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0521544734 - Changing Language Teaching through Language Testing: A Washback Study

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Excerpt

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## Section One: Education on the change

Rapid change has long been a phenomenon of modern times. And it is a phenomenon that is universal; no one and nowhere has escaped.

Lord & Cheng (1987: vii)

This section lays out the research background for an impact study of a major public examination change on English language teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools. The focus of this study was to determine whether or not any washback effect was evident on the teaching and learning of English in Hong Kong secondary schools as a result of a change to its public examination system. The examination under study was the 1996 Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in English language.<sup>1</sup> This section consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 provides background information on the Hong Kong education system and its secondary school English language teaching and learning context. Chapter 2 reviews relevant research studies related to the educational phenomenon known as and referred to as *washback*.

1. The 1996 HKCEE in English language, also described as the revised HKCEE in this book, refers to the official 1996 HKCEE English examination syllabus, and the examination itself. Changes were made to the original HKCEE syllabus in 1993. The official 1996 HKCEE syllabus was put into effect in secondary schools in 1994. The 1996 HKCEE English examination was taken by students for the first time in May 1996.

# 1 The Hong Kong research context

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Hong Kong is an examination-mad town. Public examinations dominate its secondary education system with students preparing for ‘O’ level examinations taken at the end of secondary 5 and ‘A’ level examinations, which they sit after secondary 7. Teachers plan and conduct their lessons with an eye fixed firmly on the requirements of the examinations in their subjects.

Fullilove (1992: 131)

## The problem

As is well known among educators, assessment practices are currently undergoing a major paradigm shift, which can be described as a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of the prevailing paradigm’s emphasis on standardized testing (Biggs, 1995, 1996; Genesee, 1994). Alternative assessment is built on current theories of learning and cognition and is grounded in futurists’ views of what skills and abilities students in our society will need for future success. This kind of assessment has been initiated as a result of current educational reform movements and accountability (Herman, 1992; Oller, 1979). This assessment reform further reflects a trend towards using assessment to reform curriculum and improve instruction at the school level (Linn, 1983, 1992; Noble & Smith, 1994a, 1994b; Popham, 1983, 1987). Assessment is used by and has an impact on schools, colleges, and employers. In addition, assessment is also expected to have an impact on what and how teachers teach. According to Linn (1992), each of the above-intended consequences needs to be evaluated, the process of which should start with identifying the assessment system’s intended effects on teaching and learning.

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An important assumption behind the current beliefs about examination consequences is that deleterious effects on teaching and learning can be overcome by switching to alternative assessments. Those deleterious effects are associated with the traditional assessment paradigm of standardized testing. Alternative assessments such as performance-based assessment, on the other hand, are more closely linked to curriculum frameworks. It is argued (Baker, Aschbacher, Niemi, & Sato, 1992; Honig, 1987; Linn, 1992; Noble & Smith, 1994b; Popham, 1987, 1991) that performance-based assessment can be designed to be so closely linked to the goals of instruction as to be almost indistinguishable from them. Rather than being a negative consequence, as the impact is now with some high-stakes uses of existing standardized tests, it is asserted that teaching to these proposed performance-based assessments would be considered a virtue.

The current study is situated along this line of the debate. Hong Kong is in line with the overall worldwide assessment paradigm shifts in education. English language teaching is moving towards a target- and task-based approach to curriculum and assessment. In 1993, the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA) introduced major changes to its existing fifth year Secondary (S5) English examination syllabus, which is known as the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in English language.<sup>2</sup> These changes were made in accordance with the Target Oriented Curriculum initiative in Hong Kong, and were reflected in two sections of the examination. One section is the integrated listening, reading, and writing exam paper, which requires students to perform simulated ‘real life’ tasks rather than just multiple-choice questions as in the previous paper. The other section is the oral paper, which presents brand new exam formats and has an increased weighting. The goal of this exam change was to improve the current English language teaching and learning standards in Hong Kong secondary schools. The intended impact was to positively influence the teaching of English by moving away from traditional behaviourist approaches towards the new philosophy of constructivist models of learning. Examples of this new approach include a change from non-interactive teacher dominated talk to more practical and task-based teaching approaches.

This major public examination change reflects a change towards a more task-based and integrated approach to assessment in Hong Kong. The intention was particularly evident at the policy-making level.<sup>3</sup> The focus of the

2. The HKCEE in English language offers alternative syllabuses to cater for two different groups of candidates. Candidates may enter for Syllabus A or Syllabus B, but not both. The skills covered by the two syllabuses are broadly comparable. However, a higher standard is expected of the candidates taking the Syllabus B examination. This study focuses only on Syllabus B of the HKCEE in English.
3. Interviews were conducted with the Deputy Secretary and three senior English subject officers from the HKEA.

*Purpose of the study*

current study, however, was to determine whether the effort of the Hong Kong Examinations Authority to change this public examination into a more appropriate assessment had changed teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools to become more integrated and task-based. The changes made to the HKCEE represent only one step towards assessing students' abilities to carry out real life language tasks using integrated and task-based approaches. However, the HKCEE is still norm-referenced, with its major function still being to select students rather than to educate them (Biggs, 1995: 1-2).

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to:

- study the phenomena of the washback effect<sup>4</sup> in the light of measurement-driven instruction
- understand how the main participants within the Hong Kong educational context reacted to changes made in the HKCEE – a major public English examination
- explore the nature and scope of the washback effect on aspects of teachers' and students' perceptions, and teachers' behaviours, within the context of the examination change
- identify areas of washback intensity<sup>5</sup> in teaching and learning.

As mentioned above, the public examination studied was the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in English language (1996). The primary purpose of the HKCEE is to measure the attainment [sic] in all subject areas of students who have completed a full-time secondary school course of five years' duration (Hong Kong Examinations Authority, 1992/93). This series of examinations is taken by the majority of secondary students at the end of their fifth year of secondary school. Students either proceed to further studies at the sixth form level, or leave school and seek employment.

The Hong Kong Certificate of Education examinations are conducted annually in April and May by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. Forty-two subjects (including practical subjects) are examined; English language is one of them. Candidates' performance in individual subjects is assessed on the basis of six grades: A, B, C, D, E, and F, where A is the highest and F the lowest (a fail). Achievement below grade F is designated as 'unclassified'. Grade E represents a basic level of achievement in a subject and syllabus. Grade C or above is recognized as the equivalent of an O level pass in a British G.C.E. overseas examination.

4. The washback effect in this book is sometimes referred to as the effect of washback, or simply as washback. Although it is used in the singular, it is taken to include all of the different effects of washback collectively.
5. Washback intensity refers to the degree of washback effects in one area, or in a number of areas in teaching and learning affected by an examination (see Cheng, 1997).

*1 The Hong Kong research context*

As mentioned earlier, in 1993 the Hong Kong Examinations Authority introduced major changes to its existing HKCEE in English, in format and in weighting, in an attempt to ‘narrow the gap between what happens in the exam room and the real world’ (HKEA, 1993). The former HKCEE consisted of five examination papers: *Paper I – Composition, Comprehension, and Usage*; *Paper II – Comprehension and Usage*; *Paper III – Listening Comprehension*; *Paper IV – Oral English*; and *Paper V – Summary, Directed Writing, and Comprehension*. The revised 1996 HKCEE consists of four papers instead of five (see Table 1 below). They are *Paper I – Writing*; *Paper II – Reading Comprehension and Usage*; *Paper III – Integrated Listening, Reading, and Writing*; and *Paper IV – Oral*. Major changes were made to *Paper III* and *Paper IV* in relation to the previous syllabus, which will be discussed in full in a later part of this chapter.

**Definition of key research terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following research terms are operationally defined.

*Washback* is a common notion in educational and applied linguistics literature. *Backwash* is also used in the literature bearing the same definition (Biggs, 1995; Fullilove, 1992; Spolsky, 1994, 1995). *Washback* is defined as ‘the impact of a test on teaching, and...tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms’ (Wall & Alderson, 1993: 41). The term *washback* is preferred in this study and used throughout

**Table 1 Comparison of the weighting of each component on the old and new HKCEE**

OLD HKCEE (from 1983 to 1996)		NEW HKCEE (from 1996 onwards)	
Paper I – Composition, Comprehension, and Usage	25%	Paper I – Writing	26%
Paper II – Comprehension and Usage	20%	Paper II – Reading Comprehension and Usage	24%
Paper III – Listening Comprehension	15%	Paper III – Integrated Listening, Reading, and Writing	32%
Section A – Short Items		Part A – Short Tasks	
Section B – Extended Listening		Part B – Extended Tasks	
Paper IV – Oral English	10%	Paper IV – Oral	18%
Section A – Reading and Dialogue		Part A – Role Play	
Section B – Conversation		Part B – Group Interaction	
Paper V – Summary, Directed Writing, and Comprehension	30%		

*Definition of key research terms*

the book to indicate an intended direction and function of curriculum change by means of public examinations, as was the case for this study on Hong Kong schools. The researcher has retained the use of the term *washback* or *backwash* in its original form when quoting directly from the authors.

*Public examinations* are used in this book to refer to large-scale standardized tests. The public examination under study is the 1996 revised Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (English). It is a large-scale standardized examination taken at the end of Secondary Five, its 'primary purpose being to measure the attainments of students who have completed a full-time secondary school course of a five-year duration' (HKEA, 1994a: 6). The examination known as HKCEE is issued by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority and conducted annually in May.

*Curriculum change* normally refers to pedagogical and policy-based changes, often initiated by an education body. Curriculum changes, in more recent times, also occur at the grassroots level when teachers feel that the curriculum they are following requires reform. However, in this study, the term *curriculum change* refers to those changes to the curriculum that are driven by assessment; that is, as a result of changes in a public examination syllabus and format.

*Classroom teaching* is where 'The classroom can be defined as a place where more than two people gather together for the purpose of learning, with one having the role of teacher' (Tsui, 1995: 1). Teaching and learning are studied together as they are interactive processes in the classroom.

In this study, classroom teaching is defined and studied at the following levels:

- basic theoretical or philosophical level
- policy level
- behavioural or surface level (c.f. Stern, 1989).

This study investigated the washback effect of the public examination change upon the above levels of classroom teaching.

*Task-based and integrated approach* is where a task is referred to as 'some kind of activity designed to engage the learner in using the language communicatively or reflectively in order to arrive at an outcome other than that of learning a specified feature of the language' (Ellis, 1994: 595). It can refer to a real life activity or a contrived, pedagogical activity (Nunan, 1989b). In this study, a task-based and integrated approach to language teaching and learning involves learners in using the language communicatively and reflectively, and involves the integration of the four major language skills to carry out real life type tasks in the classroom. Such an approach is specified in the new 1996 HKCEE and constitutes the major changes made to the exam syllabus, and is the driving force behind the impact it intended to bring about.

### *1 The Hong Kong research context*

## Context of the study

This section will provide important background information on the Hong Kong education context. It will address the main features of the Hong Kong education system and the language teaching context, and describe the situation of English language teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools.

### The Hong Kong education system

Hong Kong's education system has moved from being a highly selective, elite system to one providing nine years of universal, free, and compulsory education. Since 1978 there has been a massive expansion in the provision of post-secondary places at all levels, from craft courses to postgraduate degrees. The transition of secondary education in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed successive reforms of different stages of the system, which touched both on the quantity and quality of education. By 1980, most (87%) of the student population chose to continue beyond the nine years of mandatory schooling, with 40% studying in government or government-aided schools and the rest in self-financing private schools (see Postiglione & Leung, 1992: 11).

With these educational opportunities available, the next need was to further improve the quality of education for all learners. In Hong Kong, as in other modern knowledge-based societies, there is a recognized necessity for:

- quality education for all learners, which enables them to think, to learn how to learn, and to respond to the rapid changes in society and the economy
- a fair and quality-focused system of assessment and evaluation that ensures that all learners and the school curriculum are meeting these unprecedented challenges (Falvey, 1994; Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, 1995).

Hong Kong's education system is typically one with a selection bias. The government places students according to the *Primary One Admission Scheme* after kindergarten, the *Secondary School Places Allocation System (SSPA)* after primary school, and the *Junior Secondary Education Assessment (JSEA)* after junior secondary school. Students who remain in secondary schools until Secondary Five (also known as Form Five) will sit for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). About one third of these students go on to study for two more years in the sixth and seventh form and then sit for an advanced level of examinations for entry into tertiary education.

Furthermore, the Hong Kong education system is centralized (see Figure 1.1 below). Two centralized agencies coexist within the Hong Kong education system, namely the *Curriculum Development Council (CDC)* and the *Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA)*. They are mainly responsible for the

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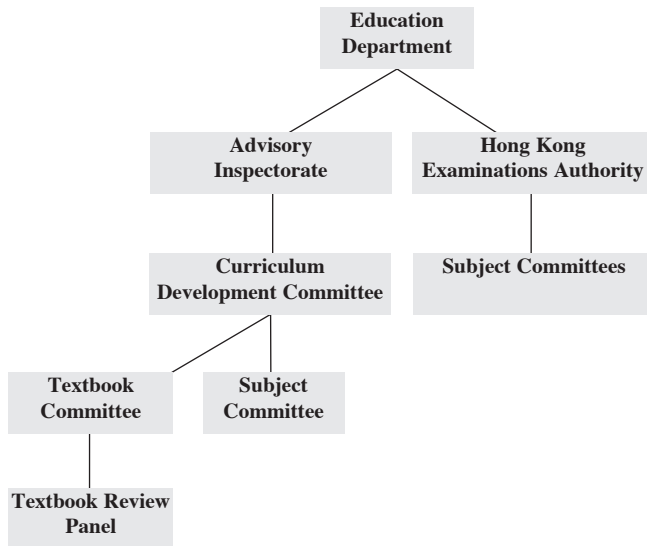
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identification and promotion of new or revised educational programmes. While the HKEA's official function is primarily to oversee the creation and administration of examinations, it has frequently been used as the primary agency of both initiating and constraining curriculum changes. The main result of these two agencies is the production of the CDC's *teaching* and the HKEA's *examination* syllabuses. The HKEA is an independent statutory body, but there is an overlapping membership with the Education Department (ED) – the Hong Kong governmental education organization.

**Figure 1.1 Governing structure and curriculum development**  
(Source: Morris, 1990a: 6)



As mentioned above, the examination syllabus devised by the HKEA (Hong Kong Examinations Authority) and the teaching syllabus devised by the CDC (Curriculum Development Council) coexisted in Hong Kong secondary schools. The official syllabuses published by various subject committees under the CDC usually contain statements like the following (CDC English Syllabus):

The Curriculum Development Council, together with its subject committees, is widely representative of the local education community, with membership including heads and teachers from government and non-government schools, university and college of education lecturers, officers of the Advisory Inspectorate, and officers of other divisions of the Education Department (1983: 5).



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Moreover, it is stated in the teaching syllabus for English Language (Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council) that:

It must be recognised that for both these groups of students [students either proceed to Secondary Six for further studies or leave school or seek employment after Secondary Five], the Hong Kong Certificate of Education examination assumes critical importance. For almost all of them, the results they achieve in this examination will be the prime factor determining their future careers. It seems vital, then, that the teaching syllabus at this stage and the examination syllabus should be in step (1983: 12-13).

While the CDC focuses on teaching materials and methods and the HKEA runs the public examinations, the curriculum in practice continues to be defined by the publications of the latter body, particularly the public examination scripts and their accompanying marking schedules (Morris, 1990a: 19). The textbooks in use locally, too, generally reflect the examination syllabus in their format, emphasis, and approach (Fullilove, 1992: 134). Preparing students for the HKCEE is still regarded as the major teaching focus at the Secondary Four and Five levels in Hong Kong secondary schools. Given the importance of the HKCEE in Hong Kong secondary schools, it is natural that schools, teachers, and students all work towards a better pass rate in the HKCEE. Morris (1990a) points out that the influence of the public examination and its exam syllabus on teachers constrains the teaching approach used in Hong Kong secondary schools.

Following the 1989 publication of the *Education Commission Report No. 4*, the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) and relevant assessment initiatives have been planned and implemented initially in all primary schools, since 1995. The TOC was planned to be extended to secondary school education in the year 2001. The curriculum is to be target-based, and assessment practice is designed to determine whether or not the targets have been met.

The TOC was designed to set clear guidelines for learning in order to connect more closely with learning and its assessment, thereby promoting the individual progress of all primary and secondary school learners. This initiative was prepared by the CDC and issued by the Hong Kong Education Department in 1992. The philosophy behind the *Education Commission Report No. 4* was that students should be given the chance to demonstrate they can make use of certain learning strategies. The individual targets for some students may be different from the academic targets necessary for entry into tertiary education. Anyone who does not achieve that goal should not be labelled a failure. The Education Department wishes to ensure that all students are able to demonstrate that they are capable of achieving genuine learning targets and of mastering certain skills. These skills can be assessed and a report of the outcomes can be produced as evidence of learning at specified levels.

*Context of the study*

Under the TOC, levels of achievement are being set for Hong Kong students in Chinese, English, and Mathematics. They are described in the official handbook as learning targets that are designed for four key stages.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the concern over multiple-choice test formats in the Hong Kong educational context, the HKEA has determined that in the future, each subject area will require students to be assessed, partially, by questions that require a written response. This means that students will have to express themselves in continuous prose, create and organize ideas in text, and communicate with the examiner. This decision is expected to have implications for the teaching and learning of all subjects. The HKCEE in English, the focus of this study, is one of the attempts made by the HKEA to incorporate the principles of TOC and to bring about a positive washback effect on teaching and learning in schools.

In reality, major changes proposed in the Hong Kong curriculum context over the last ten years are expected by the Hong Kong Education Department to affect, in particular, the teaching and learning of Chinese, English, and Mathematics. However, these planned changes, especially those relating to pedagogy, in most cases have not been implemented in the classroom (c.f. Morris, 1990a, 1990b).

According to Morris (1990a: 5), three phases in Hong Kong curriculum development are commonly distinguished: Phase I – Initiation (or policy-making), Phase II – Implementation, and Phase III – Institutionalisation. Initiation and policy-making is most evident in the Hong Kong educational context. The activities and organizational structure of the two centralized agencies, the CDC and the HKEA, are mainly intended to identify and promote new or revised educational programmes. Both the structure and the official rhetoric of these organizations stress and portray a picture of local participation and problem solving in the production of the CDC teaching and HKEA examination syllabuses.

While the structure of the CDC reflects an attempt to encourage a ‘problem solving’ strategy, the reality is more akin to a ‘power coercive’ strategy such as official directives and requirements. Teaching approaches recommended by the CDC are sometimes viewed cynically by teachers, who tend to believe that those approaches would be wholly ineffective in enabling students to pass the public examination, which is controlled by the HKEA. The effective control of ED (the Education Department), and the HKEA officials over the processes of curriculum policy-making means that they are the main sources of ‘expertise’.

The implementing processes involved are intricate because real changes, as distinct from verbal or ‘changes on paper’, are involved. Unfortunately,

6. In Hong Kong, the eleven-year programme is divided into four key stages in the CDC teaching syllabus; Stage One – Primary 1-3, Stage Two – Primary 4-6, Stage Three – Secondary 1-3, and Stage Four – Secondary 4-5.