

WASHBACK EFFECT IN LANGUAGE TESTING: WHAT DO WE KNOW AND WHAT IS ITS EFFECT?

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Abstract

The connection between language testing and language teaching can be seen from a bond called washback effects. Washback effect is defined as the impact of influence of a test on teaching and learning processes. In addition, washback effects can be determined either positive or negative according to the quality of the test done by the teacher. Positive washback effect gives beneficial change in language teaching and can be investigated from four aspects: the purpose of language learning; authenticity of testing; students' autonomy and self-assessment; and feedback of test results (Bailey, 1996 in Aftab et. al., 2014). Nevertheless, negative washback effects are said to cause negative or undesirable effect on teaching and learning. This current study is aimed at presenting review of washback effect in language testing on what we know about it and what its effect is.

Keywords: washback effect, positive washback

Abstrak

Hubungan antara penilaian bahasa dan pembelajaran bahasa dapat dilihat dari efek *washback*. Efek *washback* didefinisikan sebagai dampak dari pengaruh tes pada pengajaran dan proses pembelajaran. Selain itu, efek *washback* dapat ditentukan apakah positif atau negatif sesuai dengan kualitas tes yang dilakukan oleh guru. Efek positif *washback* bermanfaat pada perubahan pengajaran bahasa dan dapat diselidiki dari empat aspek: tujuan pembelajaran bahasa; keaslian pengujian; otonomi siswa dan penilai mandiri; dan umpan balik dari hasil tes (Bailey, 1996 di Aftabet. Al, 2014). Namun demikian, efek negatif *washback* dapat menyebabkan efek negatif pada pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menyajikan tinjauan efek *washback* dalam bahasa pengujian pada apa yang kita ketahui dan apa efeknya.

Keywords: efek washback, positive washback

Introduction

Language teaching and language testing are related each other since language testing can serve to evaluate the achievements of language teaching. The correlation is like a bond which cannot be separated. Language testing is important since it provides information about individual's language ability and their achievement (Hughes, 1989 in Aftab, Qureshi, & William, 2014). Not only language testing, assessment is also believed to have an effect on what and how teachers teach (language teaching). This effect is known as washback in language testing.

Washback effect is actually acknowledged in the early 1990s which is assumed as the impact of exams on teaching and learning. Since education seems to have always been aware of the effects of tests on educational program, teachers, and learners; scholars pursuit to have positive effects. However, in fact, teachers or educators are confused about what actually washback effect is and how we relate the effect of the test in

teaching process. This study is aimed at presenting washback effect in language testing and review of teacher's role in promoting positive washback effect.

What is Washback Effect?

Washback refers to the test influence on teaching and learning processes. Washback can also be defined as the effects of language tests on micro-level of language teaching and learning, i. e. inside the classroom (Bailey, 1996 as cited in Sukyadi and Mardiani, 2011). In addition, Brown (2005) mentioned that washback is the degree to which a test affects the curriculum that is related to it. Another expert, Messick (1996) cited in Brown (2002), defines washback as "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning." Furthermore, Cheng and Watanabe (2004) as cited in Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) conceptualize washback to have some dimensions, as follows.

- a. Specificity: washback may be general or specific. General

washback means a type of effect that may be produced by any test; specific washback refers to a type of washback that relates to only specific aspect of the test type.

- b. Intensity: washback may be strong or weak. If the test has a strong effect, then it will determine everything that happens in the classroom, and will lead all teachers in the same way toward exams. On the other hand, if a test has a weak effect, then it will affect only a part of the classroom events, or only some teachers and students, but not others.
- c. Length: the influence of exams, if it is found to exist, may last for a short period of time, or for a long time.
- d. Intentionality: there is unintended as well as intended washback which requires evaluation of the intended or unintended social consequences of test interpretation and use.

- e. Value or direction: examination washback may be positive or negative.

Alderson & Wall (1993) as cited in Ahmad and Rao (2012) have identified that a test will influence what teachers teach and a test will influence how teachers teach. Washback effects can be observed on macro and micro levels. The effects on the educational system, society or institutions at large scale are macro level effects, while micro level effects can be studied at individual level, like teacher or student. The washback effect normally leads to selective study habits in the students.

Types of Washback Effect

Generally washback effect can be analyzed based on two major types, positive and negative. Alderson and Wall (1993) in Aftabet. al (2014) mentioned that the quality of the washback effect might be independent of the quality of the test: any test, good or bad, may result in beneficial or detrimental washback effects. It means washback effect can be either positive or negative according to the quality of the test

(testing procedures). The first effect that can be seen is positive effects which can be investigated from four aspects: the purpose of language learning; authenticity of testing; students' autonomy and self-assessment; and feedback of test results (Bailey, 1996 in Aftab et. al., 2014). Positive washback effects are believed to be feasible and desirable to bring about beneficial change in language teaching. Aftabet. al (2014) added that in this case, teachers and learners should have a positive attitude towards the test and work willingly towards its objectives. Meanwhile, negative washback effects occur when a test's content or format is based on a narrow definition of language ability, and so constrains the teaching and learning context. It can also be said that negative washback is negative or undesirable effect on teaching and learning of a particular test which means a poor test in which something that the teacher or learner does not wish to teach or learn and a mismatch between the content and the test (Alderson and Wall, 1993 in Sukyadi and Mardiani, 2011).

The following is the details of positive and negative washback effects cited in Ahmad and Rao (2012):

- a) Positive Washback: tests induce teachers to cover their subjects more thoroughly, making them complete their syllabi within the prescribed time limits; tests motivate students to work harder to have a sense of accomplishment and thus enhance learning; good tests can be utilized and designed as beneficial teaching-learning activities so as to encourage positive teaching-learning processes.

Negative Washback: tests encourage teachers to narrow the curriculum and lose instructional time, leading to "teaching to the test"; tests bring anxiety both to teachers and students and distort their performance; students may not be able to learn real-life knowledge, but instead learn discrete points of knowledge that are tested; cramming will lead students to have a negative washback toward tests and accordingly alter their

learning motivation. (Pang, 2009)

Components of washback

There are three components of washback such as participants, processes, and products (Hughes, 1993 & Bailey, 1996). In the Hughes (1993) framework, *participants* include language learners and teachers, administrators, materials developers, researchers, and publishers. Besides, the term *process* covers any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning. According to him such processes include materials development, syllabus design, changes in teaching methods or content, learning and/or test-taking strategies. For example, students use the target language skills, study, learn, memorize, worry, or cheat. The process for the teachers are what they teach, how they teach, intensity of teaching, and additional tutorials, whereas the process for programs are changing curricula, scheduling test preparation classes, using new materials, and canceling classes. Finally, *product* refers to what is learned (facts, skills, etc.) and the quality of learning (fluency, etc.).

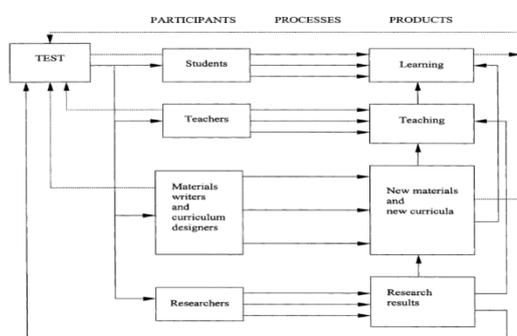
Products of washback includes changed teaching, leading to increased interaction and studying and better learning, new materials, new course syllabi.

However, Hughes (1993, 2-3) advised that at least five conditions have to be met before all of the possible washback effects can occur such as success on the test must be important to the learners, teachers must want their learners to succeed, participants must be familiar with the test and understand the implications of its nature and content, participants must have the expertise which is demanded by the test (including teaching methods, syllabus design and materials writing expertise), and the necessary resources for successful test preparation must be available.

Combining reviews of the literature as well as Alderson and Wall's (1993) Washback Hypotheses and Hughes' (1994) distinction between participants, process and products, Bailey (1996:264) put forth her own basic model of washback(see Figure 1 below). Bailey specified a number of

different participants, including researchers, and the types of products that might be affected by an examination. She also illustrated how these products might affect other products as well, for example research results can feed into materials, curriculum design and teaching. She then suggested a distinction between washback to the learners, which is the result of supplying test-derived information to the test-takers, and washback to the program, which is the result of supplying information to all of the other participants in the education system.

Figure 1. Bailey’s Model of Washback



Teachers’s role in promoting positive washback

In general, washback refers to any influence that a test may have on

the teacher and the learner, either positive or negative. The washback effect has been generally defined as the effect of assessment on teaching and learning which can be either positive or negative. According to Bachman (1990), positive washback occurs when the assessment used reflects the skills and content taught in the classroom. However, in many cases and particularly in high stakes testing, the curriculum is driven by the assessment leading to negative washback.

There are several factors that can influence negative washback such as lack of specific training, lack of curriculum materials, crowded classes with mixed ability students, lack of monitoring and support, summative assessment (both teachers and students still focus on ensuring on passing the final exam), lack of assessment technique and system.

Therefore, teachers play important role in promoting positive washback. It would have been much more effective if they are at least give a short course about how to assess effectively. Besides,

Hughes (1989, 47-44) suggests that in classroom practice teachers have responsibility to their classes to plan lessons, deliver instruction, manage interaction, and assign homework and to individual students to tailor lessons, give feedback, and give particular encouragement. Teachers should test the abilities they want to encourage, use direct testing (e.g., writing vs. an error editing task), and make sure the test is known and understood by students and teachers.

As teachers, it is important to make sure that they understand what tests are measuring, what test methods are used, how tests are scored, how to explain test scores to students, parents and administrators. Dorobat (2007: 30) purposes several tips to achieve positive washback such as: 1) test the skill or abilities whose development you want to promote (if you want to develop oral skills, then test oral skills); If tests set two kinds of task: compare or contrast, describe or interpret. Then teaching will be concentrated on these tasks. Backwash is harmful in this case. 2). employ direct testing (i.e. tasks or tests that are as

authentic as possible), 3). make testing criterion – referenced (norm–referenced testing makes teachers and learners assume that a certain percentage of candidates will fail the exam). Use a series of criterion – referenced tests representing different levels of achievement and allow learners to choose the tests they are able to pass. This will encourage positive attitude to language learning, 4). construct achievement test on objectives rather than on textbook content, 5). be sure that students understand what the test demands of them.

Gyem (2012: 15) proposed several recommendations to ensure positive washback effects of assessment. First, professional development for teachers in teaching (pedagogy) and subject knowledge, teachers should be given specific training on how to make the new assessment system work effectively. Second, align summative and formative assessment approaches; both approaches to assessment are equally important. Third, pre-service: align pre-service with the revised curriculum by having at least one

course entirely focused on testing and assessment. This could well equip the preservice teachers with the skills and knowledge of testing and assessment. Thus, the ministry should revisit the curriculum for pre-service teacher's course and then make necessary changes. Forth, assessment tasks: there are also excessive assessment tasks. They should be focused on quality assessment and designed to sample student learning. Fifth, authentic tasks: students prefer assessment tasks they perceive to be authentic. Thus they recommend tasks that present challenges to be taken earnestly, not only for the grades, but also those they believe to mirror the skills needed in the work place. Sixth, curriculum materials: provide enough curriculum materials e.g. teacher guides and assessment procedures on time. Seventh, monitoring and support services: provide proper monitoring and support services to the schools by concerned department. Reinforce effective assessment and evaluation system in the examination procedures.

Conclusion

Washback refers to the effect of testing on learning and teaching. Better understanding of how washback occurs in teaching and learning processes can help to inform targeted intervention. If, for example, teachers are failing to integrate writing activities into their classes in response to the introduction of writing tests, causes can be sought in test design (is too little weight given to writing skills? is the writing section too easy?) or in pedagogic systems (do teachers lack training in teaching writing?). If causes are correctly identified, suitable changes can be introduced (test revision, teacher training). In short, washback had close relations to the EFL teachers in regard to the syllabus and curriculum, tasks and activities, materials, and teaching methods and techniques.

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