



Colloquium C

Washback and High-stakes Testing

Panellists

Puan Marlin bt Abd Karim
Malaysian Examinations Syndicate
Dr Thom Hudson
University of Hawaii
Dr Christine Coombe
Dubai Men's College
Higher Colleges of Technology
Ms Lee King Siong
National University of Malaysia (UKM)

Moderator:

Dr Rabiah Ghani

Abstract

Current emphasis on test performance has indicated a need to create awareness of the washback effect of tests on teaching and learning. While this area has been discussed by linguists and researchers, little has filtered across to teachers and administrators. The aim of this colloquium is to update language teachers and administrators on developments in these areas and to invite their participation in thinking about ways in which positive washback can be promoted to enhance teaching and learning.

Summary of panellists' presentation

Panellist 1: Puan Marlin bt Abd Karim

Marlin highlighted the fact that washback was a concept that was not consistently defined in the literature. She discovered up to 15 hypotheses on washback existed.

She shared some findings from her own research into the issue which was based on interviews with teachers and students, questionnaires and media reports. In addition to these typical ways of assessing washback, Marlin also did direct observation of the teachers in class.

The general perception was that washback was negative – a perception due to the existence of high stakes tests. But what teachers actually did in practice was guided by several factors including teacher proficiency, student motivation and the school ethos. The negative effects of washback that she observed included a narrowing of the curriculum. For instance, the oral skills received less emphasis than reading and writing. She also noted that this narrowing of the curriculum was more pronounced when the teacher's own proficiency was low. Marlin concluded that teacher's proficiency was the most critical factor in determining whether washback was positive or negative.

Response from other panellists:

Dr Thom Hudson picked up Marlin's comment that if it were not on the test the teacher would not give emphasis to it. He wanted to know why it was not on the test. Marlin responded that she was referring mainly to the Listening component

– with 450 000 candidates it was not possible to administer such a test effectively.

Roxanne and Christine both asked about the weightage of the oral component. Marlin was not able to give any fixed figure.

Marcia enquired about portfolio assessment. Marlin answered that for certain subject components e.g. Rekacipta it was 100% coursework. For English this has not been implemented yet.

Panellist 2: Dr Thom Hudson

Dr Hudson stated that there was not much empirical evidence on washback. Writers' views on the subject ranged from “no-effect” to “full effect”. The literature suggests that the following factors can determine the washback effects of tests

1. Design
 - a. Sample widely and unpredictably
2. Format
 - a. The test format become the design format for teaching
 - b. Use a variety of formats – more open ended items
3. Content
 - a. Ensuring test content reflects the full curriculum content
4. Feedback process
 - a. Maximize feedback to all parties- teachers, administrators etc.
5. Implementation
 - a. Get teachers and administrators involved
 - b. Improve test writing and research capabilities of teachers

Panellist 3: Dr Christine Coombe

Dr Coombe took participants quickly through the contents of her power point presentation in view of the limited time available. She highlighted the meaning of the term impact: the effect it may have on individuals, policies or practices within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole (Wall, 1997 -291).

Christine also discussed Popham's idea of Measurement-driven instruction in which high stakes tests could lead to educational improvement. To facilitate this there are 5 conditions. In particular the test should provide for instructional illumination.

Christine referred to Thom's query whether washback did in fact exist and shared that it did exist in her context in the UAE in relation to TOEFL candidates.

Christine also stressed the need for transparency (to students) in testing.

The issue of teachers spending months preparing students for forthcoming tests was raised by Marcia. She questioned whether this was in fact a positive washback effect. Ramasamy narrated his observation that in year 6 teachers and pupils focus entirely on the examination subjects and do not study Physical Ed, Art, Music etc.

Panellist 4: Pn Lee King Siong

Pn Lee expressed her keen interest in washback. She sought to distinguish “Teaching to the Test” from washback. Washback in her definition was the changes to the original mode of teaching consequent to the introduction of a new test. Her study was on the 1119 SPM paper – how its introduction affected the teaching practices. She found that there was expedient syllabus reduction based on “rumours” on how the paper was marked.

She expressed the view that exams alone cannot be expected to produce positive change in teacher behaviour when the system does not allow for it. She reiterated Christine’s comment on the need for transparency in assessment procedures.

Marlin responded that there is already a move toward transparency with the training of 800 teachers in exam marking.

Dr Lee Boon Hua suggested that TED could be involved in the in-service training of teachers as assessment professionals. Marlin welcomed the proposal.

Dr Choong Kam Foong commented on the “vicious cycle” where the senior teachers who are less willing to change get to go for exam panels while the young vibrant ones are left behind.

Dr Rabiah mentioned one finding from her research – the mismatch between the curriculum and the assessment mode in the KBSR. She stressed the need for congruency between the two.