Changing language teaching through language testing:
A washback study
Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study

Liying Cheng
Dedication

This study is dedicated to my parents who have, to their best knowledge and ability, encouraged me to reach the highest level of education possible throughout my life, for which I am greatly indebted to them.
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Acknowledgements

Bringing this book to print has been something of a labour of love. I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people in the field of language testing who have supported and encouraged me throughout the process.

In particular, I am most grateful to Dr Peter Falvey, my doctoral supervisor, for his patient guidance, thought-provoking advice and constant support. I would like to thank Professor Kathleen Bailey and Professor Lyle Bachman for their constructive feedback during the time of research and the years thereafter. I must also thank Dr Andy Curtis for his unfailing support and constant encouragement. He is always the first reader of my work.

I am indebted to my friends – Peter Gu, An-e He, Sima Sengupta, Qiufang Wen and Liz Walker – who served as the research hotline throughout the whole research process. I wish to express my sincerest thanks for their academic and emotional support.

I would like to take the opportunity here to acknowledge several individuals from the Hong Kong Examinations Authority for insights into this washback study. My heartfelt thanks go to Rex King, Christina Lee and John Fullilove.

Particular thanks goes to my case study teachers – Sister Matthew, Yeo Shu Hoon and Mandy Ho Man Yan – for their ardent professional belief in this research and for letting me into their classrooms to analyse and investigate every aspect of their lessons over the two year period. Thanks also to the teachers in my baseline study who offered such generous assistance and allowed me to bring video cameras into their classrooms. I am truly indebted to all the teachers and students who participated in my survey studies.

I would like to thank the detailed work of Calvin Bowry and Ying Yu at Queen’s University for proofing the manuscript.

And finally my heartfelt thanks goes to my family for their unshakeable belief in me and their unselfish support. They have encouraged me throughout this washback study right up to the point of going to print. Special thanks to my beloved son, Jack, for his tremendous understanding of his mother’s work, even at a very early age in his life.
Series Editors’ note

It is now commonplace to regard validity as a unitary concept with theory based, content and criterion related validation processes all having a part to play in contributing evidence in respect of the interpretation of test scores. High stakes test providers such as Cambridge ESOL are also concerned with the ethical dimension of testing in terms of the impact of a test on individuals and society and place equal emphasis on social values and social consequences in any considerations of the validity of test scores.

Test impact is concerned with the influence of a test on general educational processes and on the individuals who are affected by the test results. It is recognized that examination boards have a major impact on educational processes and on society in general because their examinations often have widespread recognition and ‘cash in’ value. Washback is an important element of test impact. While impact may occur at a ‘macro’ or social and institutional level, washback occurs at the ‘micro’ level of the individual participant (primarily teachers and students).

There is now a clear consensus on the need for a concern with, if not agreement on, the effects of what has been termed ‘washback/backwash’. Washback is considered a ‘neutral’ term (which may refer to both (intended) positive or beneficial effects and to (unintended) harmful or negative effects and is broadly defined as the effect of a test on teaching and often also on learning. It has been associated with effects on teachers, learners, parents, administrators, textbook writers, classroom practice, educational practices and beliefs and curricula although the ultimate effects on learning outcomes should perhaps be the primary concern.

Given that language teachers have to equip students with the skills that tests are intended to provide information about, it seems likely the closer the relationship between the test and the teaching that precedes it, the more the test is likely to have washback on both staff and students. Some authors caution that although the test may influence the content of teaching this may not be uniformly positive and more critically tests may have little impact on methodology, how teachers teach. Liying Cheng found such a situation following the exam reforms in Hong Kong but her research clearly indicates that if adequate training for teaching the new test is not provided we should hardly find it surprising that old methodologies persist. The same is true in the Sri Lankan washback study described by Wall to be published in a later
volume in this series where additionally a debilitating civil war was hardly conducive to change.

This volume looks at the impact of the 1996 Hong Kong Certificate of Education in English (HKCEE), a high stakes public examination, on the classroom teaching of English in Hong Kong secondary schools. Liying Cheng investigates the effects from the decision-making level of the Education Department (ED), the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC), and the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA), down to the classroom levels of teaching and learning, with reference to aspects of teachers’ attitudes, teaching content, and classroom interaction.

The study addresses the following research questions:
(1) What strategies did the HKEA 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?
(3) What was the nature and scope of the washback effect on teachers’ behaviours 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.

Despite widespread lip service to the mantra of ‘washback’ in the international testing community, until recently only a limited number of research studies have been undertaken to study the effects of high stakes language tests on teaching and learning and even fewer were based on samples as adequate as the one employed in this study in Hong Kong.

An important strength of Liying Cheng’s work is the use she made of both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate these effects. A balanced combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods is employed to explore the meaning of change in the Hong Kong context as a result of the new examination. Phase I utilized interviews, observation, and initial surveys of teachers and students. Phase II involved two parallel survey studies of teachers and students. The major research methods used in Phase III were classroom observations and follow-up interviews. The triangulation of the methodology (multi-method methodology) and inclusion of comparable student and teacher data is of interest to all those contemplating researching in this area.

The overt aim of the HKEA, in introducing the examination, was 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. Of particular interest is the identification of washback intensity (potential areas in teaching and learning that experience more washback effects than others within the given context of the study).

Two forthcoming volumes in this series on washback by Wall on the O level English examination in Sri Lanka and Green on IELTS should further enrich our understanding of this under-researched area of validity and help further ground the methodologies for investigating it.

Cyril Weir
Michael Milanovic
2004