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Washback of Higher Education Language Exams (0254)

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Washback effect refers to the impact or influence of assessment practices – tests, exams or any other kind of assessment – in all the individuals involved in the teaching-learning process.

The year of 1993 is considered a landmark when talking about washback effect because it was when Alderson and Wall published an article called 'Does washback exist?'. Although the notion that tests caused some kind of impact in language learning had existed for a long time, there was hardly any empirical evidence about it. Washback was seen as a deterministic phenomenon, as it was believed that any test would affect teachers and students negatively likewise, as well as teaching and learning. Therefore, in their article, Alderson and Wall (1993) raised several issues concerning the existing knowledge about the phenomenon and urged the applied linguistic community to produce empirical evidence of its existence based mainly on classroom research rather than on what was said about classroom events.

Based on investigations carried out mainly after 1990s in language teaching and learning contexts, nowadays it can be stated that washback is a frequent, important and complex phenomenon which involves, and affects differently, several stakeholders. Furthermore, it is recognized that, in many societies, assessment goes beyond the learning sphere, as it acquires more and more political importance and is used as a power instrument and governmental strategy. Tests, particularly standardized ones, are considered to be mechanisms of control, since they affect people's lives in several ways. This particular aspect of tests – their potential domination and power – has been studied more deeply by Shohamy (2001; 2005; 2006) and McNamara and Roever (2006).

In order to explain how such a powerful effect works, some washback models have been suggested. Bailey (1996) presented a model of washback in which three elements may be influenced by the nature of a test: the participants (students, teachers, administrators, material designers and publishers), the processes (any action, carried out by the participants, related to the learning process) and the teaching and learning products (what was learned or developed). Each of these elements would have the potential to feedback the assessment practice, therefore causing its nature to change.

Burrows (2004) presented another model, known as curriculum-innovation model, in which he emphasises the importance to take into account teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge, as well as the participants' reactions when changes caused by assessment practices are concerned.

Lastly, Watanabe (2004) suggested the existence of five dimensions constituting washback. The first one is specificity, that is, whether the washback is general (independent of the content or abilities being verified) or specific (occurring due to one of more aspects of the content of ability). The second dimension is intensity, which means the washback can be strong (if a test influences classroom practices or participants meaningfully) or weak (if such an influence is only partial). Next, extension of the effect, which can be long if the influence of the test is perceived over a long period of time, of short, if it happens for a short period. The fourth dimension is

intentionality, that is, the washback of a certain assessment practice may (or not) be intentional, depending on the objectives of its designers or the teacher using it. The last one is the value of the washback effect, which can be positive or negative. In other words, the influence of a test can be perceived by different stakeholders as beneficial or detrimental to the teaching-learning process.

According to Alderson (2004), investigations conducted after 1993 enabled language assessment professionals to know that

- Tests impact more on the teaching content and materials than on teachers' methodology;
- Different teachers teach exam-preparatory classes differently;
- Some teachers prepare their students for different tests in similar ways;
- High-stakes exams have important consequences for individuals and institutions and will exert more influence than low-stakes exams. Such relevance is not always easy to identify and define, as it varies from person to person;
- Evidence of positive washback in the specialized literature is scarce;
- Washback is caused by the people in the classroom, not by the (standardized) exam designer.

The investigations carried out between 1993 and 2004 also allowed the conclusion that the idea that tests can work as levers for curricular or educational changes is naive, as research shows that much more than that is necessary to trigger curricular innovations. Also, simply altering test contents or teaching methods does not mean, necessarily, triggering direct and desirable changes in education. On the contrary, in a specific educational context, there may be a variety of factors that contribute or not to the existence of washback (CHENG; WATANABE; CURTIS, 2004).

Bearing such issues in mind as well as the importance of assessment in the higher education context, the current research, based on literature reviews carried out by Scaramucci (2004) and Spratt (2005), analyses and discusses the methodological options and findings of 78 works on the washback of language assessment practices published from 2004 to 2012 in 31 countries. The works were identified by means of online search. The results indicated the use of a variety of methodological procedures which enabled both the triangulation by means of data-collecting instruments and participants, providing researchers with the possibility of better understanding how washback is constituted and manifested not only in higher education but also in different language learning contexts.

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