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THE CONCEPT OF WASHBACK ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**LISHANTHI WIJewardene****LECTURER****FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES & COMMERCE****UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA****NUGEGODA****ABSTRACT**

This article could be considered as a review of literature which focuses on the theoretical norms of washback in language testing. Of late, the concept of washback in language testing has gained momentum and received significant attention in the spheres of language teaching and learning. As such this paper, whilst introducing the concept of the 'washback effect' that tests have, highlights some important examples in the academic field. Additionally, this article intends to explore the possibilities as to whether assessments are suitable representatives, capable of bringing about changes in teaching practices and thereby encouraging learning. As such, in order to understand the effects of washback on teaching and learning, this article will focus on the definitions of the concept of washback and review some key empirical studies done on the concept of washback.

KEYWORDS

washback, classroom assessment, tests, English language, teaching, learning.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of classroom assessment on language teaching and learning especially with special reference to oral English has become a significant area of interest for both teachers and students in recent times. It is a known fact that testing of any form affects teaching and learning and therefore testing is considered as a vital area in the educational system of any educational institution. Alderson and Wall (1993, p.115) state that "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom." Assessments, which are also known as low-stakes tests, are informal methods of testing in the classroom whereby the testing is carried out without the stress factor involved in the process of testing. This is in complete contrast to high-stakes tests which are better identified as exams. Whilst acting as an influential instrument of educational development, a test is expected to serve as a monitor of educational achievement (Linn, 1992). As such it could be said that tests play an important role not only in the shaping of teaching and learning, but also in the shaping of course designs and classroom practices. According to Madaus (1988) 'It is testing, not the "official" stated curriculum, that is increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned, and how it is learned.' Examinations are used for a plethora of activities amongst many stakeholders especially in the field of higher education, such as, being a ladder which promotes students from one level to the next, in setting a standard whereby students can secure employment, enabling employers to choose the most apt candidates for job vacancies in their organizations, and acting as an agent whereby teachers can display the efficiency of their teaching. Cheng (1997) highlights the fact that, the effect of washback plays an important part today due to the fact that test scores are used widely for educational and social purposes. As such, it is evident that the concept of washback plays an important role and is a significant actor in this scene as it assesses the effects of an examination on the teaching and learning processes.

WHAT IS WASHBACK?

Many countries have introduced different types of assessments in their educational system with the intention of motivating changes in teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Burrows, 2004; Cheng, 2004; Qi, 2004). "Washback" (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Buck, 1988) or "backwash" (Biggs, 1995; Biggs, 1996; Hughes, 2003) refers to test influences on teaching and learning. For the purpose of this article, washback is defined as the effects of an assessment that occurs in a classroom, with special reference to oral English.

Alderson and Banerjee (2001) describe washback as being the impact that tests have on teaching and learning. Messick (1996) refers to washback as "the extent to which the introduction and the use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do, that promote or inhibit language learning." Buck (1988, p.17) defines washback as "the natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the tests, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as washback, by language testers) is, of course, very important: this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful."

Wall and Alderson (1993) conducted a study examining the positive and negative effects of an examination (the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination) on English language teaching. The test was introduced in secondary schools in Sri Lanka with the objective of providing a means for focusing teaching more in the direction of communicative classrooms and less towards traditional practices. The results of the study revealed that, while the exam had no influence on teaching style, it did have an effect on the content of teaching. Alderson and Wall (1993, pp. 120-121) conducted one of the most in-depth studies on the concept of washback.

Thus it could be concluded that washback is the influence of testing on learning and teaching and that its existence has been termed as 'important', although not much empirical research has been done in this particular area. There have been many concerns about the concept of washback and whether its outcome is positive or negative, and how one could promote positive washback and inhibit negative washback (Bailey, 1999). It could be said that most studies on washback with special reference to the teaching of English as a second language, have focused on the positive or negative effects that high-stakes examinations have on areas such as course content, methodology adopted by teachers, teacher and student attitudes, and actual learning that takes place. However it has been reported that such examinations have a greater effect upon content and less upon the actual methodology employed by teachers (Muñoz and Álvarez, 2010). For instance, Cheng (1997) analyzed the effect that, changes to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in English had upon teaching and learning. She found that washback occurred, but only in terms of bringing about change to teaching materials. Evidence that the changes to the test brought about changes to the way teachers taught, was not conclusive.

In another study, Qi (2004) investigated the effect of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), which was introduced in order to promote positive washback effect on secondary school English teaching in China. Qi's findings are that there was a big discrepancy between the test designers' intentions and classroom practice and that little positive washback was felt on students' language use.

In yet another study, Burrows (2004) examined the washback effect of a classroom-based assessment in the Australian Adult Migrant English Programme. She found that the test effect varied from teacher to teacher depending on the teacher's beliefs and attitudes.

Furthermore, studies examining effects of assessment on student learning appear to illustrate a lack of clear understanding as to how washback works (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1999). Both negative and positive attitudes about the effect of tests have been reported in different studies (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2004; Shohamy *et al*, 1996). However, there have been few studies reporting improvements that could be proved in the learning that takes place among students.

Thus, stemming from the studies mentioned above, it could be construed that, the mere setting of examinations will not bring about significant changes in the education system. There are many aspects beyond the examination that have to be focused upon in order to effect change. Following up on the Sri Lanka study, Wall (1996) described diverse factors which might have prevented the examination from providing positive effects, such as teachers' lack of understanding of the examination, resistance to change and examination content. She also refers to other factors such as gap between test designers and teachers, and lack of

well trained teachers. Similarly, to overcome hindrances to positive washback, many English Language Teaching (ELT) specialists recommend that examination systems be improved by ensuring congruity between curriculum objectives and exams, authenticity of tasks, detailed score reporting, teachers and students' increased understanding of the assessment criteria, and learner self-assessment (Bailey, 1996; Eisemon, 1990; Hughes, 1989; Messick, 1996; Shohamy, 1992). Other authors refer to meaningfulness of feedback (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Kulik and Kulik, 1991) and variety of test formats and tasks as powerful means for teaching and learning improvements (Kellaghan and Greany, 1992 in Wall, 1996; Messick, 1996).

The important role of classroom assessment in learning is highlighted by Glaser and Silver (1994, p. 26) when they state that 'as assessment and instruction are more closely linked, achievement measurement will be integral to learning rather than imposed by some external examination on students' fates.'

According to Boud (1995), assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students' learn than any other single factor. As Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) pointed out, course objectives and assessment should be aligned for greater learning. They further argued that, assessment methods, questions, and task should not be arbitrary. The outlook / perception of assessment is different for students and teachers, the reason being that teachers consider assessment as the end of the teaching and students commence their learning with assessment in mind.

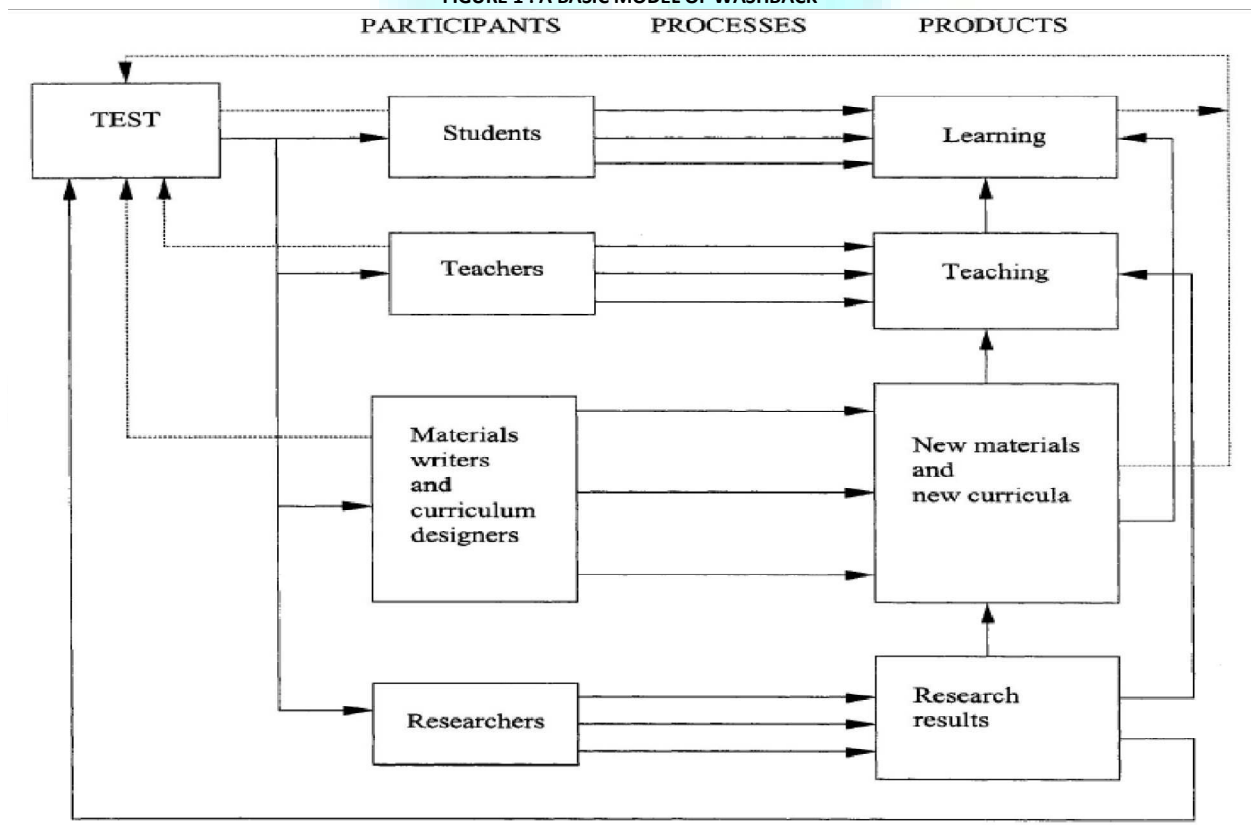
SOME IMPORTANT WASHBACK STUDIES

Alderson and Wall (1993) in their pioneering study based on extensive work done in Sri Lanka on washback, posed the question "Does washback exist?" and in the quest to finding answers to this question, they posed some possible washback hypotheses, which are given below:

1. A test will influence teaching.
2. A test will influence learning.
3. A test will influence what teachers teach.
4. A test will influence how teachers teach.
5. A test will influence what learners learn.
6. A test will influence how learners learn.
7. A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching
8. A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning.
9. A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching.
10. A test will influence the degree and depth of learning.
11. A test will influence the attitudes to the content and method etc, of teaching and learning.
12. Tests that have important consequences will have washback on teachers and learners.
13. Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback.
14. Tests will have washback for all learners and teachers.
15. Tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not for others.

Bailey (1996) refers to the model put forward by Hughes (1993) wherein the mechanisms that turn the wheel of washback are focused upon. Accordingly Figure 1 highlights the participation of key stakeholders, where Hughes is of the view that a test will impact the participants, the process and the product involved in both teaching and learning. According to Hughes, the overall category of 'participants' includes teachers, students, administrators, developers of course material and publishers. Hughes is of the opinion that the perceptions of these 'participants' could vary because of a test. Additionally, Hughes defines 'process' as being 'any action taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning.' Some examples of items that could be categorized under the title of 'process' include designing the syllabus, improvement of materials, incorporating changes into the teaching methodology and implementing strategies for test-taking. The final category that Hughes focuses on is the 'product' which includes what is learnt and the quality of that learning. As Hughes emphasizes, "The nature of a test may first affect the perceptions and attitudes of the participants towards their teaching and learning tasks. These perceptions and attitudes in turn may affect what the participants do in carrying out their work (process), including practicing the kind of items that are to be found in the test, which will affect the learning outcomes, the product of that work (Hughes, 1993, p.2 cited in Bailey, 1996, p.262).

FIGURE 1 : A BASIC MODEL OF WASHBACK



Source: reprinted from Bailey 1996, p. 264

In another study Cheng (1997) examined the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) where research was done on secondary school exams in Hong Kong. In this study, Cheng refers to 'washback' as 'an active direction and function of intended curriculum change by means of the change of public examinations' (ibid., p. 38).

A study done by Pearson (1988) highlighted the fact that there was a deliberate use of a revised national exam in Sri Lanka to bring about curricular change. According to Pearson, "There is an explicit intention to use tests, including public examinations, as levers which will persuade teachers and learners to pay serious attention to communicative skills and to teaching-learning activities that are more likely to be helpful in the development of such skills (ibid., p. 106). According to Pearson, using "tests as a deliberate backwash-generating device has its limitations." (ibid) Thus it is amply evident that the washback effect is the impact that a test has on teaching and learning.

THE IMPACT OF WASHBACK IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) CLASSROOM

Buck (1988) defines washback as being the influence that a test has on a classroom, where the washback effect can either be beneficial (or positive) or harmful (or negative) It is thus an understood fact that, especially in the classroom where the learner is a non-native speaker of the English language, the impact that the concept of washback has on various aspects is important if one were to promote positive washback and minimize the negative effects of washback. Many facets related to classroom teaching such as the curriculum, the lesson materials used in teaching, the teaching methodology adopted, the attitudes of both teachers and learners, and the learning that takes place can be affected by washback.

THE IMPACT OF WASHBACK ON TEACHING

Many are the studies that have been done on washback, which focus on what happens in the ELT classroom. The outcome of these studies has highlighted a plethora of findings. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) and Watanabe (1996) discovered that, although not all teachers reacted the same way to the same test, a test influenced the content that teachers used in their teaching and the methodology they adopted. Watanabe (2004) and Burrows (2004) found that in most cases, tests exerted a lot of pressure on teachers. The findings of Shohamy (1993) and Shohamy *et al* (1996) revealed that, whereas teachers who were experienced taught with the test in mind, novice teachers focused on activities to teach oral English. This finding was endorsed by Lam (1994, p.91) who concluded that whilst novice teachers tended to be less exam oriented, their experienced counterparts were more exam oriented. Another significant finding was that teaching content was dependent on the test but that the methodology adopted by teachers in their instructions did not necessarily change according to the test (Cheng, 2004, Wall and Alderson, 1993). Qi (2005) discovered that language teachers were not able to bring about positive changes in their teaching which entailed using a more communicative approach (which was the intention of the test developers) in their English language teaching, due to their beliefs and attitudes regarding the goals of their teaching, and therefore they were unsure about what changes to adopt. This prompted Cheng (2004) to conclude that English language teachers are unable to change their existing teaching methodologies due to the fact that they are inadequately trained and that their professional background acts as an impediment. However, many researchers (Wall and Alderson, 1993; Watanabe, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Burrows, 2001; Watanabe, 2004) have concluded that tests do have an influence on the content and teaching activities adopted in the English language classroom. They further added that the educational backgrounds and beliefs of English language teachers played an influential role in the instruction methodology adopted by these teachers.

THE IMPACT OF WASHBACK ON LEARNING

Although numerous studies have been done on the relationship between washback and English language teaching, relatively fewer studies have been done on the relationship between washback and learning in the sphere of English language. The findings of Watanabe (2004) endorse this fact: "...relatively well explored is the area of washback to the programme, while less emphasis has been given to learners..." (p. 22). Whilst the findings of Shohamy *et al* (1996) reveal that tests promote learning, Cheng (1998) concluded that although tests motivated students to learn, their learning strategies did not vary according to the test. A similar finding was recorded by Bright and Randow (2004) in their study which centred around the Diagnostic English Language Needs Analysis, an English needs assessment. They discovered that students who had a low proficiency were not willing to find ways of improving their language proficiency due to time constraints, excessive workload and stress, even though they were aware that a better English language proficiency would assist them in their academic progress. In another study done by Stoneman (2006), the findings revealed that students were motivated to spend more time in preparing for high stakes tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) rather than on low stakes tests such as the Graduating Students Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLAP). Stoneman was also of the view that researchers needed to investigate the changes in students' learning styles, learning strategies and motivations in order to have a better understanding of the degree of washback that takes place in the English language classroom. In their pioneering study on washback, Wall and Alderson (1993) reiterated the fact that more research was needed to find out the extent to which a test affects the performance and motivation of students.

THE IMPACT OF WASHBACK ON THE CURRICULUM

Many researchers have come up with findings in relation to the effect that washback has on the curriculum. According to Alderson and Wall (1993: 126-127), consequent on their study conducted in Sri Lanka, they concluded that 'the examination has had a demonstrable effect on the content of language lessons,' whereby the curriculum was narrowed down to the areas which were expected to be tested. This is a similar finding to that of Lam (1994) who stated that according to the findings obtained by him, teachers placed more importance on the areas which carried more marks at the examination. In the findings of his study Cheng (1997) discovered that consequent on the revised examination being introduced, teachers focused on the areas that were included in the revised examination (for example, the revised examination focused on discussion activities and role plays). However, the findings of the study done by Watanabe (1996) revealed that, although the examination included writing and listening skills, the teachers did not focus on these particular skills. The findings of the study done by Alderson and Hamp Lyons (1996) revealed that some institutions gave more time to TOEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) classes whilst others did not. They also discovered that there were more students in the examination classes when compared with the 'regular' classes. These findings indicate that washback on the curriculum operates in different ways, depending on the situation.

THE IMPACT OF WASHBACK ON MATERIALS

In the case of high stakes tests, the materials referred to are textbooks related to the examination and the past papers. Most of the studies done in this area indicated that teachers are aware of the materials necessary for the exam. As such if a revised edition of a textbook is printed, or, a new textbook is printed based on the revised exam, teachers will undoubtedly use this material for their teaching. This was seen in the findings of a study done in New Zealand by Read and Hayes (2003). Cheng (1997: 50) also discovered this trend in a study done in Hong Kong. However Shohamy *et al* (1996: 309) discovered that in a low stakes exam for Arabic no special course material had been published since 1993 (1996: 304). Lam (1994) discovered that teachers relied heavily on text books and past papers; Andrews *et al* (1995) endorsed this in his findings where teachers spent almost two thirds of the classroom time on exam-related materials. In a study done on IELTS in New Zealand, Read and Hayes (2003) also discovered the fact that exam preparation materials were used almost 90% of the time. Having done in-depth research in their study, Alderson and Hamp Lyons were of the view that, irrespective of their teaching experience, teachers relied heavily on exam related materials when teaching for a particular exam and that this was mainly due to the fact that teachers had a negative attitude towards the exam which in turn dissuaded them from creating their own lesson material. However, in the findings of Watanabe (2000: 44) teachers "tried to innovate during exam preparation classes.... using a variety of self-made materials.'

Lumley and Stoneman (2000) conducted a study on the reaction of teachers and students to a new learning package for a test that was newly introduced at tertiary level in Hong Kong. According to their findings:

"There seems to be something of a mismatch between the attitudes of the teachers towards the contents of the Learning Package, and those of the students. The teachers clearly saw the potential of the materials as a teaching package, containing relevant and worthwhile teaching activities including but extending beyond test preparation. The students, on the other hand, were, above all, concerned with familiarizing themselves with the format of the test, and seemed to be relatively little concerned with the learning strategies proposed, and the broader suggestions for improving performance.... In general they demonstrated relatively little interest in the idea of using test preparation as an opportunity for language learning."

(Lumley and Stoneman, 2000: 75)

In the Alderson and Hamp Lyons study (1996: 285), the findings revealed that the teachers were of the view that, it was the students who decided on the methodology to improve their English for the TOEFL exam. Some students insisted that they do practice tests which were similar to TOEFL-like items. But students who came from the Far East and Latin America preferred to prepare for the TOEFL exam by interacting with their American friends, engaging in activities such as reading and going to the movies and 'using English outside the classroom.' This could be due to the fact that these students were based in the United States and felt the need to improve their spoken English which was a communicative tool for them. Thus it can be said that the washback on teaching materials will differ according to teachers and students and their diverse learning contexts.

CONCLUSION

English communication skills are a vital factor in determining the level of success that one enjoys in the global economy and community. However, in the case of undergraduates, the ability to communicate in English is crucial to survive in society, to obtain a suitable job and to pursue higher studies. Thus guiding students towards skills that will bring long term benefits to ELT students is of utmost importance. It is in backdrop that washback plays a crucial role. Within the ambit of low stakes testing which encompasses the concept of assessments, the tendency in the classroom setting is to test what is taught. Flinders (2005) opines that "What is tested now determines what is taught." An oral English classroom assessment can have an impact both at macro level (where the educational system and society are impacted), and at micro level (where students and teachers are affected). However, it is the cumulative effect of micro level impact that will have a bearing at macro level and thus it is important to focus on the factors that impact the micro level components.

Based on the washback studies, it is not possible to assume that the consequences of teaching and learning do not reflect the invalidity or validity of a test. It is therefore vital that empirical studies on the concept of washback in the English language classroom at undergraduate level be done to ascertain the causes and the very nature of washback. Thus it could be said that the concept of washback is a multifaceted occurrence. Cheng and Curtis (2004, p. 16) endorse this when they say that

"The relationship between testing and teaching and learning does appear to be far more complicated and to involve much more than just the design of a 'good' assessment. There is more underlying interplay and intertwining of influences within each specific educational context where the assessment takes place."

Thus it could be said that the fact that a test exists does not mean that this test is capable of bringing about either a positive or a negative washback. There are numerous other factors within the educational context that can influence what takes place in the language classroom and before analyzing a test, it is important that these factors be analysed. With special reference to the English language classroom, merely changing a test or assessment would not seem suitable in order to bring about changes in teaching and learning. In order to bring about a positive washback to both teachers' teaching and students' learning, it may be crucial to scrutinize the educational system as a whole. For example, a balanced assessment system with emphasis on a formative assessment system in addition to the high-stakes tests may be beneficial in preparing the learners and teachers to veer towards a positive washback in the English language classroom. Hence it is recommended that future studies be done to ascertain the test impacts of classroom based assessments where the concept of washback will be further explored.

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