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A Review Of Washback In Language Assessment And Its Implications For Teaching

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ABSTRACT:
Due to the extensive use of test results for educational and social purposes, washback effects of tests on teaching and learning have gained greater attention from many educators and researchers. A thorough understanding of washback would contribute to promoting the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, in the scope of this paper, the key concepts and dimensions related to washback effects will be reviewed. The study ends by drawing several pedagogical implications for EFL teachers.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Tests are generally perceived to have a significant impact on teaching and learning as they are "powerful determiners of what happens in classroom" (Alderson &Wall, 1993, p.115) or measurement-driven instruction (Popham,1987). The way in which testing impacts on teaching and learning process is known as "washback" (Hughes, 1989). Washback effect is a crucial factor due to considerable influences of test results on learners, teachers, the educational system, and the whole society as well (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). With this increasing importance of testing, the notion "washback" or "backwash" has been more commonly used in teaching and testing literature. Also, it has gained more attention on not only negative washback of the test but also its beneficial influences on the teaching and learning process.

In this article, the key concepts and dimensions related to washback effects will be reviewed. Comes after that are areas affected by washback and it ends with a number of pedagogical implications to enhance positive washback.

1. Definitions of washback

There have been various definitions of the term "washback" in language teaching literature. According to Pearson (1988), washback is the way that tests have an impact on the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, learners, and parents. Sharing a similar viewpoint, Gates gave a very clear definition that washback is "the influence of testing on teaching and learning" (p.101). This definition was strongly supported by Hughes (1989), Alderson & Wall (1993), Bailey (1996), Brown (2004). Messick (1996) added the degree to which tests influence teachers to do things they would not otherwise do to facilitate or hinder language learning is referred to as washback. Shohamy (1992) confirmed that language tests influence and drive the process of learning, and due to the importance of test scores, testing has a profound impact on the lives of test-takers. Brown (2005) that "washback is the degree to which a test affects the curriculum that is related to it" (p. 242). Buck (1988) provided a more elaborate definition that Both teachers and students tend to adapt the process of teaching and learning in the classroom to the "future of the students " and the pass rates are seen as a measure of teacher performance (p.17).

From the initial review on the definitions of washback, it can be generalized that washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. In addition, it can happen commonly at the micro-level and mostly affects teachers and students.

2. Types of washback

Generally, washback can be divided into two types, including positive and negative washback regarding its beneficial or detrimental impact on educational practices (Hughes, 1989).

Negative washback can be understood as the harmful or undesirable effect of a particular test on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Alderson & Wall, (1993) added at the macro level, they stated that the test with detrimental washback "may fail to reflect the learning principles and/ or the course objectives to which they are supposedly related" (p. 5). It is said that negative washback occurs in the context of teaching and learning when teachers are likely to overlook topics and tasks that are not explicitly linked to completing the

exam. As a result, tests have a negative impact on the curriculum (Vernon, 1956). In addition, negative washback is produced when students focus on learning test language rather than the total phases of understanding (Shohamy, 1992).

Conversely, when testing has beneficial and desirable influences on teaching and learning, washback becomes positive (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Specifically, positive washback refers to the way that teachers and students are encouraged to achieve their teaching and learning objectives (Anderson & Wall, 1993). Pearson (1998) added that tests can be used and designed as useful activities in the classroom in order to promote a productive teaching and learning process (Pearson, 1988, p.107). According to Djuric (2008), positive washback occurs when the teacher uses the scores to gain more students' attention and to have a thorough preparation. In other words, when teaching the curriculum is not different from teaching to the test, a positive washback is created (Weigle & Jensen, 1997, as cited by Bailey, 1999). Brown & Abeywickrama (2010) provided a detailed concept that "a test that provides beneficial washback influences what and how teachers teach positively, influences what and how learners learn positively, offers learners a chance to adequately prepare, gives learners feedback that enhances their language development, is more formative in nature than summative, provides conditions for peak performance by the learner" (p.38).

A review on the types of washback highlights that the influences of testing can be so considerable. The tests may drive the process of teaching and learning positively or negatively. Also, it seems that teachers play a crucial role in the development of different types of washback.

3. Areas affected by washback

Washback can encourage or discourage the quality of the teaching and learning process. It can significantly influence various aspects of this process, namely curriculum, materials, teaching methods, feelings, and attitudes, learning (Spratt, 2005).

Curriculum

Alderson & Wall (1993) pointed out that examination has provable impacts on the content of language lessons because teachers tend to narrow the curriculum to the areas which are commonly tested. Lam (1994) added the parts of the exam which are already taught likely carry the most marks (as cited by Spratt, 2005). Likewise, Vernon (1956) highlighted the negative washback of testing on curriculum that teachers have a tendency to focus narrowly on the domain directly related to the exam. Examination also affects the time allocation in the curriculum (Smith, 1991). However, this may vary in different situations because the time for exam preparation can be greater or lesser depending on the school (Read &Hayes, 2003, as cited by Spratt, 2005).

Materials

In addition, washback may affect the teaching materials. In this case, this term refers to exam-related textbooks and past papers. As stated by (Alderson & Wall, 1993), when the exam comes, the past papers and commercial exam-public textbooks are at the greatest use. Cheng (1997) confirmed that in Hong Kong secondary school, almost all school had altered their textbook for students when the examination syllabus influenced teaching. According to Lam (1994), nearly all teachers rely on using these materials heavily because "they believe the best way to prepare students for exams is by doing past papers" (as cited by Spratt, 2005, p.16). Also noted by Andrews (1995), the instructors in his study were found to spend around 66% of class time dealing with test-related distributed materials. Apparently, the washback effect of testing on teaching materials is extremely great.

Teaching methods

Besides curriculum and teaching materials, teaching methods and learners' approaches to learning are driven by testing (Frederiksen,1984; Frederiksen & Collins,1989). Sharing similar viewpoint, Alderson and Hamp Lyons (1996), Shohamy (1996), and Watanabe (1996) pointed out that with the influences of examination, instructors tend to teach through the exam tasks or hold the activities to develop exam skills or strategy. Specifically, some teachers tend to "teach to the test" or use 'textbook slave' approaches(as cited by Spratt, 2005, p.16). Some teachers employ all the test-like activities and add review sessions to regular class hours (Shohamy et al., 1996). Clearly, most teachers tend to alter their teaching methods to meet the demand of the test (Buck, 1988).

Feelings and attitudes

Tests can also affect teachers' and learners' feelings, attitudes because they are often administered at the end of the course, "his influence is seen working in a backward direction" (Pearson,1988, p. 7). For learners, the exam can make them worry about an inaccurate reflection of all aspects of their studies (Cheng, 1997). For

teachers, they feel under pressure when the exam gets closer because of the anxiety of students' results or unfamiliar test format (Cheng, 1998, as cited by Spratt, 2005). Therefore, the atmosphere in the class was tense (Shohamy et al., 1996). However, if the test has positive washback, they can get encouraged and motivated to attain learning and teaching objectives (Anderson and Wall, 1993).

Learning

Testing also impacts the students' approaches to learning through focusing on test-taking skills, subject matter relating to the test, and adopting more of a memorization approach (Andersonetal, 1990). However, little evidence indicated "whether students have learned more or learned better because they have studied for a particular test" (Wall, 2000, p.502). In fact, if teachers can apply an integrative method of creative activities in the classroom and positive backwash, students' attention, interests, and choices to their learning can be encouraged and motivated (Yi-Ching, 2009).

From the discussion mentioned above, it is clear that testing can have a powerful influence on curriculum, materials, teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, learning. Therefore, it is an essential factor that should be taken into when designing and evaluating a test. Also, the teachers have a decisive role in driving the process of teaching and learning in the desirable direction.

4. Pedagogical implications

Over the past years, many studies have been conducted to find solutions to reduce negative washback and achieve positive washback of the test. In general, suggestions can be associated with three main aspects including test design, test development, and test use.

Test design

As for test design, Hughes (1989) suggested assessing the students' abilities that teachers need to encourage. For instance, if the teachers want students to improve their communicative abilities, then the communicative skills should be tested. These abilities can be assessed by using direct testing with authentic texts and tasks (Hughes, 1989). Likewise, Messick (1996) stated, to enhance the positive washback, the change from learning activities to test exercises "should be seamless" by using authentic and direct samples of communicative abilities (p. 5). This would create a match between what is taught and what is tested. As stated by Weigle & Jensen (1997), when "there is no difference between teaching the curriculum and teaching to the test", positive washback is produced (p.205). Moreover, by doing so, students will get motivated and focus on language development because the ways how they apply the knowledge and skills that they have learned in real-world situations are assessed.

Furthermore, both Alderson (1986) and Hughes (1989) recommended designing a test based on objectives instead of the textbook content to make students' achievements more real. In this sense, teachers and learners will have a positive attitude to the test and make efforts to have good teaching practice and suitable learning strategies which ultimately enhance students' overall language performance. In addition, a test designed according to objectives will help eliminate the tendency to skip language classes to practice previous tests or use an excessive amount of time on test-like activities.

In addition, Hughes (1989) proposed to make criterion-referenced tests that compare a students' knowledge and skills against a predetermined standard, cut score, or other criteria. This seems good for students because this kind of test will stimulate students towards their learning by making them clear with what they have to achieve according to test specifications. Simultaneously, the pressure of testing on learns would be lower, thus reducing the practice of cramming, concentrating on test-taking skills, and adopting a memorization approach to pass the examination.

Test development process

With the test development process, Hughes (1989) put forward the idea that the test consisting of the rationale, specifications, and a wide range and unpredictable samples should be necessarily known and clearly understood by students and teachers. Similarly, Wall (1996) stated that "all stakeholders are kept informed of and are allowed to contribute to new developments" (as cited by Kim 2008, p. 29). In case a new test is introduced, Hughes (1989) noted it is necessary to provide teachers guidance and training. By the same token, Djuric (2008) suggested that teachers need to be provided information and training from testers as well as communicate with them to reduce negative washback. This enables teachers and students to have a thorough preparation for the test. Hughes (1989) emphasized that although a great deal of time, money, effort may be taken for direct testing, production, and distribution of test samples or training, we need to compare the cost of achieving and not achieving positive washback.

Test use

Regarding test use, to promote positive washback, Bailey (1996) showed that the test administers should provide detailed feedback on students' test performance to teachers. Shohamy (1992) also suggested that a test will exert a positive influence on teaching and learning when the feedback is "detailed, innovative, relevant and diagnostic" (p.515). He confirmed that the interpretation of test results has to deal with a range of aspects of students' performance rather than reporting a single score. Likewise, Djuric (2008) proposed teachers and exam boards take test feedbacks into account to give constructive advice to students. When learners are provided informative feedback, they can identify and realize their strengths and weaknesses which can lead to better development of their language skills in the future and improve their motivation to learn (Klimova, 2015). Consequently, positive washback is promoted.

II. CONCLUSION

Insights from various empirical studies show that washback effect is a crucial factor that influences teaching and learning considerably and happens in the educational system or the society, but more commonly occurs in the school setting. The importance of classroom teachers in maximizing positive washback and minimizing the negative consequences is also highlighted. Admittedly, to achieve this purpose, test developers, educators, and policymakers must make the collaborations. However, teachers play a role in implementing teaching methodologies that test developers and policymakers, as well as what students and parents expect (Lopez, 2005; Huang & Wang, 2011). Therefore, classroom teachers should make every effort to innovate teaching methodologies and focus on boosting learners' language performance. In addition, the teachers should be fully aware of the educational theories related to washback, the areas affected by washback. Notably, a classroom teacher needs to thoroughly understand the test objectives and multiple factors related to the test, such as the characteristics of and expectation of test-takers, testing context, the test uses when choosing a suitable measure to promote positive washback and reduce negative washback.

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