

國立清華大學命題紙

98 學年度 外國語文學系 (所) 外語教學組 碩士班入學考試

科目 英文閱讀與寫作 科目代碼 3903 共 4 頁第 1 頁 *請在【答案卷卡】內作答

Directions. Read the following passage, briefly summarize it, and write an original essay in response to what you read. In the essay you can, for example, criticize the ideas in part or in general, further develop aspects of what the author says, apply the ideas to English teaching in Taiwan or to your own experience as English learner and/or teacher, or possibly combine these approaches. These are only suggestions; choose your own topic.

Washback and the classroom: The implications for teaching and learning of studies of washback from exams

by Mary Spratt

I Introduction

Madaus (1988: 83) stated that '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.' This paper reviews recent empirical studies of washback to see whether they indicate this to be the case, and if so, why.

The paper looks at these studies from the point of view of the teacher, whose main concern is generally that of the progress in learning of the group of individuals in their class or classes and their ability as teachers to facilitate that progress. These concerns differ from those of the tester, researcher or educational innovator, whose interests in washback receive attention elsewhere, for example, Bailey, 1999; Wall, 2000.

The term 'washback' is used in the literature with various meanings, which reveal differences in scope, actor and intentionality. The focus of this paper is the classroom. The following definitions of 'washback' capture its meaning as used in the paper:

The influence of the test on the classroom . . . this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful.

(Buck, 1988: 17)

The extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do.

(Messick, 1996: 243)

The influence of testing on teaching and learning.

(Bailey, 1996: 259)

These definitions focus on the classroom, allow for both the accidental and the intentional effects of washback and leave the door open on whether washback is positive or negative. The term 'washback' will also be used to refer interchangeably to both 'impact' and 'backwash'.

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IV Guidelines on teaching towards exams

It can be concluded from the studies that washback is not inevitable and also that it is malleable. This conclusion puts the teacher in the driving seat in some important ways as far as washback is concerned. When and where the teacher is in control of the factors determining washback, washback itself is largely in the teacher's control. It is the teacher who can then determine to a greater or lesser extent whether to allow washback to operate, what areas it should operate in and how. This means the teacher has a series of decisions to make, decisions both pedagogic and ethical. Possible parameters for these decisions and the areas they operate on will be discussed below. They are based on suggestions from the literature on washback, and the pointers emerging from the above review. They aim to facilitate positive washback.

The decisions a teacher needs to make concerning teaching towards exams involve choices about the best ways of teaching and promoting learning to achieve both good exam results and good learning of the content domain of a syllabus. With some exams or administrative arrangements for courses, however, a teacher may note a conflict between teaching and learning requirements and exam success requirements. This conflict can create a tension between pedagogical and ethical decisions. Bailey (1996) and Hamp Lyons (1998), amongst others, point out that the tension between pedagogic and ethical decisions occurs when teachers believe that 'tests run contrary to the principles and practices of current approaches to language learning' (Bailey, 1996: 259), and when they believe that the most effective way for their students to achieve higher test scores is to be given opportunities to engage in some form of test coaching. We should remind ourselves at this point that, as pointed out above, there is currently no evidence that test coaching achieves better test scores.

Hamp Lyons argues for a code of ethical practice for those involved in test preparation. She suggests that practice on published previous or parallel forms is both educationally indefensible as it boosts test scores without mastery, and of dubious legality as it coaches merely for score gain (Hamp Lyons, 1998: 334). This position echoes that of various educationalists. Smith reports that Cannell, for example, imputes that any test preparation practice that artificially inflates scores and thereby robs the public of accurate information is immoral (Smith). Smith herself, however, points out that many teachers view the use of practice materials and activities differently from some educationalists, as they do not believe in the inherent reliability of a test as a true reflector of student performance. This is because of the possible presence of various kinds of bias in a test, for example, bias against students from particular socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds or against those with a particular emotional make-up.

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The tension between ethical and pedagogic decisions reflects itself in the following suggestions. McKay (2001) suggests a practical method for resolving tension between the demands of short and long-term assessment. This could be adapted in certain learning contexts to resolve tensions between ethical and pedagogic decisions related to assessment. She argues for adapting the idea promoted by Woodward (1988) of 'pushing' and 'popping'.

'Pushing' in computer programming language is suspending operations on the task currently being engaged in and taking up a new task. This task is usually said to be on a lower level than the first task. Once this second lower level task is completed the teacher can 'pop' back up to the first level again. (McKay, 2001: 24-25)

We can think of the top-level task as helping students to learn a content domain, and the lower level one as helping students to pass an exam successfully.

Bailey suggests four ways of reducing tension between pedagogic and ethical decisions and of promoting beneficial washback. These are 'the incorporation of 1) language learning goals; 2) authenticity; 3) learner autonomy and self-assessment; and 4) detailed score reporting' (1996: 268).

Bailey's suggestions appear to be written for an audience of test writers but they can also be adapted by the teacher to guide choices in the classroom. With regard to educational goals, she says that 'Washback can either be positive or negative to the extent that it either promotes or impedes the accomplishment of educational goals held by learners and/or programme personnel' (Bailey, 1996: 269). The teacher can incorporate this suggestion by ensuring that educational goals are pursued in the classroom. In relation to authenticity, she refers to the use of both authentic tasks and authentic texts in testing. While teachers may not be able to control the content of external exams, they could apply this advice in their classrooms in that they often control the content of the class-based tests they employ to teach towards an external exam as well as the texts and tasks they use for teaching towards the exam's content domain. In relation to learner autonomy and self-assessment, Bailey suggests enabling students to assess their own abilities and being given responsibility for doing so. This advice can be adapted for the classroom. Finally, with regard to score reporting Bailey suggests that exam boards provide full feedback on test performance. The teacher could adapt this advice to ensure that they themselves provide full feedback to students on class tests.

The above suggestions from McKay and Bailey provide general guidelines for principled approaches to decisions about teaching towards exams. They can complement principles coming from theories of language teaching and learning. The empirical studies reviewed in this paper identify specific points within the areas of teaching and learning that are susceptible to washback. The teacher could apply the guidelines to these points. To conclude this article the points are summarized below under the areas discussed:

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- Curriculum – how much to focus on the exam’s content domain as opposed to exam techniques and test wiseness, when to teach particular areas of the curriculum, how much time to devote to teaching particular areas.
- Materials – what textbooks to use, how much use to make of selected textbooks, how much and how to use exam or parallel exam materials, how much to use other materials including one’s own and the students’.
- Teaching methods – how much drilling to employ, when to employ such methods, how much to employ other methods more focused on language development and creativity, what kinds of exam preparation to employ (cf. Smith’s eight categories), how much planning time to devote to exam classes, what kind of atmosphere to promote in exam classrooms, what kind of interaction patterns to encourage in exam classrooms.
- Feelings and attitudes – what kinds of feelings and attitudes towards the exam to attempt to maintain and promote in students.
- Learning – the appropriateness of the learning outcomes demonstrated by students.

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