

TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF VSTEP PREPARATION: A COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: A VSTEP certificate is often a mandatory requirement for graduation and postgraduate admission in Vietnam, yet empirical research on its preparatory washback remains limited. Guided by washback theory, this qualitative study examines teachers' and students' experiences of VSTEP preparation in Vietnamese universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine English language teachers and seventeen undergraduate students. The data was then analyzed thematically using an inductive and comparative approach. The findings disclose divergent interpretations of test demands, with teachers adopting construct-oriented perspectives aligned with CEFR outcomes, while students tend to hold task- and score-oriented views. Preparation strategies reflect mediated washback shaped by institutional expectations and individual agency. Despite challenges related to time pressure, assessment ambiguity, anxiety, and resource access, participants also report positive washback, including enhanced assessment literacy, structured learning goals, and increased test confidence. The study offers insights into VSTEP-related washback in Vietnamese higher education.

Key words: Washback; VSTEP; English language assessment; test preparation; Vietnamese higher education

NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN VỀ VIỆC CHUẨN BỊ CHO KỲ THI VSTEP: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU ĐỊNH TÍNH SO SÁNH

Tóm tắt: Tại Việt Nam, chứng chỉ VSTEP thường là yêu cầu bắt buộc để xét tốt nghiệp và tuyển sinh sau đại học; tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu thực nghiệm về tác động ngược của việc ôn luyện cho kỳ thi này còn hạn chế. Dựa trên lý thuyết tác động ngược, nghiên cứu định tính này khảo sát trải nghiệm của giáo viên và sinh viên trong quá trình chuẩn bị cho kỳ thi VSTEP tại các trường đại học Việt Nam. Phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc được tiến hành với chín giảng viên tiếng Anh và mười bảy sinh viên đại học. Sau đó, dữ liệu được phân tích theo phương pháp phân tích chủ đề với cách tiếp cận quy nạp và so sánh. Kết quả cho thấy sự khác biệt trong cách diễn giải yêu cầu của bài thi: giáo viên có xu hướng tiếp cận theo định hướng cấu trúc năng lực, phù hợp với các chuẩn đầu ra CEFR, trong khi sinh viên thiên về nhiệm vụ và điểm số. Các chiến lược ôn luyện phản ánh tác động ngược mang tính trung gian, chịu ảnh hưởng bởi kỳ vọng của nhà trường và tính chủ thể cá nhân. Bên cạnh những thách thức như áp lực thời gian, sự mơ hồ trong đánh giá, lo âu thi cử và hạn chế về tài liệu, người tham gia cũng ghi nhận những tác động tích cực. Cụ thể, họ cho rằng việc chuẩn bị cho kỳ thi giúp nâng cao hiểu biết về đánh giá, xác lập mục tiêu học tập rõ ràng và tăng sự tự tin khi làm bài thi. Nghiên cứu góp phần làm rõ tác động ngược của kỳ thi VSTEP trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Washback; VSTEP; đánh giá năng lực tiếng Anh; ôn luyện kỳ thi; giáo dục đại học Việt Nam

1. Introduction

In recent years, standardized English proficiency tests have played an increasingly central role in higher education systems, functioning not only as assessment tools but also as drivers of teaching and learning practices (Fan et al., 2020; Yang & Wang, 2025). In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) has become a high-stakes requirement for university graduation and postgraduate admission (Doan & Piamsai, 2025; Nga & Lan, 2019). VSTEP is a four-skill test assessing listening, reading, writing, and speaking, with tasks designed to reflect communicative language use across CEFR-aligned proficiency levels (B1–C1). The test includes multiple sections such as listening comprehension tasks, reading passages with objective questions, structured writing tasks, and face-to-face or computer-mediated speaking components. As a localized proficiency framework aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (The Ministry of Education and Training, 2014), VSTEP has significantly shaped English language teaching and learning across Vietnamese universities (Nguyen et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the influence of high-stakes language tests on teaching and learning is commonly conceptualized through the notion of *washback*, which refers to the effects that tests have on instructional practices, curriculum design, and learner behaviors (Cheng, 2005; Fulcher & Harding, 2022). Washback can manifest in both positive and negative forms. Positive washback occurs when tests promote meaningful learning, communicative competence, and alignment between assessment and instructional goals, whereas negative washback arises when teaching is narrowed to test-taking strategies, mechanical practice, or score-oriented outcomes (Cheng, 2008; Wall, 2000). Importantly, contemporary perspectives emphasize that washback is not a direct or uniform consequence of test design, but rather a complex and mediated process shaped by contextual factors and stakeholder interpretations (Fulcher, 2024).

In this study, washback is understood as the dynamic and context-dependent influence of a high-stakes test on teaching and learning practices, which is mediated by stakeholders' interpretations, institutional conditions, and individual agency (Cheng, 2005; Fulcher & Harding, 2022; Fulcher, 2024). This working definition allows for a consistent examination of positive, negative, and mediated washback as experienced by both teachers and students in the VSTEP preparation context.

Within this framework, stakeholders, particularly teachers and students, play a central role in mediating washback. Teachers interpret test constructs and translate them into pedagogical decisions, thereby acting as key agents in shaping how tests are enacted in classroom practice. At the same time, students actively interpret test demands and adopt preparation strategies based on their perceptions of task requirements, scoring criteria, and institutional expectations (Cheng, 2005; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). This perspective highlights the importance of stakeholder cognition, that is, how individuals understand and respond to test demands in determining the nature and extent of washback effects.

Despite the growing body of international research on test preparation and washback, empirical studies on VSTEP remain limited, particularly qualitative investigations that foreground stakeholder voices. Existing Vietnamese studies tend to focus on test validity, alignment with CEFR levels, or students' test scores, often adopting quantitative or evaluative

approaches (British Council, 2018; Lan & Nga, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024). While these studies provide important insights into the technical and outcome-oriented aspects of VSTEP, they offer a relatively limited understanding of how washback is experienced and enacted in actual preparation contexts. In particular, there is a lack of research examining how different stakeholder groups interpret test demands and negotiate preparation practices within shared institutional environments. Furthermore, prior research has rarely adopted a comparative qualitative perspective that systematically examines both teachers' and students' experiences. Such a perspective is essential because washback is inherently relational, emerging through interactions between instructional practices and learner responses. Without examining both sides, it remains difficult to identify potential mismatches between pedagogical intentions and learner strategies, or to understand how preparation practices are co-constructed in real educational settings. This lack of comparative qualitative evidence constrains our understanding of how VSTEP preparation is implemented in practice and whether mismatches exist between instructional intentions and learner practices.

To address these gaps, this study aims to investigate teachers' and students' experiences in VSTEP preparation at Vietnamese universities, guided by the following research questions:

(1) How do teachers and students perceive the structure, content, and demands of VSTEP?

(2) What preparation strategies do teachers and students employ for the VSTEP, and how do these strategies differ or align?

(3) What challenges and benefits do teachers and students experience during the VSTEP preparation process?

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative research design to explore and contrast teachers' and students' experiences in preparing for the VSTEP. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the study's focus on participants' perceptions, strategies, and lived experiences, which cannot be adequately captured through standardized questionnaires alone (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The comparative design enabled a systematic examination of convergences and divergences between teachers' and students' perspectives across shared institutional contexts (Miles et al., 2020).

2.2 Research context and participants

The study was conducted at a private university in southern Vietnam, where VSTEP preparation courses are offered and required for academic progression. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The sample included 26 participants, comprising nine teachers and 17 students. Teachers had at least one year of experience teaching VSTEP-related courses, enabling them to reflect on instructional practices and test demands. Students were undergraduates or postgraduates who were currently preparing for or had recently taken the VSTEP, providing first-hand insights into preparation strategies, challenges, and perceived benefits. The sample size is consistent with

qualitative research conventions and is sufficient to achieve thematic saturation while allowing for meaningful comparison between groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were developed based on three main sources. First, they were informed by washback theory, which views test effects as positive or negative and as mediated through stakeholders' interpretations and practices (Cheng, 2008; Fulcher & Harding, 2022). This framework guided the study's focus on teachers and students as mediating agents and informed the design of interview questions addressing perceptions of test demands, preparation practices, and experienced consequences. Second, the questions drew on empirical studies on test preparation and stakeholder experiences in language assessment (Alqahtani, 2021; Wall, 2018). Third, the domains were aligned with the research questions to ensure conceptual coherence. The framework also informed the interpretation of results by enabling analysis of positive and negative washback across stakeholder groups.

Based on these foundations, separate but parallel interview protocols were developed for teachers and students, organized around three domains: (1) their perceptions of VSTEP demands, (2) their preparation strategies, and (3) challenges and benefits experienced by teachers and students during VSTEP preparation. Follow-up prompts were adapted to participants' roles as instructors or test-takers. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to facilitate nuanced expression (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Participants were assigned codes (T1–T9; S1–S17) to ensure confidentiality and support systematic comparison. To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted at the transcription stage (Birt et al., 2016), whereby participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy and made minor revisions where necessary before inclusion in the analysis.

2.4 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework. As interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. To ensure accuracy, translations were reviewed and refined after a one-week interval and were cross-checked by an independent reviewer with expertise in applied linguistics. Revisions were made where necessary, and finalized bilingual transcripts were used for analysis.

Initial coding was conducted separately for teacher and student datasets to capture group-specific patterns. Codes were iteratively refined and organized into themes aligned with the research questions. To enhance credibility, participants reviewed a summary of the themes for confirmation. A comparative thematic analysis was then conducted to identify points of convergence and divergence between the two groups. Throughout the process, a reflective journal was maintained to document analytic decisions and ensure reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3. Results

3.1 Perceptions of VSTEP test demands (RQ1)

This section addresses RQ1 by examining how teachers and students perceive the structure, content, and demands of VSTEP. The findings reveal distinct patterns in how each group interprets the test, reflecting different orientations toward language assessment and test preparation.

3.1.1 Teachers' construct-oriented perceptions

Teachers generally conceptualized VSTEP in relation to CEFR alignment, task types, and scoring criteria, demonstrating a construct-oriented understanding of the test. Teachers described VSTEP as an assessment intended to measure integrated language competence rather than isolated skills, emphasizing the need to align instruction with CEFR descriptors. One teacher explained that VSTEP assesses “overall communicative competence based on CEFR levels” and requires instruction to move beyond individual tasks to reflect target proficiency levels (T3). This perspective was echoed by other participants, who viewed the test as reflecting broader communicative abilities. For instance, one teacher noted that “the test is not just about grammar or vocabulary, but about how students can actually use English in different contexts” (T8). Such views indicate an awareness of the underlying construct of language proficiency beyond surface-level task performance.

At the same time, teachers expressed concerns about the extent to which the test format fully represents the intended construct. Some participants highlighted perceived tensions between communicative goals and standardized task constraints. As one teacher observed, although the test aims to assess communicative ability, “the format sometimes pushes both teachers and students to focus on task completion strategies rather than genuine language use” (T6). Similarly, another participant remarked that “students often learn how to deal with the task rather than develop real language ability because of time pressure” (T1). These concerns suggest that while teachers maintain a construct-oriented understanding of VSTEP, they also recognize limitations in how the construct is operationalized. As a result, their perceptions reflect an ongoing negotiation between maintaining construct validity and responding to exam-oriented demands.

3.1.2 Students' task- and score-oriented perceptions

In contrast to teachers' construct-oriented views, students tended to perceive VSTEP through task characteristics and score requirements, framing the test as “skills-based but format-driven.” Their interpretations emphasized familiarity with task types, timing, and scoring expectations as central to test success. One student noted that although VSTEP covers four skills, “knowing the test format is more important than general English ability” (S11). Students also highlighted time pressure and task predictability as key elements shaping their understanding of test demands. Rather than focusing on CEFR descriptors, they prioritized achieving the minimum required score for graduation or academic progression.

As one participant explained, “I mainly practice typical tasks and manage time because reaching the required score is what matters most” (S7). This instrumental orientation was further reflected in students' emphasis on practical strategies. For example, one student stated that “if you understand the common question types and how to answer them quickly, you can get a good

score even if your English is not very strong” (S5). Another participant similarly noted that “teachers usually show us tips for each part, so we focus more on applying those strategies than improving overall ability” (S14). These perceptions indicate that students interpret VSTEP primarily as a performance-oriented task system rather than a measure of communicative competence. Their focus on efficiency, predictability, and score attainment reflects the high-stakes nature of the test and its role as a gatekeeping mechanism in academic progression.

3.1.3 Comparative insights

A comparative analysis reveals a clear divergence between teachers’ and students’ interpretations of VSTEP test demands. While teachers adopt a construct-oriented perspective grounded in CEFR alignment and communicative competence, students tend to approach the test from a task- and score-oriented perspective shaped by practical constraints and institutional requirements. This divergence highlights the role of stakeholder cognition in mediating washback effects. Teachers interpret the test in relation to its intended construct and attempt to align instruction accordingly, whereas students interpret the test in terms of actionable strategies for achieving required outcomes. As a result, VSTEP is simultaneously understood as a measure of language competence and as a system of tasks to be strategically managed. Importantly, this mismatch suggests that washback is not uniformly experienced but is differentially constructed across stakeholder groups. The gap between pedagogical intentions and learner interpretations may contribute to variations in preparation practices, reinforcing the notion that test demands are not simply imposed but are actively negotiated in context.

3.2 Preparation strategies as mediated washback (RQ2)

This section addresses RQ2 by examining the preparation strategies employed by teachers and students for the VSTEP, and how these strategies reflect mediated washback shaped by institutional expectations and stakeholder agency.

3.2.1 Teachers’ instructional mediation strategies

Teachers described their instructional practices as a continuous balancing act between preparing students for the test and fostering broader language development. While acknowledging the high-stakes nature of VSTEP, many emphasized the need to integrate test preparation within communicative and skill-based instruction rather than relying solely on exam-focused drills. As one teacher noted, “I cannot ignore the test format, but I try not to reduce my teaching to test tricks only” (T2). A central strategy reported by teachers was the use of mock tests and structured practice tasks. These were employed not only to familiarize students with test formats and timing but also to diagnose learning gaps and inform instructional adjustments. One participant explained that mock tests were used “to identify students’ weaknesses and adjust teaching accordingly, not just to practice the test” (T5). Similarly, another teacher noted that “after each mock test, I spend time analyzing common mistakes so students understand what they need to improve” (T9).

In addition, teachers demonstrated agency through the adaptation of preparation materials. Rather than relying entirely on commercial VSTEP preparation books, many reported supplementing them with communicative activities, integrated skills tasks, and feedback-oriented practices. For instance, one teacher shared that “I often modify the materials by adding speaking discussions or group work so that students can actually use the language, not just follow the

format” (T4). These adaptations were intended to mitigate the narrowing effects of test-oriented instruction while still meeting institutional expectations for test readiness. Overall, teachers’ strategies reflect a form of pedagogical mediation, in which test preparation is embedded within broader instructional goals. Their practices suggest an attempt to balance exam requirements with construct-oriented teaching, thereby shaping washback in a more pedagogically meaningful direction.

3.2.2 Students’ strategic preparation practices

In contrast to teachers’ pedagogically mediated approaches, students’ preparation strategies were largely strategic and instrumental, driven by score requirements and perceptions of test efficiency. Many students reported prioritizing specific skills or task types that were perceived as more predictable or easier to improve within limited preparation time. As one student stated, “I focus more on writing and listening because those parts seem more controllable with practice” (S4).

Test-taking strategies played a central role in students’ preparation practices. These included time management techniques, the use of templates in writing and speaking, and repeated practice with familiar task types. One participant explained that “for speaking and writing, I try to memorize some useful structures so I can respond quickly in the exam” (S10). Another student similarly noted that “managing time is very important, so I always practice doing tasks within the exact time limit” (S2).

Students also relied heavily on external resources, including past papers, teacher-provided tips, and peer-shared materials circulated through social media or informal study groups. One student remarked that “doing past papers and learning tips from seniors helped me understand what the exam really wants” (S13). In addition, another participant highlighted the role of peer networks, stating that “my friends and I often share materials and strategies, so we can prepare more effectively together” (S16).

These practices illustrate how students actively interpret and respond to VSTEP demands by adopting efficiency-oriented strategies aimed at maximizing score outcomes. Rather than focusing on holistic language development, their preparation reflects a pragmatic approach shaped by time constraints, perceived task predictability, and institutional pressure.

3.2.3 Comparative synthesis

A comparative analysis reveals notable differences in how teachers and students enact preparation strategies, reflecting distinct forms of agency within the washback process. Teachers’ strategies are characterized by pedagogical mediation, as they attempt to integrate test preparation with broader communicative and developmental goals. In contrast, students’ strategies are predominantly instrumental, focusing on optimizing performance through targeted practice, time management, and test-taking techniques.

This divergence highlights an asymmetrical distribution of agency between the two groups. Teachers operate within institutional and curricular constraints but retain some degree of control in shaping instructional practices, whereas students respond more directly to perceived test demands and outcome pressures. As a result, preparation practices are co-constructed but not equally negotiated, with students often prioritizing immediate performance outcomes over long-term language development.

From a washback perspective, these findings underscore that preparation strategies are not merely reactions to test design but are actively mediated through stakeholder interpretations and contextual conditions. The coexistence of pedagogically oriented and performance-driven strategies reflects the complex and dynamic nature of washback in high-stakes testing environments.

3.3 Challenges and benefits of VSTEP preparation (RQ3)

This section addresses RQ3 by examining the challenges and benefits experienced by teachers and students during VSTEP preparation. The findings reveal that preparation is characterized by the coexistence of negative and positive washback, shaped by institutional conditions, individual experiences, and stakeholder interpretations.

3.3.1 Negative washback: experienced challenges

Teachers frequently reported time constraints and mixed-ability classrooms as major obstacles to effective VSTEP preparation. Balancing syllabus coverage, language development, and exam readiness within limited instructional time was described as particularly demanding. As one teacher noted, “we have very limited time, but students’ levels are very different, and all are expected to pass” (T4). Institutional pressure to ensure acceptable pass rates further intensified these challenges. Several participants described feeling accountable for students’ test outcomes, which influenced instructional decisions and increased workload. One teacher explained that “there is pressure from the institution to make sure students meet the required score” (T1). Similarly, another teacher remarked that “sometimes we have to focus more on helping students pass rather than developing their actual ability” (T7).

In addition, teachers identified ambiguity in assessment criteria as a persistent concern. Uncertainty regarding how scoring decisions are operationalized, particularly in productive skills, made it difficult to provide targeted feedback. As one participant stated, “the descriptors are quite general, so it is not always clear how speaking and writing are really judged” (T7). These challenges suggest that institutional constraints and assessment opacity may narrow instructional practices, reflecting forms of negative washback.

At the same time, students reported a range of cognitive and affective challenges, with test anxiety emerging as a recurrent concern. The high-stakes nature of VSTEP intensified stress levels, particularly for those approaching graduation deadlines. One student remarked that “the pressure is very high because if I fail, I cannot graduate on time” (S9).

Difficulties related to uneven skill demands, especially in writing and speaking, were also frequently mentioned. Students described uncertainty about expectations and difficulties performing under time constraints. As one participant explained, “writing and speaking are the hardest because I am not sure what examiners really expect” (S15). Another student similarly noted that “even if I study a lot, I still feel unsure because the scoring is not very clear to me” (S8).

In addition, financial constraints and unequal access to preparation resources shaped students’ experiences. Several participants reported that enrolling in preparation courses or purchasing materials imposed a financial burden. One student observed that “good preparation courses are expensive, so not everyone can afford them” (S6). Others relied on shared or informal resources, which may not always be sufficient or reliable. Taken together, these findings indicate

that negative washback is not only pedagogical but also affective and socioeconomic in nature, influencing students' engagement, confidence, and access to effective preparation.

3.3.2 Positive washback: perceived benefits

Despite these challenges, teachers identified several benefits associated with VSTEP preparation, suggesting the presence of positive washback. One key benefit was increased clarity in instructional focus, particularly in relation to CEFR-aligned outcomes. Several participants noted that the test provided a clearer framework for defining learning objectives and structuring lessons. As one teacher explained, "VSTEP gives a clearer reference for what students should be able to do at each level" (T8).

In addition, teachers reported enhanced assessment literacy, especially in understanding performance descriptors and rating criteria. Engaging with test specifications and sample tasks prompted greater reflection on how language ability is operationalized in assessment contexts. One participant observed that "preparing students for VSTEP makes me more aware of how CEFR outcomes are assessed in practice" (T5). Another teacher added that "I now pay more attention to how I evaluate students' performance, not just what I teach" (T3). These experiences suggest that VSTEP preparation can support professional development by strengthening the alignment between teaching, learning outcomes, and assessment practices.

Students similarly reported positive outcomes resulting from VSTEP preparation. A key benefit was increased familiarity with test formats and expectations, which contributed to greater confidence. One student noted that "after practicing many mock tests, I felt more confident because I knew what to expect" (S12).

Preparation activities also helped students develop more structured and goal-oriented learning approaches. Several participants described becoming more systematic in their study habits, focusing on specific skills and measurable progress. As one participant explained, "VSTEP preparation helps me study in a more organized way, not just randomly" (S3). Another student similarly stated that "I can see my improvement more clearly because the test format gives me a clear target" (S1).

Beyond test-related gains, some students also perceived improvements in their overall language competence, particularly in writing organization and speaking fluency. These findings suggest that, when supported by appropriate strategies and guidance, VSTEP preparation can contribute to both assessment readiness and broader academic development.

3.3.3 Integrated interpretation

A synthesis of these findings indicates that VSTEP preparation generates both negative and positive washback, which coexist and interact within the same educational context. While teachers and students face significant constraints related to time pressure, assessment ambiguity, anxiety, and resource access, they also experience developmental benefits in terms of instructional clarity, assessment awareness, structured learning, and increased confidence. Importantly, these effects are not experienced uniformly but are differently mediated through stakeholder roles and interpretations. Teachers tend to frame both challenges and benefits in relation to pedagogical and institutional demands, whereas students experience them more directly in terms of performance pressure, strategy use, and learning outcomes. This duality

reinforces the view that washback is a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a fixed outcome of test design. In the case of VSTEP, the coexistence of positive and negative effects reflects the complex interplay between assessment requirements, institutional expectations, and individual agency, highlighting the need for more balanced and supportive preparation practices.

4. Discussion

Drawing on washback theory as a mediated, stakeholder-dependent process (Cheng, 2005; Fulcher, 2024), this study provides a comparative account of how teachers and students in a Vietnamese university context interpret and enact VSTEP preparation. Rather than a linear consequence of test design, the findings demonstrate that its effects are co-constructed through stakeholder cognition, institutional conditions, and differing forms of agency. In doing so, this study extends both international and Vietnamese washback research by offering a more nuanced, relational understanding of how test preparation unfolds in practice.

First, the divergence between teachers' construct-oriented perspectives and students' task- and score-oriented orientations highlights the central role of stakeholder cognition in shaping washback. Consistent with prior research (Cheng, 2005; Lan & Nga, 2020), teachers demonstrated an awareness of underlying test constructs, aligning their interpretations with CEFR-based communicative competence. However, the present findings suggest that such construct awareness does not automatically translate into shared understandings with learners. Instead, students' focus on task familiarity, time management, and score attainment reflects what can be interpreted as an instrumental rationality shaped by the high-stakes nature of VSTEP. This supports previous Vietnamese studies showing that test perception strongly influences learning strategies (Doan & Piamsai, 2025; Lan & Nga, 2020), while extending this line of research by demonstrating that this divergence is not merely a gap in knowledge, but a systematic difference in interpretive frames.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding extends existing washback models by demonstrating that alignment between intended constructs and enacted learning is not inherently achieved, even when teachers possess strong assessment literacy. Instead, washback emerges through the interaction between pedagogical intentions and learner interpretations, which may diverge due to differences in goals, stakes, and perceived constraints. This reinforces the argument that washback should be understood as a cognitively mediated process, rather than a direct effect of test design.

Second, the contrast between teachers' instructional strategies and students' preparation practices provides further evidence of mediated washback shaped by asymmetrical agency. Teachers' practices, such as integrating mock tests with feedback, adapting materials, and embedding communicative activities, align with findings from international studies emphasizing teacher agency in mitigating negative washback (Cheng, 2005; Fulcher, 2024). However, students' reliance on test-taking strategies, templates, and selective skill prioritization reflects a performance-oriented approach, similar to patterns observed in high-stakes testing contexts globally (Alqahtani, 2021).

Importantly, rather than interpreting these student strategies as purely negative washback, the findings suggest they can be understood as adaptive responses to contextual pressures, including time constraints, graduation requirements, and perceived scoring demands. This

interpretation contributes to ongoing debates in washback research by challenging the simplistic dichotomy between “positive” and “negative” washback. Instead, it supports a more nuanced view in which certain practices, such as strategic test preparation, simultaneously facilitate short-term success while potentially constraining long-term language development.

Moreover, the findings highlight an asymmetry of agency: while teachers retain some control over instructional design, students operate under more immediate performance pressures, leading them to prioritize efficiency over construct alignment. This imbalance helps explain why exam-oriented practices persist even in contexts where teachers attempt to promote communicative learning. In this sense, washback is not only mediated but also unevenly distributed across stakeholders, a dimension that remains underexplored in existing literature.

Third, the study demonstrates that negative washback is shaped not only by test design but also by institutional and structural conditions. Teachers’ experiences of limited instructional time, mixed-ability classrooms, and institutional pressure to ensure pass rates echo prior findings from other high-stakes contexts (Fan et al., 2020), suggesting that accountability systems can constrain pedagogical choices. Similarly, students’ reported anxiety, uncertainty about scoring criteria, and unequal access to preparation resources indicate that washback operates across cognitive, affective, and socioeconomic dimensions.

These findings extend previous Vietnamese research by showing that washback is embedded within broader educational structures, including resource distribution and institutional expectations. In the case of VSTEP, its role as a graduation requirement intensifies its gatekeeping function, amplifying both pressure and strategic behavior. This supports Fulcher’s (2024) argument that washback must be understood within its socio-educational context, rather than as an isolated testing phenomenon.

At the same time, the study provides stronger evidence of positive washback than is often emphasized in critical accounts of high-stakes testing. Teachers’ increased assessment literacy and clearer alignment with CEFR outcomes suggest that engagement with VSTEP can support professional development and more structured instructional planning. This aligns with research indicating that well-designed assessments can enhance pedagogical focus and coherence (Cheng, 2008). Similarly, students’ reports of improved confidence, greater familiarity with test demands, and more organized learning strategies indicate that preparation can foster self-regulated and goal-oriented learning behaviors.

Importantly, these positive effects should not be viewed as separate from negative washback, but as coexisting and dynamically interacting within the same context. For example, increased familiarity with test formats may enhance confidence while also encouraging reliance on formulaic responses. Likewise, structured preparation may support learning efficiency but reduce opportunities for broader communicative development. This duality reinforces the view that washback is inherently ambivalent and context-dependent, rather than uniformly beneficial or detrimental.

5. Conclusion

This study examined teachers' and students' perceptions of VSTEP preparation in Vietnamese universities through a qualitative, comparative lens informed by washback theory. The findings indicate that VSTEP preparation is a mediated process shaped by stakeholder interpretations, institutional expectations, and individual agency. Teachers demonstrated construct-oriented understandings aligned with CEFR outcomes, whereas students adopted more task- and score-oriented perspectives. Preparation practices reflected this divergence, resulting in the coexistence of negative and positive washback.

The study contributes to washback research by providing comparative qualitative evidence from a Vietnamese higher education context, highlighting how test effects are differentially constructed across stakeholder groups. The findings reinforce the view of washback as a socially mediated and context-dependent process. Pedagogically, enhancing teachers' assessment literacy and improving transparency in scoring criteria may support more balanced preparation practices. Institutionally, greater attention to equitable access to resources and reduced emphasis on pass rates may help mitigate negative washback.

This study is limited by its regional scope and reliance on self-reported data. Future research could adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to further examine how washback evolves across contexts and over time.

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