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Changing language teaching through language testing: a washback study

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ABSTRACT

The notion of "washback" is common in the language teaching and testing literature, and tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in classrooms (Alderson and Wall, 1993). "Washback" refers to the influence of language testing on teaching and learning (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004). Milanovic and Weir's book *Changing Language Teaching Through Language Testing: A Washback Study* offers insights into the concept that a test can be used to encourage innovation in the classroom.

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Introduction

Despite persistent assertions of washback – the influence of testing on teaching and learning- limited research studies have been undertaken on the subject. Even fewer studies have made use of quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine washback.

This book illustrates the washback effects of language tests on teaching and learning in general and at the intersection of language testing and teaching, investigate the impact of the introduction of the 1996 Hong Kong Certificate of Education in English, a high-stakes examination, on classroom teaching and learning in Hong Kong secondary schools. In fact, the focus of this study was to determine whether or not any washback effect was evident on the teaching and learning of English in that context as a result of a change to its public examination system.

The washback effect is observed initially at the larger level, macro level, including different parties within the Hong Kong educational context, and subsequently at the more local level, micro level, in terms of the classroom, including aspects of teachers' attitudes, teaching content and classroom interactions. Further, the book offers insights into the concept that a test can be used as change agent to encourage innovation in the classroom.

The book is structured in three sections and eight chapters. Section one, including chapter one and two, opens with the description on the Hong Kong educational and research context and then moves towards the literature review on washback effects. In the first chapter, she provides background information on the Hong Kong education system and its learning context. She also introduces her research focus and the research questions: (1) What strategies did the Hong Kong Examinations Authority use to implement the examination change? (2) What was the nature and scope of the washback effect on teachers' and students' perceptions of aspects of teaching towards the new examination? And (3) What was the nature and the scope of the washback effect on teachers' behavior as a result of the new examination in relation to: (a) Teachers' medium of instruction, teacher talk, teaching activities, (b) Teaching materials used in teaching, aspects of lesson planning, (c) Assessment and evaluation in relation to their teaching.

Chapter two explores how and why washback could work to influence other components within the educational system, trace the rationale behind the use of public examination, and its powerful function to change teaching and learning. In this chapter, she reviews the relevant research studies related to washback and the theoretical framework of the study from four perspectives. In the first part, she goes through the research concepts such as the origin of washback, definition and scope of washback, and then two main functions of washback- negative and positive washback. In the second part, she explores the research phenomenon and gives report on some empirical studies. In the third part, she explores washback within different educational contexts and finally in the fourth part, she explores the theoretical background and existing frameworks of teaching and learning to guide the current study of washback.

In section two (chapter three), Cheng introduces the methodology for her washback study in more details to address the three research questions. This chapter has been organized in three parts. The first part elaborates on overall research design and the theoretical and methodological foundations for the study. In the second and third part, research design and instruments for the study is described. It employs teacher and student survey questionnaires and classroom observation. The design, rationale, aim, structure, content and sources of the surveys are discussed. Since there are limited amount of empirical research in investigating the washback effect of examination, one positive aspect of this study is to provide a methodological framework for further research and studies.

Section three (chapter four to eight) is a report on the washback effects of Hong Kong Certificate of Education at two levels, one on the large scale, macro level, and the other on the more local one, micro level. Cheng reports her research findings in this section. There are three phases of the research. Phase one is classified as the decision-making stage, and major research methods used in this phase are: key informant interviews, overall observations, initial survey studies. Phase two is made up of comparative surveys on teachers' and students' attitudes and their classroom behaviors. This phase is classified as the perception stage. The last phase, phase three, which has some overlaps with phase two, has focused on classroom observation and interview. This phase is classified as the implementation stage.

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Cheng's study is the first large-scale empirical study of washback in Hong Kong. Her work is one of the few washback studies that has employed both quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, an important strength of Cheng's work is the use she made of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the washback effects. A balanced combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is employed to explore the meaning of change in the Hong Kong context as a result of the new examination. In phase one, she used interviews, observation, and initial survey of teachers and students. In Phase two, two parallel survey studies of teachers and students were employed. The triangulation of the methodology and inclusion of comparable student and teacher data is of interest to all those contemplating researching in this area (Weir & Michael, 2005).

One of the drawbacks of the study is the use of simple methods of analyzing the quantitative data- use of reporting mainly. There is a need of more sophisticated approach towards data collection and analysis to gain more fruitful results.

The major aim of this research project is to bring about positive washback effects on teaching and learning in schools. However, the study shows the washback effect of the new examination on classroom methodology to be limited in many respects although the content of lessons shows marked change (Weir & Michael, 2005).

Washback exists and has consequences, negative, positive or both. Cheng successfully employed combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods in her longitudinal study at both macro and micro levels. She proposes a model of washback effects for the Hong Kong educational context which is a very helpful guide for future research and studies on washback. This book is highly recommended for language researchers, language teachers and testers.

To conclude, as stated by Pan (2009), as teachers and language testers we should bear in their minds that if we are the ones who make the tests, we should try to make a match between what is tested and what is taught by using more direct testing, making sure the test is known by students. Tests are one factor that will lead the teacher to "teach to the test", and what students learn might be discrete points of language, not the communicative part of language they need in real life. To remedy this, it is desirable to use authentic and direct tests (Bailey, 1996). We should utilize the tests to enhance students' learning while at the same time not inhibiting students' motivation by cramming too much. As teachers, "we may have limited power to influence high-stakes national and international examinations, but we do have tremendous power to lead students to learn, to teach them language and how to work with tests and test results" (Bailey, 2005). All in all, it's the teacher who has the most power to turn it into positive or negative washback.

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