

**PROMOTING POSITIVE WASHBACK****Ekaterine Vatsadze**

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**Abstract.** The aim of the article is to promote positive washback during study. Washback or backwash, also known as measurement-driven instruction, is a common term in applied linguistics referring to the influence of testing on teaching and learning, which is a prevailing phenomenon in education. It is a truism that "what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught." The effect of Washback of English language tests on English teaching inside the classroom has long been recognized by scholars. The paper presents some empirical studies that focus on the washback of some English language tests on different aspects of classroom teaching, including the washback on course content, teaching activities and teaching materials. Positive and negative washback takes place due to a factors such as differences in features of the test content, differences in teachers' usage of teaching methods, differences in tests' coordination to course syllabus, etc. The mechanism of washback of the English language test on classroom teaching is quite complicated and serves to bring out some scholarly and pedagogical implications. Though present studies focus more on how to promote positive washback of English language tests on classroom teaching.

**Keywords:** washback, promote, testing, study.

**1. Introduction**

Learning is the process of acquiring new understanding, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values, attitudes, and preferences. Consequently, valuable existence means continuous perception of the surroundings, universe; being in 'flow' and enjoy learning whether at home, school, college, university or in one's neighbourhood. The effect of learning at academic institutions are measured by examinations. Examination should not only be used as a control that a student is qualified, but also as an educational tool to influence the learning process.

**2. Methods**

Based on the specificity of the research material, qualitative, descriptive and inductive research methods are used in the article.

**3. Results**

1. Washback of English Language tests is connected to

- course content
- teaching activities
- teaching materials

2. Washback can be defined at microlevel within the classroom and macrolevel beyond the classroom ranging from government policymaking, school administration publishing and general opportunities to parents' expectations of their children

3. Washback can be Positive and Negative based on the beneficial or harmful impact of the test on educational practices. Positive and Negative washback takes place due to factors such as

- Differences in features of the content
- Differences in teacher's usage of teaching methods
- Differences in test coordination to course syllabus

4. Positive washback can be promoted by:

- getting to know exams;
- learning opportunities;
- transferrable skills- communication, problem-solving, self-control, learning from mistakes, goal setting, stress management.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 1. Origin of the washback.

Examinations have been long applied as tool of checking and control. They have been with us for a long time, at least a thousand years or more, if the use made of them in Imperial China to select the highest officials of the land is included (Arno, Altback and Kelly, 1992). Those used was probably the first Civil Service Examination ever developed by our human race. To abstain from corruption, all essays in the Imperial Examination were marked anonymously, and the emperor personally supervised the final stage. Although the goal of the examination was to select civil servants, its washback effect was to establish and control an educational program, as prospective mandarins set out to prepare themselves for the examination (Spolsky, 1994).

Even in modern times, the use of examinations to select for education and employment dates back at least 300 years. Examinations were seen as ways to encourage the development of talent, to upgrade the performance of schools and colleges, and to counter, to some degree, nepotism, favouritism, and even outright corruption in the allocation of scarce opportunities. If the initial spread of examinations can be traced to such motives, the very same rationales appear to be as powerful as ever today. Examinations are subject to much criticism. However, despite all the criticism, examinations continue to occupy a leading place in the educational arrangement of most countries these days (Baker, 1991).

The way in which examinations impact teaching and learning is commonly described as “washback” or “backwash”. Several definitions have been offered for the term “washback” throughout the published research and literature on language testing.

In this paper I focus on the various definitions of backwash or washback and similar concept terms defined by other researchers; discuss different types of washback and suggest appropriate ways of promoting positive washback.

##### 2. Definition and notion of washback

The notion of “washback” is ubiquitous in teaching and testing domain. Some writers used the term “washback” while others preferred “backwash” to describe the effects or influences brought by tests or examinations.

According to **Wall and Anderson** 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' (Alderson and Wall, 1993: 41). It refers to the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things 'they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test' (Alderson and Wall, 1993:117). Messick emphasises that `washback, a concept prominent in applied linguistics, refers to 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.' (Messick, 1996: 241). He continues to comment that `some proponents have even maintained that a test's validity should be appraised the degree to which it manifests positive or negative washback, a notion akin to the proposal of 'system validity' (Frederiksen and Collins, 1989) in the educational measurement literature.

**Pearson** (Pearson, 1988: 98) points out that 'public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviours, and motivation of teachers, learners and parents, and, because examinations often come at the end of a course, this influence is seen working in a backward direction hence the term `washback'. He further emphasises that the direction in which washback actually works must be forwards in time.

Bailey (Bailey, 1996) is the “influence of testing on teaching and learning.” Shohamy, et al. (Shohamy, E., Donitsa-Schmidt, S., Ferman, L., 1996) Washback is delineated as “the connections between testing and learning”.

Biggs (Biggs, 1995:12) uses the term 'backwash' to refer to the fact that testing drives not only the curriculum, but teaching methods and students' approaches to learning Spolsky (Spolsky, 1994: 55) commented that 'backwash is better applied only to accidental side-effects of examinations, and not to those effects intended when the first purpose of the examination is control of the curriculum'

Hughe offered trichotomy (1993) to illustrate the complex mechanism by which washback works in actual teaching and learning context.

Table 1 The trichotomy of backwash model

1. participants - students, classroom teachers, administrators, materials developers and publishers, whose perceptions and attitudes towards their work may be affected by a test
2. process any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning
3. product what is learned and the quality of the learning

Hughes (Hughes, 1993:2) further notes:

The trichotomy ... allows us to construct a basic model of backwash. 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 practising the kind of items that are to be found in the test, which will affect the learning outcomes, the product of the work.

Cheng (Cheng, 2005): Washback indicates “an intended or unintended (accidental) direction and function of curriculum change on aspects of teaching and learning by means of a change of public examination.”

Apart from terms ‘washback’ and ‘backwash’ scientists use other terms. Some researchers have argued that tests can have more far-reaching effects in the educational world than just in the language classroom. Bachman & Palmer (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) used the term **test impact** to refer to the effects that tests have on individuals (teachers and students) or educational systems and on the society at large. McNamara (2004) claimed that “Tests can also have effects beyond the classroom. The wider effect of tests on the community as a whole, including the school, is referred to as test impact”.

Fredericksen and Collins used the term **Systemic validity** to (Fredericksen & Collins, 1989) refer to the effects of instructional changes brought about by the introduction the test into an educational system as stated tests induce “in the education system curricular and instructional changes that foster cognitive skills that the test is designed to measure”.

Messick applied the term **Consequential validity** (Messick, 1996:14) that encompasses concepts ranging from the uses of tests, the impacts of testing on test takers and teachers, the examination of results by decision makers, and the potential misuse, abuse, and unintended usage of tests.

Shohamy contended that “the use of external tests as a device for creating impact on the educational process is often referred to as the washback effect or **measurement-driven instruction**.”

### 3. Types of washback.

Overviewing the different definitions of the term washback we can define it according to two major perspectives: one at a narrower view within the classroom at a **micro level**, and the other at a wider and more holistic view beyond the classroom at a **macro level**.

As suggested by Bachman & Palmer (Bachman & Palmer, 1999), washback, at a macro level, refers to the extent to which a test influences within the society, ranging from government policymaking, school administration, publishing, and general opportunities, to parents’ expectations of their children. At a micro level, washback refers to the extent to which a test influences within the classroom, mainly in the change or innovation of curricula and teachers’ methodologies and the influence of students’ learning. Bailey (Bailey, 1996) used the phrase “washback to the learners” to indicate the effects of test on students, and “washback to the programme” to indicate effects of test on teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, counsellors, etc.

All in all, the narrower definition of washback focuses on the effects that a test has on teaching and learning. The wider or more holistic view of washback (also defined as test impact) looks beyond the classroom to the educational systems and society at large.

After reviewing washback dimensions, I’ll discuss two main types of washback -**positive** and **negative**. This categorization of the above-mentioned phenomenon is based on the beneficial or harmful impact of test on educational practices (Hughes, 1993). In this paper I explore positive and negative washback in terms of both the classroom setting and the educational/political system. In the classroom setting positive washback can be considered the motivation of teachers and students to fulfil their teaching and learning goals. Good tests can be utilized and designed as beneficial teaching-learning activities to encourage a positive teaching-learning process (Pearson, 1988: 107). Creative tests can even lead to an alteration or formation of the syllabus. As for positive washback in educational/societal system, decisional makers use the authority power of high stakes testing to achieve the goals of teaching and learning, such as the introduction of new textbooks and new

curricula Cheng; 2005). Tests are encouraged to promote the idea of lifelong learning and encourage people to learn English.

As I mentioned above, washback can also be **negative** as it may narrow content in curriculum. What students have learned is test language, instead of total phases of understanding. Teachers tend to ignore subjects and activities that are not directly related to passing the exam, and tests accordingly alter the curriculum in a negative way. The tests may well fail to create a correspondence between the learning principles and/or the course objectives to which they should be related. Many teachers detailed high anxiety, fear and pressure to cover the material, as they felt that their job performance was assessed by students' test scores. Educators experienced negative reactions to the stress brought about by public displays of classroom scores. Inexperienced teachers felt a greater degree of anxiety and pressure for accountability than did teachers with more experience. An increasing number of paid coaching classes are set up to prepare students for exams, but what students learn are test-taking skills rather than language learning activities. A negative washback at educational and societal level refers to overwhelming use of tests by decision makers to promote their political agendas and to seize influence and control of educational systems (Shohamy, 1996). Tests are used as a "lever" for change.

#### 4. Teacher's role in washback.

Whether washback is positive or negative greatly depends on teachers' beliefs. A test may encourage teachers to plan their curricular carefully to meet the needs of the test or make them feel worried thinking test make them teach what they find unsuitable or inappropriate for students. A teacher plays a significant role in determining the types and intensity of washback, and thus, teachers have become the sources of promoting positive washback. I think that teachers should be provided with in-service training and be familiar with a wide range of teaching methods. Tests sometimes are used by schools or school administrations as a "lever" to introduce the innovation of new curricula, but it may change the format of what teachers instruct, not foster an in-depth change of teaching methodologies. As Wall (Wall, 2005: 283) stated, "examinations cannot influence teachers to change their practices if they are not committed to the new ideas and if they do not have the skills that will enable them to experiment with, evaluate and make appropriate adjustments to new methods". In other words, teachers themselves must conduct the changes and teachers need to have the necessary skills to adapt the changes. Again, teachers play a very crucial role in promoting positive washback or hindering negative washback. Ethan Mansur gives tips how to promote positive washback. The first and the foremost is **getting to know the exam**. When teacher knows the format and content of the exam, he or she doesn't waste time on unnecessary materials. A good place to find information about exams is exam boards. For example, how big the exam is. Companies like Cambridge assessment publish handbooks that are very well-written and have lots of good information. Among them are Trinity, IELTS, TOEFEL. The exam boards of this company know a washback and they want to create a positive washback. Another factor to promote positive washback is **learning opportunities**. Tests can identify strength and weakness of a student. Actually, test says clearly what students are doing well and when they are doing well and what they still need to learn. Giving a test to students can be a way of assessing them formatively. Teacher can collect information from test and improve the way of teaching. The last thing that promotes positive washback is **transferable skills** also called global skills, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that refer to an ability or expertise which may be used in a variety of roles or occupations. Examples include communication, problem-solving and self-control. Transferrable skills help students do better on exam. Examples of transferrable skills during learning process is **study habits**. Teachers can talk about studying habits like choosing the place and time for study as well as expectations of materials to be acquired and mastered. In addition to study habits transferrable skills encompass **learning from mistakes, goal setting, stress management**.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, washback is inseparable aspect of learning and teaching process which helps sophistication, development, renovation and revolutionization of education. Promoting positive washback quite depends on teacher's endeavour and wish to lead students to learn, to teach them language and how to work with tests and test results.

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