

The Washback Effect of IELTS Examination on EFL Teachers' Perceived Sense of Professional Identity: Does IELTS Related Experience Make a Difference?

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Abstract

A teacher's self-perception and identity are shaped by the test accountability context where they teach. Although research on washback effect and teacher-related factors is not an uncharted territory, investigating the nexus of high-stakes tests and teachers' professional identity has been kept at the margins. In response to this gap, the present study examined the washback effect of IELTS examination on Iranian EFL instructors' professional identity. To this end, at the beginning of the study, a professional identity questionnaire was administered on 120 IELTS instructors to determine the relationship between EFL teachers' IELTS Related Experiences and their Professional Identity. Likewise, 15 IELTS instructors were closely examined at the outset of their IELTS course and at its end to examine the change in their perceptions. Regarding the qualitative phase, the researchers carried out a semi-structured interview with all 15 instructors. The results of t-test and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test indicated there was no statistically significant improvement in IELTS instructors' Professional Identity total scores from pretest to posttest ($p > .05$). However, the results of Spearman rho indicated a positive and significant relationship between instructors' professional identity and their past IELTS related experiences. Likewise, the interview results indicated that Iranian instructors' professional identity has been extensively affected by IELTS examination in that they had no option but to work for the test rather than developing genuine literacy skills. The participants further argued that to survive in such a score-polluted context, they have had no choice but to use tips and tricks, test-taking strategies, and past papers.

Keywords: High-stakes Testing, Identity, Professional Identity, Test Accountability, Washback Effect

1. Introduction

Testing has never been an indifferent and neutral process but a powerful instrument with consequences far beyond its educational context (Safari, 2016; Stobart, 2003). It has multiple impacts on the stakeholders due to its differentiating nature. Tests should be in consonance with teaching and their first and foremost purpose should be serving and fulfilling the needs of teaching (Bachman, 1990; Davis, 1990). However, when it comes to reality, the functions of tests and testing deviate and the offshoot of this distortion is “washback effect”, a technical term used to describe the impact of testing on various aspects of learning and teaching program. Although a solid body of research has examined the washback effect of different high-stakes examinations in Iran, the majority of such studies have investigated the phenomenon from learners’ perspectives (e.g., Ghorbani, 2008; Erfani, 2012; Estaji, 2013; Salehi & Salehi, 2011) and washback to the teacher as one of the most important types of washback (Bailey, 1996) has been rather overlooked.

As research shows washback is a multi-faceted phenomenon and many factors, areas, and variables are involved in its mechanism (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Estaji, 2013; Tsagari, 2009b). One of its affected areas, less attended by the researchers, is teachers’ sense of professional identity which is often interconnected with their beliefs and feelings, and the context wherein they teach (Kelchtermans, 1996; Nias, 1996). Teachers’ professional identity, or who they are as teachers, is dynamic and changes as teachers mature in the profession and as the nature of teachers’ work changes (Hargreaves, 2005). Undoubtedly, teachers’ performance is now under the pressure of high-stakes testing and accountability. As high-stakes examinations and accountability systems have flooded the world of education, the work lives of teachers have gone through various changes. In a score-polluted teaching context created around exam preparation courses, teachers’ practices and the way they feel about themselves as teachers, or how they perceive their professional identity are definitely affected by the examinations and the students’ results (van Veen, Slegers, & van de Ven, 2005).

In spite of its significance, few studies, if any, have examined teachers’ professional identity in association with the washback effect of high-stakes examinations. Motivated by this gap and to substantiate the existing of a nexus between teachers’ identity and high-stakes tests, the present study aimed to bring into the picture the possible impacts of IELTS examination on Iranian EFL teachers’ perceived sense of professional identity.

2. Literature Review

Language tests, particularly high-stakes ones, have an impact on teaching and learning (Hung, 2012; Jilani, 2009; Spratt, 2005; Sultana, 2018). Such influence is regularly referred to as washback in language testing (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Nevertheless, there is a controversy on whether the influence of testing is beneficial or detrimental to education and classroom practices (Hughes, 1989). Moreover, Alderson and Wall (1993) points to the fact that washback effect typically embodies itself in the behavioral and attitudinal changes in both learners and teachers who are in close contact with the examinations.

Unquestionably, teachers are the most important participants in washback phenomenon (Beilely, 1996), whose work lives are directly influenced by the tests and students' test results. Having been frequently mentioned in the available literature, teachers' characteristics are considered as key factors in the determination of when and how washback happens (Turner, 2009). These characteristics involve teachers' beliefs and perceptions, experience, academic qualifications and educational backgrounds and training (Cheng, 2008). In his influential review of various empirical washback studies carried out in the field of language education, Spratt (2005) contends "how crucial a role the teacher plays in determining types and intensity of washback, and how much teachers can therefore become agents for promoting positive washback" (p. 5).

Having its infancy past and its foundation stones firmly established, many washback studies on teaching and teachers in different contexts have been conducted. In Sri Lanka, Wall and Alderson (1993) examined the impact of a new English examination on language teaching. They observed the classes and conducted interviews with the teachers and the results revealed that the revised examination influenced the teachers' content of teaching, but there was no evidence for any influence of the test on how teachers taught. The researchers also argued that English lessons were still teacher-centered and there was still little opportunity for the students to use English practically. They pointed out that the positive washback of the revised test was more limited than expected.

In another study, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996) investigated the effect of Arabic as a Second Language (ASL) test and EFL test on teachers' teaching in Israel. They found that by introducing the new test of Arabic, teachers stopped teaching new materials and began to review; textbooks were replaced with worksheets identical to the previous year's test; class activities became "test-like"; the classroom atmosphere became tense; and students and teachers were observed to be "highly motivated to master the materials" (p. 301). Through the interviews, the researchers also found

that “once teachers learnt that the result had no personal immediate effect on them, they became relaxed and fearless, and thus the effect of the test decreased” (p. 314). By the same token as the new EFL test was introduced in Israel, teachers devoted more class time to teaching the oral language, and the tasks and activities which “were identical to those included in the test” (p. 301).

Furthermore, in their qualitative study, Salehi, Mustapha, and Yunus (2012) investigated the nature and existence of the washback effect of Entrance Examination of the Universities (EEOU) and its role in promoting beneficial washback. The analysis of group interviews confirmed the existence of washback phenomenon in general and negative washback effects on language teaching in particular. Likewise, Aftab, Qureshi, and William (2014) examined the washback effect of the Pakistani intermediate English examination using interviews with 6 teachers. They found that the examination seems to have a strong negative washback effect on methodology, content, and learning. Bunti (2014) also studied the washback effects of Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (EGSECEE) on English language teachers’ pedagogical practices. The target participants of the study were grade 9 and 10 English language teachers, chosen through availability sampling. The final results revealed that EGSECEE has exerted a harmful impact on the teachers’ teaching methods, contents of teaching, choice of reference materials, classroom test contents, and testing techniques.

As a key factor in the washback effect, teachers’ teaching experience assists in explaining the reasons why washback may affect some teachers, but not others (Cheng, 2005; Fish, 1988; Lam, 1995; Shohamy, et al., 1996; Watanabe, 1996). Considering the teachers’ level of experience, Shohamy et al. (1996) indicated that experienced teachers were more perceptive and thoughtful to public examinations and thus were more prone to stick to the test requirement and made use of it as a key source of guidance in their instructional practices. Moreover, Lam (1995) made reference to some differences between the experienced and novice teachers with regard to the positive and negative washback effect and found that experienced teachers were “less affected by the syllabus innovations” because of their confidence and realistic attitude “in assessing what is functional in their working situations” (p. 95).

In Iran, a solid body of research has also examined the washback effect of examinations indicating that washback studies are by no means unfamiliar to the Iranian scholars. However, what is eye-catching is the fact that the majority of such studies have investigated the phenomenon from learners’ perspectives and University Entrance Exam (UEE) as the test under investigation (e.g., Ghorbani, 2008; Salehi & Salehi, 2011; Salehi, Yunus, &

Salehi, 2011) and only some studies have focused on teachers' perspectives which are still confined to UEE (e.g., Ghorbani, 2008; Mohammadi, 2007; Mousavi & Amiri, 2011; Salehi, Yunus & Salehi, 2011). All these indicate that there is a dearth of research on washback effects of standardized high-stakes tests like IELTS on EFL teachers considering their personality and identity related variables.

As a crucial factor in the teachers' profession teacher identity, which refers to a self-image that teachers develop in relation to "who they are" and what roles they have in a social milieu, has long been the focus of a myriads of studies. It has been regarded as a transitional and relational characteristic in teachers (Miller, 2008). It is also argued that teachers' sense of their professional identity results from the ongoing interaction between person and context and manifests itself in teachers' job satisfaction, occupational commitment, self-efficacy, and change in level of motivation (Day, 2002). These constructs represent a personal perspective on how teachers view themselves as professionals in their work (Kelchtermans, 1993). Many studies done on teachers' professional identity have been mainly oriented around three research strands in the literature each focusing on different aspects of the concept: (1) teachers' professional identity formation and development (2) identification of characteristics of teachers' professional identity, and (3) professional identity (re)presented by teachers' stories (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). What seems to be missing is examining the possible impacts of high-stakes test like IELTS on teachers' sense of professional identity which the present study aimed to take it under meticulous investigation and bridge the gap in this research area. More specifically, this study addressed the following research questions.

1. Does IELTS examination have any washback effect on Iranian EFL teachers' Professional Identity?
2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' IELTS Related Experiences and their Professional Identity?
3. What instructional practices do Iranian instructors implement in their IELTS preparation classes to maintain and promote their Professional Identity?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 15 Iranian IELTS teachers, including both genders and with different academic qualifications, who were selected from among 120 IELTS instructors. They were teaching IELTS preparation courses in different institutes in Tehran with different teaching experience (see Table 1). Their age ranged from 20 to 62 and they were

selected based on their willingness to participate in the study, non-randomly, based on convenience sampling.

Table 1

Teacher Respondents' Demographic Information

Background Information	No.	% (rounded)
Academic Qualification		
MA	9	60
PhD	6	40
IELTS Teaching Experience		
1-3	7	46
4-7	5	33
8-10	3	20
IELTS Training		
Yes	8	53
No	7	47

Considering various levels of IELTS instructional experience, demonstrated through teacher demographic questionnaire, they were all invited for a follow-up interview.

3.2. Instruments and Materials

Based on the purpose of the study, the following research instruments and materials were employed.

3.2.1. Teachers' Demographic Questionnaire

In order to provide a better picture of the participants' related background information, the researchers developed a teacher's demographic questionnaire which included a section related to the participants' generalities such as: sex, age, prior teacher education, type of institution, years of experience as a teacher, current level of education and the age of the learners they teach most often. Next, through some items the participants were asked to give some information of their IELTS related experiences namely, whether they had attended IELTS preparation courses, teacher training centers, neither or both. Likewise, to have well-grounded findings on the washback effect of IELTS examination and to substantiate the existence of washback under the influence of the test, the IELTS instructors were asked if they take advantage of mock tests in their courses.

3.2.2. Teachers' Professional Identity Questionnaire

In line with the requirements of the study, the researchers used two previously developed questionnaires (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Starr et al., 2005) with some items being added to gauge the construct of examination as the central concern of the study. The reason for such an

addition was that these questionnaires did not include items touching upon the constructs related to test taking and its impacts on professional identity. Consequently, the researchers added some items and ran the reliability and validity measures afresh. The final questionnaire contained 59 items using a 5-point Likert-scale with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. Considering the reliability and validity indices, the results of Factor analysis and Cronbach' Alpha Coefficient revealed that the questionnaire had a high construct validity and reliability ($r = .96$).

3.2.3. Interview

In order to have a better picture of washback effect and to reinforce the quantitative data in the first phase, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teachers. To this aim, 15 teachers were selected for an in-depth, audio recorded, semi-structured interview (15-30 minutes long) according to their responses in the quantitative phase and their agreement for further cooperation. The questions for the interview were developed by the researchers and with regard to their content validity, they were reexamined by two language and two content teachers to ensure appropriateness of content and language.

3.3. Procedure

In this study, initially, a pilot test was administered on 35 participants to ensure the reliability of teachers' professional identity questionnaire and 120 participants to check its construct validity and the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' IELTS Related Experiences and their Professional Identity. Afterward, in order to collect the needed data, a teacher's demographic information questionnaire along with a questionnaire pertaining to the dependent variable of the study were utilized to examine the impacts of IELTS examination on Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity. This questionnaire was distributed among 15 IELTS teachers in different language institutes in Tehran, Iran. The teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire during non-instructional times at their convenience, enclose and deliver them to the researchers within one week time interval. They were assured that their identity and responses would be kept confidential. Then the questionnaire was analyzed by different statistical procedures.

Subsequently, the same questionnaire given at the outset of the study was readministered at the end of the study as a post-test to examine if teachers' beliefs and responses had changed at the end of the course. Furthermore, in this phase, the interview questions were developed by the researchers and were reanalyzed by two language teachers to ensure the appropriateness of both the language and the content of the questions. Based on the results of quantitative data analysis and the teachers' level of

experience, all 15 IELTS instructors were involved in a semi-structured interview to explore their perceptions of the impacts of IELTS examination on their professional identity.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was done according to the data collected from both questionnaires and interviews. Concerning the quantitative research questions, for the first research question t-test and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test and for the second research question, Spearman rho were computed respectively. Regarding the qualitative phase, the interview data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis using frequency counts and descriptive statistics. To this end, primarily, all the interviews were transcribed, summarized, categorized, and proofread by the researchers. Ensuring that the transcriptions matched the audios, the interview transcriptions were once more reviewed and coded. Such a categorization process led to the identification of the predominant patterns in the teachers' responses. Afterward, the emerging themes and patterns in the transcriptions were grouped according to their frequency of occurrence. In so doing, the themes and patterns were placed into a thematic table according to the interview questions along with the representative excerpts from each of the fifteen interviewee participants.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Research Results to Respond to the First Research Question

In order to answer this question, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test for the total Professional Identity scores of the teachers and one sample Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test for individual item scores within pretest and posttest were run to see to what extent the teachers have changed in Professional Identity. Table 2 presents the results of descriptive statistics on total Professional Identity scores on pretest and posttest. Since the skewness and kurtosis ratios computed from this Table were beyond $+1.96$, the data were considered non-normal, and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks as a non-parametric test was run.

Table 3 presents the mean ranks for pretest-posttest data on total Professional Identity, and Table 4 presents the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test results indicating no significant improvement in the Professional Identity total scores of the teachers from pretest to posttest ($p > .05$). Therefore, it could be concluded that the null hypothesis to this research question regarding the total Professional Identity scores was supported. That is to say, IELTS Examination does not have any Washback effect on Iranian EFL teachers' Professional Identity total scores. It should be noted that such

results might be due to the fact that either the teachers in this study already had enough experience in teaching IELTS; therefore, IELTS instruction between pretest and posttest did not have any better washback effect on the Professional Identity of the teachers than it already had. Or maybe the period of instruction was not that long to have any effect on the Professional Identity total scores of the teachers.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics (Total Professional Identity Pretest-posttest)

Test		Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis		
Pretest	Prof.Identity. Total	15	119.00	317.00	248.00	43.65	-1.73	.58	1.12
	Valid (listwise)	N	15						.44
Posttest	Prof.Identity. Total	15	229.00	291.00	252.60	18.07	.71	.58	1.12
	Valid (listwise)	N	15						.36

Table 3

Ranks (Total Professional Identity Pretest-posttest)

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	
Prof.Identity.Total.Posttest	Negative Ranks	6 ^a	7.67	46.00
-	Positive Ranks	7 ^b	6.43	45.00
Prof.Identity.Total.Pretest	Ties	2 ^c		
	Total	15		

a. Prof.Identity.Total.Posttest < Prof.Identity.Total.Pretest

b. Prof.Identity.Total.Posttest > Prof.Identity.Total.Pretest

c. Prof.Identity.Total.Posttest = Prof.Identity.Total.Pretest

Table 4

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Total Professional Identity Pretest-posttest)

	Prof.Identity.Total.Posttest Prof.Identity.Total.Pretest
Z	-.03 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.97

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on positive ranks.

4.1.2. Research Results to Respond to the Second Research Question

In order to answer this question, first the experience data of the teachers were divided into 10 categories or ranks (i.e. ordinal data). Then Spearman rho as a correlation for ordinal data was computed between experience level and Professional Identity of the teachers. In so doing, first the descriptives of these data were computed (Table 5).

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics (Professional Identity and Experience)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std.Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	
						Std. Error	Std. Error	
Prof.Identity.Total	120	107.0	388.0	243.9	31.74	-.42	.22 6.99	.43
Experience.Ranks	120	1.00	10.00	4.81	2.53	.52	.22 -.49	.43
Valid N (listwise)	120							

Then Spearman rho was computed, whose results in Table 6 show a positive and significant rho ($p < .05$), indicating that the higher the experience level of the teachers, the higher their Professional Identity.

Table 6

Correlations (Professional Identity and Experience)

		Experience.Ranks	Prof.Identity.Total
Spearman's rho	Experience.Ranks	Correlation	1.00
		Coefficient	.33**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
		N	120
Prof.Identity.Total	Prof.Identity.Total	Correlation	.33**
		Coefficient	1.00
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
		N	120

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.1.3. Research Results to Respond to the Third Research Question

To answer this research question, the respondents were asked about the effects of IELTS examination on their profession and the areas of their job which might be affected by IELTS, whether students' scores on the examination influence how others see them as a professional teacher and their own judgments of themselves, and finally in the last question, they were asked about the activities they had usually performed in IELTS classes to maintain and promote their professional identity.

Based on the results, all of the respondents agreed that IELTS examination has affected their profession in a multitude of ways. More particularly, the teachers maintained that IELTS examination has made them a better teacher owing to its different and goal-oriented nature. They also contended that IELTS examination has unavoidably affected their sense of professional identity and the way they were perceived as teachers. The following section represents the most common themes emerged from interview data and their representative excerpts.

IELTS affects how I am perceived as a professional teacher by others and myself (77%)

As a matter of fact, I think when people are talking about an IELTS teacher, they have a different perception of these teachers and teachers themselves too, they perceive themselves differently. (Teacher 6)

IELTS examination affects other colleagues' perception of me and they try to respect me as a professional IELTS teachers if my students succeed... (Teacher 2)

IELTS affects my identity especially my professional identity and the way I am perceived as a teacher. (Teacher 7)

IELTS makes me feel proud while I'm teaching it and of course others consider me as a giant. I suppose I myself have more self-confidence among other teachers and it actually gives me more prestige among my colleagues. (Teacher 3)

IELTS has improved me as a teacher (33%)

IELTS has influenced the way I look at teaching, studying, and analyzing the present stuff. It has made me a little more meticulous and notice the details more than ever before. (Teacher 8)

Well, IELTS has made me take teaching more seriously because the students in IELTS classes have goals that are life-changing... (Teacher 1)

Actually, IELTS has made me a much more committed teacher since you have to prepare students for a determinant exam. (Teacher 5)

To shed more light on the interconnection of teaching IELTS and teachers' professional identity, another question was raised concerning the effects of students' scores in the examination on the professional identity of teachers both from their own views of self as a professional teacher and others' perceptions and judgments of them. In response to this question, all of

the teachers unanimously declared that the results of students in IELTS examination have affected how others perceived them as a teacher. Additionally, they stated that their reputations and judgment of themselves were absolutely linked to the students' score. The following excerpts reveal the aforementioned themes:

Yes, actually almost all of my students come from the previous ones... my reputation moves from one mouth to the other if my students pass the exam they will introduce me to others. (Teacher 5)

Yeah, the judgment is willy-nilly there and there is an image that may be affected positively or negatively by the students' results, but I have tried my best not to let the judgments outperform me but only teach me how to raise the quality in my job. (Teacher 8)

You know, when your students reach the band score that they desire, it gives you a very nice feeling of yourself. (Teacher 11)

Of course, the students' scores on the examination affect how I am perceived as an instructor. (Teacher 15)

Having the teachers' confirmation that IELTS examination and their students' performance affected their sense of professional identity, the researchers further explored the type of activities that IELTS instructors would offer in the preparation courses to maintain and promote their professional identity and in turn convince their students that they are professional IELTS teachers. To this end, the last interview question was posed. Analyzing the emerged themes, it was found that to maintain and promote their professional identity and indicate that they are professional teachers, Iranian IELTS teachers frequently resorted to some exam-oriented activities which are presented in the following themes and samples.

I offer my students test-taking strategies (60%)

In my classes I always try to show that I am different from other teachers and I give my students expressions and strategies that might help them in their writing. (Teacher 2)

Well to tell you the truth, half of my IELTS classes is allocated to giving my students' test-taking strategies. (Teacher 3)

IELTS teachers should be familiar with question types and provide students with strategies to deal with each... (Teacher 1)

I work on tasks similar to those of IELTS examination (53%)

I have a number of personalized techniques and tasks similar to those of the IELTS specifically in the areas of writing and

speaking which are not available in the market and I have come up with them by myself. (Teacher 6)

When teaching IELTS, I usually try to give my students some tasks which are representative of what they are going to see in the real IELTS examination. (Teacher 7)

I focus on past exams and the format of the exam (26%)

Besides working with the materials and the books we have, I sometimes resort to previous exams and actually work on guidelines to work better and faster with such tests. (Teacher 3)

In teaching IELTS you have to keep up with the questions and the latest samples to be seen as a better teacher. (Teacher 9)

To maintain my professional identity, I talk about the format and the structure of the exam and tell them strategies and ask them to practice them at home. (Teacher 12)

Overall, the in-depth analysis of teachers' responses concerning this research question revealed that IELTS examination affected Iranian instructors' professional identity and the way they were seen as teachers. Moreover, it was declared that the students' test results explicitly affected IELTS instructors' reputation, salary, and respect among their colleagues. Knowing that their identity was dependent on their students' test scores, Iranian instructors were hard pressed to focus on exam-oriented activities such as working on tips and tricks, test-taking-strategies, similar tasks, and previously administered sample tests in order to maintain and promote their sense of professional identity.

4.2. Discussion

Considering the results of data analysis, the discussions are presented both for the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. According to the results, there was no statistically significant difference in the total scores of professional identity among Iranian IELTS instructors from pre-test to post-test. That is to say, IELTS examination does not have any washback effect on Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity. Although the results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test indicated mean increase in some items, that increase was not statistically meaningful to claim that the course has brought about the change in responses offered by the participants as they were similar to those of the pre-test. This lack of any washback effect of teachers' professional identity was partly in line with the results of Katsuno's (2012) study in which the researcher investigated Japanese teachers' professional identity in the era

of testing accountability. The results demonstrated that examination and its pressure does not immediately impact teachers' professional identities.

However, the findings of the present study were found in conflict with Barrow's (2013) study on the nexus between professional identity and high-stakes examination and the suggestions it has for teachers and other stakeholders. The preliminary findings of his study suggested that when teaching a high-stakes examination class, teachers usually select their test preparation strategies in ways that subconsciously reflect their professional identities with identity meaning, "being recognized as a certain type of person in a given context" (Gee, 2000, p. 99). Moreover, the results were inconsistent with those of Assaf (2008), who carried out a case study on the impact of high-stakes examination on teachers' professional identity. The findings of the research suggested that the teacher involved in the study struggled over her commitment to help her students pass the test and at the same time grappled with how to stay true to her own professional identity.

To justify the obtained results, especially the absence of a meaningful improvement from pre-test to post-test in teachers' professional identity, it should be mentioned that although previous research has found that professional identity should be perceived as an ongoing and dynamic process (e.g., Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), this dynamism does not seem to continue throughout one's life. One of the factors that might make identity dynamic is the occurrence of new interactions in new contexts in one's profession (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). Nevertheless, the participants of this study seemed to have shaped and constructed their professional identity before they entered the course, more technically speaking, they initiated the IELTS classes with a closed identity system. A possible reason for perceiving such a prefigured identity might be the fact that the participants already had enough experience in IELTS classes and had realized that the context, needs, and expectations were fixed from a point onward in the sense that they knew they were required to offer test-taking strategies, work on samples, past exams and so forth. Therefore, when IELTS teachers repeat the same course atmosphere and expectation in another place, their professional identity system seems to close off. This justification for the findings is well substantiated by the results of some researchers including Agee (2004), Gergen (1989), and Bourdieu (1977), who suggested that professional identity is constructed among shifting social contexts that make demands on an individual's agency, social responsibility, and ethical positioning. It is dynamic for as long as teachers face new experiences and when the same experience is repeated the identity does not seem to change or evolve.

Due to the limited period of investigation and teachers' past IELTS experiences, in this study, no washback effect was found concerning

professional identity. To better support the justifications and the considerable impact that IELTS related experiences might have on the occurrence of washback effect, the researchers ran Spearman rho procedure to examine if there was any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' IELTS related experiences and their professional identity after receiving washback from IELTS examination. The results of Spearman rho indicated a positive and significant rho ($p < .05$), suggesting that the higher the experience level of the teachers, the higher their professional identity.

As for the existence of a link between teachers' experience and perceived level of professional identity, various studies were found in line with the results of the present study. These findings revealed that teachers' teaching experience is a key factor in the perceived level of identity. With regard to professional identity, in their seminal paper, Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) reported changes in relevant features of teachers' professional identity as a result of experiences and contextual influences. Similarly, Beijaard (2006) conducted a study on 28 teachers and examined the relationship between experience and teachers' professional identity. The results of his study revealed that teachers' professional identity was progressive rather than regressive. That is to say, as their level of experience increased, their perception of professional self grew as well.

Regarding the third research question on the washback effect of IELTS on Iranian instructors' perceived sense of professional identity, the respondents stated that their students' results on IELTS have affected how they were perceived as teachers by others and themselves. Moreover, they argued that their reputation and salary were absolutely linked to the results of such an examination. Therefore, to maintain and promote their professional identity in such a test-oriented context, Iranian IELTS instructors declared that they often resorted to more exam-oriented activities in their classes. Activities such as offering test-taking strategies, working on similar tasks, and focusing on past exams were the most referred ones among the participants' responses of this study.

This finding concurred with those of Barrow (2013) and Assaf (2008), who contended that when teaching a high-stakes examination class, teachers usually select their test preparation strategies in ways that subconsciously reflected their professional identities. In addition, they struggled over their commitment to help their students pass the test and at the same time grappled with how to stay true to their own professional identity. On the contrary, the results were found incompatible with Katsuno's (2012) study who argued that examination does not affect teachers' professional identity immediately, yet it might destabilize their professional selves by changing the relationships they are involved in.

A major reason that had probably made the instructors work on IELTS related activities to maintain and promote their professional identity can be the testing and accountability pressure that has dominated IELTS and all its aspects. This pressure has forced IELTS trainers to turn their back on what they believe to be instructionally best for their students. They simply shifted their instruction from rich and authentic practices to a rather subdued atmosphere of offering testing-taking strategies, tips, and tricks in isolation. Clearly, Iranian IELTS instructors' responses to this testing pressures had much to do with their responsibility and personal commitments to their students and the language institute. Although IELTS instructors knew the limitations of teaching to the test, they supposed that they needed to take the time to explicitly teach students certain strategies to pass the test. In a similar study that further supports this justification, Gaziel (1995) has argued that when teachers are faced with difficult educational changes such as high-stakes testing pressures that threaten their perceived professional identity they tend to leave teaching all together and in many cases, they do not know why they are doing what they are doing. Furthermore, testing pressure forces the trainers to set up for an inordinate responsibility of serious consequences which in many cases shift the role of teachers from facilitators of students' literacy development to test preparation coaches.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In light of the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that IELTS examination did not have any washback effect on Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity. Although the instructors in both phases argued that their professional identity had been affected by IELTS examination, no significant improvement was found in the two sets of data collected from pre-test to post-test. More particularly, the participants argued that students' performance on the examination definitely affected IELTS instructors' sense of professional identity and how they were perceived as teachers by others and themselves. Therefore, to maintain and promote their professional identity, they resorted to exam-oriented activities in their classes. A possible reason for such argument might have been the teachers' past IELTS experiences rather than their instruction during the course being investigated. To substantiate this, a correlation analysis was run which revealed that there was a positive and significant correlation between teachers' experience level and their professional identity. In other words, the more the teachers' experience with IELTS examination, the higher their professional identity.

The results of the present study can offer significant implications for different individuals both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, they can add fresh insights to the body of the related literature concerning how

high-stakes examinations can affect teachers' professional identity as a result of testing accountability pressure imposed by such examinations. Many washback studies in the literature have indicated that the intensity and direction of washback may be affected by mediating variables such as the teacher and the context. As this has not been given sufficient attention in the literature, this study provides detailed insight into how factors like teacher qualification and experience play a major role in washback to the teacher.

The findings of this study can also offer precious pedagogical implications for IELTS teachers, teacher trainers, IELTS preparation course developers, administrators, materials developers, syllabus designers, test developers, language testing researchers. In particular, the findings would be of help for IELTS teachers in that they can enhance their knowledge about the nature and scope of washback effect of the IELTS examination on their instruction in many ways. Second, teacher trainers can provide instructors with professional development courses especially their assessment literacy skills and enhance their knowledge of testing which in turn hinders the negative washback effect of exams on their teaching and students' learning. The results can also be helpful for IELTS preparation course developers in that they can design a test preparation course curriculum and provide instruction in test-taking strategies, communicative language functions, and reinforce the development of language skills not just test-taking skills. Materials developers and syllabus designers can also develop materials that are more compatible with IELTS testing formats and the skills that are tested.

One of the limitations of this study lies in the generalizability scope of the study due to its sole focus on IELTS instructors. In addition, in interpreting the qualitative data such as interviews, caution had to be exercised due to the generalizability issues of self-reported data. The researchers also had no control over the age, gender, socio-economic situations, and educational background of the participants. Considering the limitations of the study, there are further avenues to explore the domains related to this study. Future researchers can benefit from the results of this study in the sense that they can run future studies on the washback effect of other high-stakes examinations on other areas such as washback to the learners, textbooks, and programs. It is also possible to consider other teacher-related factors and examine if teacher's gender and other personality traits can affect the process and product of washback effect in IELTS classes.

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Bibliographic information of this paper for citing:

Estaji, M., & Ghiasvand, F. (2019). The washback effect of IELTS examination on EFL teachers' perceived sense of professional identity: Does IELTS related experience make a difference? *Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies, 6*(3), 83-103.