authentic materials and real-life activities into their classes to make English language learning as meaningful as possible so as to raise student interest in learning English. They further acknowledged they were given freedom to use various teaching techniques to make classes "creative" and to address their students' needs. This was also confirmed by the students, including the alumni of the foundation programme, who reported that their teachers used various activities to enliven English classes. Overall, the teachers had positive views on the teaching content and methods espoused by ELAS which we infer is largely due to the congruence between the beliefs about teaching and assessment they already held and the underlying approach adopted by the ELAS. We also find that because of this congruence, the perceived impact of the ELAS in this respect is minimal as it did not affect the teachers practice in a distinct manner.

(c) Support for Appropriate Feedback Practices in Assessment

Comments by the teachers indicated that the ELAS helped them to monitor their students' progress, especially in terms of providing appropriate feedback to their students based on their performance. The variety of assessment techniques suggested by the ELAS allowed the teachers to provide different kinds of feedback to their students. As far as the amount of feedback is concerned, all the teachers stated that they were able to provide more comprehensive feedback on their students' performance during portfolio and speaking assessments. The forms of feedback the teachers gave when using these assessment techniques included written comments on their work in their portfolios as well as immediate verbal responses after the speaking assignments. In the other assessment components, the teachers

mostly highlighted common errors made by their students. They noted, however, that they also provided individual feedback to the students at their request, which was also confirmed by the students, including the alumni of the foundation programme: "We would usually receive general feedback in the classroom. But, we could ask for an appointment with our lecturer if needed individual feedback or consultation. We would receive specific guidelines on how to improve" (MPA-7). In addition to self-assessment incorporated in the Writing Portfolio in the first semester, all the three teachers reported that they involved their students in peer-assessment during portfolio assessments as well as daily classroom activities in both semesters.

(d) Teacher Motivation and Professional Development

The comments made by the teachers suggested that the ELAS had a positive impact on their motivation to teach. For example, ELI-3 pointed out:

> I have to say that it has positively influenced my enthusiasm and motivation because it has made me focused on what to teach. As a teacher, I also have my own target. I want to see how my students fare after what I have taught them. I want to see the level of my students and this assessment system helps me achieve that target. (ELI-3)

Overall, however, the teachers seemed to be more motivated in the second course as its assessments allowed for more latitude in choosing different activities in the classroom. Another stated reason was that the teachers became more conversant with the assessment system.

In addition, all teachers reported that the ELAS had a positive impact on their professional development, mainly by improving their assessment literacy. When asked about whether their experience with ELAS contributed to their professional development, ELI-1 remarked in the affirmative, noting "you will find new approaches and new perspectives. To me, this is quite challenging and also very interesting." The other two teachers interviewed also expressed similar views, noting that "it has given me some ideas or thoughts on how assessment looks like or how the programme goes" (ELI-2) and "I get to know the new sides that I have known before" (ELI-3). All in all, it can be inferred from the comments made by the teachers that the ELAS helped them improve the quality of their teaching.

Research Question 3: Students Perceived Washback of the ELAS

Four major themes were derived from the analysis of interviews regarding the perceived impact of the ELAS on students and their learning: (a) positive views towards the ELAS, (b) motivation and a positive attitude for learning English, (c) building confidence and self-directedness in using English, and (d) development of English language and complementary skills. Apart from the students' perceptions of the washback, this section also includes the teachers' perspectives on the impact of the ELAS on their students' learning.

(a) Positive Views Towards the ELAS

All eight students expressed positive views on the ELAS. They recognized the importance of having assessment in the English foundation programme, above all, because it helped them identify areas for improvement. The students were convinced that the ELAS was an effective tool to evaluate their language skills as it reflected the curriculum, assessed all four language skills, and included continuous assessment. When asked about whether the main purpose of the ELAS was simply to give grades, most replied that the ELAS them with

something more than just grades. MPS-1, for example, felt that it was "to make us learn something new … we need to learn something new … so the main benefit is that we use English to get more knowledge." Others echoed this sentiment, expressing other purposes or benefits such as application of English language ability or skills in "practical work" (LPS-1) or "academic contexts" (HPS-3).

The fact that the ELAS included various forms of assessment, such as portfolios, oral presentations, group discussions as well as tests was another benefit emphasised by most of the students. They stressed the importance of having continuous assessment in addition to the final examination, which afforded them multiple opportunities to demonstrate their language skills. The comment made by one of the students suggested that the ELAS promoted "holistic" language learning: "My personal opinion on the English language assessment system is that the learning experience can be seen as quite holistic in the sense that it covers several fundamental areas of English, such as speaking" (HPS-3).

Most students regarded it as an advantage that the ELAS included group and pair work tasks, which they perceived as more "enjoyable" and effective in improving their language skills compared to individual work tasks. MPA-7, for example, felt that working in groups enables students to "exchange ideas ... get more knowledge and ... is more fun," while LPS-1 noted that group work tasks "encourage the passive students to talk in groups." Furthermore, some students believed that collaborative tasks helped them develop teamwork and leadership skills, apart from fostering "mutual learning" and enhancing their language skills.

The students also recognized the importance of having SCL tasks as part of the ELAS, which they deemed beneficial for their language learning outside the classroom. Overall, the students preferred to be assessed by their own English teachers rather than by external examiners, mainly because they felt more comfortable and knew their teacher better. Lastly, all the students reported that they were informed by their respective teachers on the assessment procedures and criteria for different forms of assessment within the ELAS at the beginning of every course.

(b) Motivation and a Positive Attitude for Learning English

The students' comments suggested that the different forms of assessment within the ELAS increased their motivation to learn English, largely because they were more enjoyable than their previous experiences at school. This response was consistently expressed by the students, regardless of their proficiency level. The lower proficiency student, LPS-1, for example, commented: "I enjoy learning English here quite more than the time at the boarding school." Students with a medium level of proficiency described the assessment practices in the ELAS as "enjoyable" (MPS-2) and "quite helpful" (MPS-1). But perhaps a more illuminating response was given by a more proficient student who remarked that:

> As a student, I enjoy the system most of the time because it really makes the English language learning experience more continuous and fun. For me personally, it has worked by making me more interested in learning English. ... I would say the assessment system makes one learn English more voluntarily and more meaningfully. (HPS-3)

Particularly, continuous assessment formats, such as portfolios and SCL tasks as well as collaborative tasks, appeared to have a stronger influence on the students' motivation compared to formal tests and final examinations. The students felt that these forms of assessment could provide them with "a longer time" to review the language they use (MPS-1), make them "more

comfortable and more used to the language" (HPS-3) and helped them to understand the language better as the teacher would "constantly check*"* their progress (MPA-6).

The comments made by some of the students suggested that the different forms of assessment within the ELAS had a positive influence on their attitude towards learning English, causing them to become more aware of the importance of learning English. For example, one of the students pointed out:

> I believe that all these assessment forms make us aware of how important English is. Although they are just assumed to test our English, they actually simulate different parts of our lives, for example, speaking is important for interview like this or in presentations or even in daily life conversations - it is not just about the speaking assessment, but rather about where the skill is necessary. (HPS-3)

From their accounts it was clear that the students regarded various assessment forms as relevant to real-life situations, which were believed to contribute to the development of skills necessary for using English in various contexts. The teachers interviewed were also of the opinion that the ELAS in general positively influenced the students' attitudes towards learning English. ELI-2 noted that the assessment system "gives them the push to take English seriously." Another teacher pointed out that one of the main reasons behind the positive impact of the ELAS on the students' attitudes towards learning English is that it enables them to practice their skills in various ways and "see improvement in their English" (ELI-3).

(c) Building Confidence and Developing Self-Directedness in Using English

Most of the students were of the opinion that the ELAS considerably increased their confidence in using English. One of the students, however, felt that the ELAS had only little impact on her confidence in speaking English. On the other hand, a high English proficiency level student stated the ELAS in general and the SCL tasks in particular helped his less proficient peers gain confidence in using English. The teachers were especially observant of this particular impact of the ELAS, with one indicating that the students "have become more independent in using the language … they are going to do it on their own, but they need some more time and guidance" (ELI-2).

Most students of different English proficiency levels reported that the various assessment forms within the ELAS helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses and encouraged them to take more responsibility for their learning. The SCL tasks that were done outside the classroom seemed to promote the students' independent language learning, as the following comments suggest:

> Throughout this foundation course, I have learned various ways of learning English. For example, I can go online and use some websites, which I learned through the SCL tasks. I can actually practice and learn by myself some new things, which I may be not so good at. (HPS-4)

> All the teachers are actually ready to see us whenever we need them, and it all depends on the students whether they meet the teachers or not for consultation. ... So, it is about the students' effort to ask for specific guidance ... (HPS-3)

All the students reported that they engaged in various out-of-class learning activities such as watching English movies and videos for learning English, listening to English songs, reading essays and articles and even books in English, talking with friends in English, playing online English games and participating in English language related co-curricular activities to improve their English language skills due to the ELAS.

It is interesting to note, however, that despite indications that the students were beginning to take responsibility for their own learning, there were still signs that the students were still dependent on their teachers. The different assessment formats had varied effects on the students according to their proficiency levels. Many of the less proficient students commented that they did not obtain any feedback from their teachers during the SCL sessions. Feedback was important to them largely because they were concerned about the accuracy of their answers. MPS-1, for example, noted "…we did not receive any feedback after SCL and that's why we didn't know whether the answers were correct." Other students also expressed similar sentiments regarding wanting to obtain correct answers from teachers. The more proficient students, however, seemed to appreciate SCL assessment. The following comment indicated this point of view:

> Although SCL might be the assessment form that we complain about because of its workload and least efficiency, but it is actually the one that has increased my willingness to study English because it is continuous and it simulates a lot of different situations, which makes me want to learn English myself. (HPS-3)

(d) Development of English Language and Complementary Skills

All the students reported that the ELAS with its different forms of assessment enabled them to develop their language skills in English. They acknowledged that the assessments helped them improve their speaking and/or writing language skills the most. Interestingly, speaking and writing assessments were also the ones that students perceived as the most challenging, irrespective of their perceived level of English proficiency.

In addition to improving the students' general English language skills, the ELAS was also perceived to facilitate the development of other language-related skills needed for the students' future academic studies, such as information gathering, note-taking and summarizing skills as well as several complementary skills they would need in their future study and work, such as self-evaluation skills, social and interpersonal skills, teamwork, and decision-making skills. The alumni of the foundation programme pointed out that these academic language skills proved to be an asset in their degree studies. The teachers also recognized the positive impact of the ELAS on the students' general and academic English language skills. "When doing the Academic Portfolio in pairs, the students develop their creativity, decision-making skills, planning and organizing skills, collaborative and peer learning" (ELI-3).

Furthermore, all the students considered the feedback they received from their teachers as vitally important for the overall improvement of their language skills. The students admitted, however, that the most comprehensive feedback they received was during portfolios and speaking assessments, whereas feedback given after the tests was rather general, though they could ask the teachers for individual feedback.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of the English language assessment system (ELAS) and its washback on the teaching and learning of English in a Malaysian university foundation programme. From the interviews with the curriculum and assessment developers as well as the analysis of relevant documents, we identified three themes related to the intended goals of the ELAS. These were the development of general and academic language skills, continuous assessment of learning and student-centred and meaningful language teaching and learning.

Washback of the ELAS on Teaching and Learning

With regards to the washback of the ELAS on teaching, findings of the study suggest that the assessment system had an overall positive impact on the teachers (participants), their instructional practices (processes) and teaching quality (products). All the teachers held positive attitudes towards the ELAS and recognized the advantages of the assessment system, such as being in line with curriculum and learning outcomes, including different types of continuous formative and summative assessment, and incorporating authentic tasks and texts. At the same time, they attached great importance to the role of the teachers and the students in effective implementation of the assessment system. Overall, the teachers had a good understanding of the rationale, requirements, and assessment criteria of the ELAS and were committed to make the most of the assessment system to improve their students' language learning.

As intended by the curriculum and assessment developers, the ELAS was found to help the teachers monitor their students' progress and make necessary adjustments in their instruction. The teachers' provision of constructive feedback on the students' performance with guidance on how to enhance their language skills as well as involvement of their students in self- and peer-assessment can be identified as the main positive impact of the ELAS on teaching. This finding is in line with the results of the study by Yu (2010), which reported washback of the SBA on teachers' assessment practices.

The teachers reported during the interviews that other than having to focus on academic content, the ELAS did not cause any major changes in their teaching methodology which they generally described as being communicative in nature. This, they reasoned, was because the current methods they were using already promote student-centred learning and communicative language teaching, and therefore were congruent with the ELAS. This corroborates the findings of the study by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) to the effect that "the amount and type of washback will vary according to [...] the extent to which the test is counter to current practice" (p. 296).

Since the ELAS was based on learning outcomes and reflected the curriculum, it had only some facilitative influence on the teaching content, helping the teachers to focus more on the development of specific skills that students were expected to develop. This is consistent with the findings of the study by Mizutani (2009), which reported focused teaching as one of the positive washback effects of an assessment system in New Zealand. Thus, it can be stated that the ELAS promoted "teaching the curriculum" (Weigle & Jensen, 1997, p. 205) and the "accomplishment of educational goals" (Bailey, 1996, p. 268). In addition, the ELAS was found to increase teacher motivation and improve the quality of teaching by enhancing the teachers' language assessment literacy and promoting overall professional development of the teachers. All in all, the ELAS was found to support "good teaching" (Hughes, 1989, p. 2).

As far as the washback of the ELAS on learning is concerned, the findings of the study indicate that the assessment system also exerted an overall positive influence on the students

(participants), their learning (processes) and their learning outcomes (products). All the students acknowledged the importance of the assessment for language learning and held positive views towards the ELAS. They considered it highly beneficial having their own English teachers as assessors, being given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their language abilities through various assessment formats and receiving constructive feedback on their performance.

In line with the intentions of the curriculum and assessment developers, the ELAS was found to provide the students with an authentic and meaningful context for learning and using English, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation to study English among students of all proficiency levels. This finding is in contrast with the results of the study by Pan (2014), which reported positive washback on intrinsic motivation of higher-proficiency students, as well as the study by Buyukkeles (2016), which indicated "no significant washback" on students' intrinsic motivation "regardless of their language proficiency" (p. 9). This can perhaps be explained by the difference in assessment design: both above-mentioned studies investigated the impact of one-off standardized exit tests, whereas the present study explored the washback of the assessment system consisting of various alternative assessment formats, such as portfolios, individual presentations, group discussions, poster presentation in addition to formal tests and exams, which were more likely to increase students' intrinsic motivation for learning English.

In addition, the findings of the study indicate that the ELAS increased the students' confidence in using English and encouraged them to take more responsibility for their own learning, as it was intended by the curriculum and assessment developers. All the students reported engaging more in independent out-of-class learning activities due to the ELAS, such as talking with friends in English, watching English videos, listening to English songs, reading English books and playing games in English. This finding is in agreement with some earlier studies, which reported the impact of internal assessment on students' out-of-class learning activities (Buyukkeles, 2016; Pan, 2014; Yu, 2010).

Furthermore, the ELAS was perceived to promote the development of the students' general and academic English language skills (especially speaking and writing skills), which was the ultimate intended washback of the assessment system. Additionally, the ELAS was found to help the students improve their vocabulary and grammar. These findings both support some and contradict other aspects of the results of the study by Köktürk (2015) and Buyukkeles (2016), which explored the washback effects of internal assessment in Turkish university EFL preparatory schools. The study by Köktürk (2015) reported that the mid-term exams assessing the four language skills had a positive impact on students' learning, whereas the weekly quizzes testing grammar and vocabulary knowledge had mainly negative washback effects on students' skill development. Similarly, the study by Buyukkeles (2016) found that the exit test involving heavy emphasis on vocabulary and grammar knowledge had rather negative impact on the development of students' language skills, despite having "positive washback on their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar." (p. 60). Since the ELAS in general and SCL tasks in particular assess students' ability to use language in different situations rather than testing their content knowledge, they were more likely to promote the development of language skills.

Apart from preparation for and experience of completing the assessments included in the ELAS, the feedback received from the teachers contributed significantly to the overall improvement of the students' language skills, as they were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. In contrast to the study by Yu (2010), the students in this study perceived the teacher feedback as highly helpful for improving their language skills, though they expressed the need for more feedback, especially after speaking SCL tasks in both courses.

In addition to general and academic language skills, the ELAS was perceived to help the students develop a range of complementary skills, such as teamwork and interpersonal

skills, planning and organizing skills as well as time management and decision-making skills. Finally, the ELAS was also found to foster self-assessment, creativity, critical thinking, and peer learning. The latter finding was also reported in the study by Hung (2012), which investigated the washback of e-portfolio assessment on learning.

The Assessment Context and Factors that Mediate Washback of the ELAS

The context of the present study presents an interesting backdrop to our analysis and interpretation of the participants' responses to washback. Assessment in Malaysia has traditionally been summative, reflected most prominently by high stakes national standardized examinations at the end of the secondary school years. The ELAS, on the other hand, emphasises a more continuous approach to assessment that includes greater provision for feedback from teachers throughout the one-year programme. At the end of the year, however, students are required to sit for a national level English test – the MUET – to determine placement into the different levels during their undergraduate programme at the university. Only one of the two courses in the ELAS is designed to prepare the students for the MUET although it includes activities such as SCL that are not mirror images of the MUET tasks. The second course does not prepare the students directly for the MUET and is more concerned about raising student language in preparation for studies in the degree programmes. Seen as a whole, the ELAS therefore prepares students for both a national standardized examination as well as for real world and authentic language related tasks using a combination of formative and summative assessment. The individual characteristics of the "participants" - that is the teachers and learners - in such an assessment context that is rather unique, even in Malaysia, therefore plays an important role in the extent of positive washback we are able to observe.

In examining the washback effect of the ELAS on teaching and learning, we found that washback can often have differential effects depending on the backgrounds and characteristics of the participants, processes, and products of assessment. The backgrounds and characteristics mediate the effects of washback on teaching and learning. This was significant in many ways as it highlighted the need to prepare all stakeholders in order to obtain greater levels of positive feedback. Factors such as teacher personal and professional backgrounds, student expectations and familiarity to assessment practices, as well as assessment context can either facilitate or inhibit the intended positive impact of the assessment system.

Teachers' understanding of the assessment system is an important factor in promoting positive feedback. In this study, the teachers accurately described the general goals of ELAS, highlighting its communicative teaching, as well as its student-centred and continuous assessment approach. Their subsequent teaching-learning practices and decisions were also in line with these understandings. At the same time, the professional and educational background of the teachers were clearly influential in these actions as the teachers indicated that they are satisfied with the ELAS because they considered it to be consistent with their own beliefs on teaching, learning and assessment.

While it seemed easier to elicit a unanimous positive response to the ELAS from among the teachers, the same cannot be said about student reaction as they seemed a little more guarded and hesitant. The more proficient students like HPS-3 were eager and confident in praising the ELAS, some of the less proficient ones did express some reservations. However, it is difficult to conclude that English proficiency level was the decisive mediating factor in their differing responses, as was reported in some previous studies (e.g., Buyukkeles, 2016; Pan, 2014), as the findings of this study suggest that the ELAS generally affected both higher and lower English proficiency students in a similar manner. A more plausible explanation could be the students' expectations of and familiarity to the assessment system used in the ELAS.

> If I can take tests without continuous assessment, I will go for the tests because I want to do it in a short time. If I do the long-term assignment like portfolio, it will start from the beginning of the course and last till the end of semester. It will take a lot of my time. I need to study for other subjects. So, I prefer tests, although it is quite hard for me to score good grades. (MPS-2)

Unlike teachers who were introduced to the concepts and rationale for different forms of assessment, students only had their previous experiences as a reference thereby expressing agreement or disagreement to the ELAS through statements such as the quotation above or one expressed earlier in the paper where the ELAS was considered to be "more interesting" than in school. It should also be mentioned here that the students in this study were generally academically inclined as admission into the Foundation Programme is very competitive. In this respect, it can be inferred that the ELAS can have a positive washback on student perspective towards learning and assessment as they acknowledge at many instances throughout the interview that, with the ELAS, grades alone do not matter. Nevertheless, the comment by ELI-3 that the students "mostly have a positive attitude towards tests and exams. But they don't have any positive attitude towards assignments or formative assessment yet, especially SCL" indicate that positive washback on learning may occur over time, especially when the students are introduced to new assessment approaches.

The conditions at the academic institution were also important mediating factors as can be seen in how they affect feedback, which is critical in developing positive washback. The findings indicate the students benefited more from assessments involving detailed feedback, such as portfolios and speaking assessment, in comparison with other assessment formats, which involved general or no teacher feedback. The course designers indicated the ELAS provided for SCL sessions so teachers could provide greater feedback. Formative assessment, which is a major characteristic of the ELAS, also inherently encourages feedback from the teachers. From one perspective, feedback is very much supported as the teachers themselves considered feedback as "very important" and describe that was the way "how students learn" (ELI-2). However, the teaching context of centre made it difficult to consistently provide effective feedback. Teachers taught six groups of about 25 students each semester (or 18 hours a week) and the strain of this heavy workload restricted their ability to provide effective, individualised feedback. As ELI-2 remarked, "You have a lot of students and essays to mark. I'm not able to give the kind of feedback that I want to give them and individualize them …" (ELI-2). This led to some of the teachers providing "general feedback" to the entire class and relying more on "student initiative" and "autonomy" to come and see them to get more feedback. Similarly, student workload (including those of non-English courses) in the first semester was perceived as a factor preventing some students from gaining more from the ELAS. Especially the high number of SCL tasks in the first semester was considered by the teachers and the students as a hindering factor. Some of the context-related factors identified in this study were also reported in previous studies, in particular teacher support and teacher collaboration, which played a pivotal role in promoting the intended washback of the assessment (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010; Yu, 2010).

As the washback studies reviewed earlier suggest, different factors embedded in the educational context are involved in mediating intended washback. However, among these factors, the teacher factor is especially crucial in mediating the process of washback. As Spratt (2005) points out, "it is the teacher who can then determine to a greater or lesser extent whether to allow washback to operate, what areas it should operate in and how" (p. 24). Moreover, Wall (2005) states, "examinations cannot influence teachers to change their practices if they are not committed to the new ideas and if they do not have the skills that will enable them to experiment with, evaluate and make appropriate adjustments to new methods" (p. 283).

The Way Forward: Increasing Positive Washback

The findings of the present study may have several theoretical contributions to the washback literature. First, this research has provided empirical evidence of washback of an internal language assessment system on English language teaching and learning in a Malaysian university foundation programme. To date, the literature lacks studies investigating the impact of internal assessment (Cheng et al., 2015), especially within the context of an English preparatory programme.

In addition, unlike earlier studies, the present study explored the impact of an assessment system comprising various forms of assessment. As the findings of the study suggest, providing a variety of assessment techniques throughout a course in the form of formative and continuous as well as alternative assessment formats, such as portfolios and performance assessments, is likely to produce a positive impact on teaching and learning. It is highly likely that this is mainly attributable to the *length* of washback rather than its *intensity* as the impact of formative, continuous and alternative assessment on teaching and learning is usually present *before*, *during* and *after* the assessment (especially in form of feedback provided at these periods) and may be less intense (due to low weighting in grades awarded). This situation differs from the washback of summative one-off tests and final examinations which is usually more intense (due to high weighting), but mainly limited to the teaching and learning done *before* and in preparation for the test.

Second, the present study has provided evidence with regard to the washback of assessment on students and their learning, which has not been focused on in most previous studies (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). The findings of this study suggest in the case of internal assessment, washback to the learners is more profound and multifaceted than washback to the teachers, exerting comparably strong influence on all three aspects of learning (i.e., learners, their learning processes and learning outcomes). In contrast, the role of internal assessment in teaching appears to be facilitative rather than decisive, affecting mostly teachers' assessment practices. This can be explained by the fact that, unlike external large-scale tests, internal assessment is (ideally) based on learning outcomes and embedded in the curriculum, which makes it less likely to have decisive influence on the content and methods of teaching. In other words, teachers test what is being taught rather than teaching "what is being tested" (Abd. Samad, 2010, p. 5). Nevertheless, as the findings of the study indicate, internal assessment does exert some washback on various aspects of teaching.

Furthermore, the present study demonstrated that washback of internal assessment, similar to washback of external large-scale testing, is likely to be mediated by various types of factors: not only factors related to the assessment, but also factors related to the teachers, the students and the context. This supports the argument of numerous researchers in the fields of applied linguistics and education that washback is a highly complex phenomenon and various factors besides the assessment itself need to be taken into account when investigating the impact of assessment on teaching and learning (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Brown, 1997; Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Spratt, 2005; Tsagari & Cheng, 2017; Wall, 1997; Watanabe, 2004).

Finally, it should be emphasised that the design of the assessment plays a central role by setting the stage for positive washback to occur. As the findings related to the first research question indicate, the design of assessment utilised in the ELAS included student-centred learning (SCL), a variety of assessment formats, authentic tasks, and an emphasis on feedback and higher order thinking skills. It also included other features, although perhaps to a lesser extent, such as being based on learning outcomes, using direct assessment and integrated skill tasks, involving authentic tasks and texts, integrating formative and summative assessment as well as assessing both general and academic language skills, which all represent key strategies

for promoting positive washback (Bailey, 1996; Biggs, 1998; Brown, 2000; Heyneman & Ransom, 1990; Hughes, 1989; Kellaghan & Gleaney, 1992; Wall, 1996).

Based on the findings of this study, we make several recommendations related to the design of the assessment in order to encourage positive washback. Firstly, institutional leaders should ensure that assessment practice is grounded in sound language teaching and learning theory. The data have shown that doing so would assure the teachers in conducting assessment. From a related but slightly different perspective, the data also encourage institutions to employ teaching staff who share the same assessment principles. Secondly, and in so far as the students are concerned, the recommendation would be for students to undergo an orientation programme to prevent old habits related to assessments as well unfamiliarity to new formats from getting in the way. The data in this study also indicates that it would be wise to take student language proficiency into account as responses seem to differ according to the students' level of proficiency. In order to cater for student needs, the assessment should be designed to encourage generous portions of feedback from teachers as well as a variety of assessment formats. Other considerations that institutions need to take include creating workplace conditions that will encourage positive washback and allow acceptance of the assessment system. Conducting assessment over a one-year period involving two courses as in the ELAS, for example, allowed students and teachers to adapt to the assessment system.

In conclusion, it is noted that while the assessment design points the way to positive washback, successful implementation of the internal assessment is dependent on teachers and students. As aptly stated by Alderson (2004), "washback is brought about by people in classrooms, not by test developers" (p. xi). Thus, it is crucial that teachers understand the rationale and purpose of the assessment, are provided with continuous support and guidance (especially with regards to the frequency and type of feedback), and are involved to the extent possible in the assessment development process to ensure they can make full use of the assessment and become competent "agents for promoting positive washback" (Spratt, 2005, p. 5) to improve their students' learning. Just as teachers, students should also be informed about assessment procedures and understand the relationship between assessment and learning outcomes of the programme. At the same time, it is vital that teachers incorporate real-world connections into their instruction and inform their students about the real-life applications of the skills that are assessed, which will increase students' engagement in learning. Finally, it is important that students "whose lives are most directly influenced" by washback (Bailey, 1999, p. 14), are given opportunity to provide constructive feedback on assessment and teaching, thereby contributing to the improvement of the programme.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study provides some insights into the washback of the internal assessment on the teaching and learning of English in a Malaysian university foundation programme, but it has certain limitations. First, this study investigated the washback of an English language assessment system in a Malaysian university foundation programme, and its findings are specific to this particular research context and assessment system. Besides, due to its exploratory nature, the study employed exclusively qualitative data collection and analysis procedures, involving a small number of participants. Therefore, more studies using mixed methods research design and involving a larger number of participants are necessary to be conducted in other higher education institutions in Malaysia and elsewhere in order to have a more insightful understanding of the washback of internal language assessment in the context of a university foundation programme. Despite its limitations, the present study is one of few studies that have provided empirical evidence concerning the impact of internal language assessment on teaching and learning. As the findings of the study suggest, the washback of

internal assessment is comparable in its complexity to the washback of external large-scale testing reported in previous studies and constitutes an area of research deserving further exploration.

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