

Understanding the Influence of Washback Phenomenon on Learners' Performance: Nuts and Bolts

فهم تأثير ظاهرة إنعكاسية الإختبار على أداء المتعلمين: التفاصيل الرئيسية

Comprendre l'Influence du Phénomène du Washback sur la Performance des Apprenants : Principaux Détails

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Introduction

Diving into the history of language testing, one would suppose that language researchers seem to be concerned with the theoretical approaches and various range of methods, rather than with their practical content within a realistic context. In fact, in educational literature, testing has become an integral part in language assessment as it is needed for a variety of purposes. Its importance is reflected upon the amount of the required literature devoted to this high-flying aspect of education. The growing interest of testing within teaching driven by the power of language tests and high stakes exams in particular, has created a line of arguments among researchers: a phenomenon known as “Test Washback”. The reservation of washback phenomenon policies in education seems to be among the most fundamental issues occupying language research.

1. Testing and Teaching

A glance through the past century or so on the teaching-testing methods and techniques would give us an interesting picture of the varied interpretations on how to teach and test a language. In fact, it is generally known that teaching and testing are two sides of the same coin, that there is neither teaching without testing nor testing without teaching (Benmoussat, 2004).

In formal classroom practices, tests remain an unavoidable part in language teaching because there is a perceived need for a method to measure learners' language ability (Brown, 2004). Although testing is of an axiomatic function, tests can be closely associated with pedagogical purposes (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Thus, teachers, state policy makers and test developers seek ways to drive pedagogical benefits from both teaching and testing (Watanabe, 2004). Language tests are usually used to provide learners with feedback about their

progress in general and teaching practices in particular. In this sense, Flavell (1981: 1) states that: 'A test is seen as a natural extension of classroom work, providing teacher and student with useful information that can serve each as a basis for improvement'. In the sense that test content are put as tools for classroom activities improvements, feedback about learners' progress or failure and as a remedy for some teaching practices.

1.1. Practical and Theoretical Considerations in Testing

Language teachers routinely encounter within their daily experience pervasive obstacles that interfere with having suitable learning environment. Thus, awareness must be driven on the new testing frames, roles of classroom testing, testing principles and what makes a test qualified as a good test. While some researchers consider tests as having nothing but negative consequences for teaching methodology and syllabus content (Wiseman, 1961), others view that tests are more positive as potential instruments for educational reform (Pearson, 1988). In this line of thought, Valette (1977) notes that classroom testing fulfills three main functions namely;

- Definition of course objectives.
- Tests stimulate student progress.
- Evaluation of classroom achievement.

1.1.1. Definition of Course Objectives

Valette (1977) believes that before engaging in teaching in general and in course design in particular, teachers must clearly envision the course objectives. Therefore, teachers should systematically set short term course goals as well as items to be taught within the formal classroom setting. By doing so, teachers will be sure that their teaching will be rationally-oriented and that tests will indicate how close each student has come to attain the desired objectives. (Valette, 1977)

1.1.2. Tests Stimulate Students' Progress

Valette (1977) also explains that tests should give a clear picture of how well students handle specific element of the target language. Thus, learners themselves are expected to demonstrate their performance errors. Considering this view, he (1977 :4) states that 'The test best fulfills its function as part of the learning process if correction performance is immediately confirmed and errors are pointed out'.

1.1.3. Test Evaluates Class Achievement

Valette (1977 :4) believes that through current testing, teachers can have an idea and can decide which aspects of the course are presenting difficulties for individuals and which parts had been well perceived by students. Teachers then, can decide on the content of the extra remedy sessions and how best they may assist each learner in analyzing the mistakes made on a given tests. Testing also helps teachers discover which classroom objectives have been met, evaluate the effectiveness of new teaching methods, different approaches and new materials. In a word, one should view testing as a bridge-building process between teaching and learning and classroom tests as mirrors in which teachers and students see their reflections clearly. (valette, 1977) sited in Benmostefa (2014 :70)

1.2. Washback Phenomenon in Language Testing

1.2.1. Positive Washback

On the positive sider, tests oblige lecturers to load the syllabus with standards-related content, thereby creating a pecking classification of educational priorities. In this sense, Shohamy (1996:8) maintains that ‘creative and innovative testing . . . can, quite successfully, attract to it-self a syllabus change or a new syllabus which effectively makes it into an achievement test’. In such a situation, the test no longer needs to be just an obedient servant but rather a leader towards change.

1.2.2. Negative Washback

On the other side of the corner, language tests are often judged for their negative influence on teaching. In fact, research has shown that paid classes (i.e., classes intended for preparing students for exams) tend to ignore at a large extent subjects and activities that did not contribute directly to examinations (Shohamy, 1996), and this results in passive students practicing test techniques rather than language in-class activities; making the educational experience fine, limited and boring.

During the past decade, successive attention of testing, measurement and evaluation research has been put on its content and on the residual effect tests may have on the educational process. Many scholars and policy makers in the field of language testing have driven great attention on the influence tests, especially high stakes, may have on the teaching/learning process. Under the pressure to help students reach satisfactory results on such tests, teachers and administrators tend to give more importance on test content and the format

devoting more time in test preparation. In other terms, teaching exam-related content or what is called in the testing literature item-teaching rather than teaching different linguistic variables, mastery-related items i.e., what is intended to be taught. It is generally acknowledged that in this specific context, tests exert a powerful influence on teachers and learners ; this phenomenon has been labeled as being the washback or backwash effect (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Considering its importance, the following section is devoted to analyze this phenomenon and its related issues.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Questions and Paradigm

The present research aims to investigate the impact of washback on learners' outcomes. It seeks to identify whether it has a positive or a negative impact on learners' outcomes, and how is washback perceived by teachers and learners. A case study on second year learners was conducted to tackle such issue. The following research questions were investigated :

- What factors may influence teachers' classroom assessment ?
- How may teachers deal with high stakes testing ?
- How do learners perceive language testing ?

2.2. Participants

The primary focus of this study is to investigate the effect of washback on learners' performance. Therefore, through the use of a case study, the researcher opts for a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection procedure using a triangulation process. Herein, choosing a suitable instrument is extremely important. A questionnaire was administered to teachers and students. They were asked about their attitudes and perceptions about language learning and testing. To investigate the effect of the teaching method on learning, a test was administered to learners to see the impact of washback on their outcomes.

2.3. Teachers' Questionnaire

The purpose of the teachers' questionnaire is to explore the impact of the washback effect on teachers' attitudes towards language testing in general, and their classroom practice in particular. In this questionnaire, questions varied

between open ended, close and mixed questions. Here, Teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire containing three rubrics. Rubric one seeking to know general information about teachers profiles, teaching experience nodules in charge of, their post graduate degree and option. Rubric two three and four consist of eleven questions varied from open ended, close and mixed questions. In view of this, data were entered into SPSS 22 spreadsheets, and the pre-tests were computed on this questionnaire. To determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was computed.

Regarding the first hypothesis, which revolved around teachers' attitudes and their classroom behavior, results reveal a number of factors that may influence learners' psychology while being tested. Herein, teachers believe that the majority of learners witness a cognitive fatigue or cognitive load before the test is administered, fear, anxiety and demotivation. When asked about the reasons behind such psychological state results show that it is mainly due to the lack of preparation, stressful classroom environment and sometimes due to teachers' anxiety providing behaviors.

2.4. Data Interpretation

Regarding the second hypothesis, results demonstrate that some teachers assume that the good preparation for the high stakes test will help learners build up a sound self-confidence level, some try to calm them down before the test would be administered through various techniques, for instance, by telling them that the exam is about what has been previously done in the classroom.

The following hypothesis demonstrates that learners feel comfortable with language tests because they assume that all teachers focus on the appropriate teaching methodology to be adopted in their classroom to insure a good learning environment ; they also focus on the test objectives when delivering the lectures. Accordingly, this ensures good learning environment and help learners feel at ease preparing for the high stakes test.

We may conclude by saying that washback is clear and present in the current case. The analysis pushes the researcher to recognize the extent of washback on teacher's beliefs and attitudes, as they all showed an adjustment in the content teaching, the teaching methodology and the teaching materials due to the impact of the test. On the other side of the ledger, students are also influenced by tests in the sense that they devoted more time to prepare for tests, they use varieties of different ways to ensure good scores. Students claim that, thought out the university year, they main focus is to get scores by focusing mainly on tested items, rather than learning to learn and acquire knowledge. This reaso-

ning promotes rote learning, quantity oriented education rather than quality oriented and thus, achieving negative washback. The uncertainty of students was attributed to some affective factors that influence learners' learning process, such as test anxiety.

In sum, all the results discussed previously reveal that students are affected psychologically and mentally by testing. Thus, teachers should be well aware of this state and help promoting positive washback, taking care of the affective dimensions involved in the testing process

3. Recommendations for Change

Notwithstanding the importance of testing in language teaching, it has become all-encompassing in current educational culture. While testing may seem to offer an excellent way to accurately assess students' progress, it is believed that testing is affected by numerous factors that impact not only the students who take the tests, but also parents, teachers, and schools. Therefore, the quest to find the factors influencing teaching within testing can be a daunting task, and certain factors may be the result of the teaching strategy followed by the teacher in his classroom. In a more intricate manner, researchers agree on the fact that testing appears to be anxiety-provoking, and teachers need to consider the psychological side of learners when being tested. Testing as a word calls into mind the feeling of constant worry, discomfort and uneasiness. Therefore, almost everyone may experience a feeling of uneasiness and frustration when a test approaches. In fact, it is rare to find a student who does not approach the test with a degree of test anxiety. This kind of nervousness fear and discomfort happens before, during and sometimes after an exam. While it is perfectly natural to feel so, too much anxiety levels may become discouraging. Thus, teachers should be well aware about what happens with the psychology of the language learner before they dive in delivering knowledge.

Conclusion

Language researchers appear to steadily acknowledge that the field of language testing seems to be a relatively new trend that has entered the field of applied linguistics and didactics. Thus, thinking about educational policy or educational reform without thinking about testing seems to be outdated. In fact, testing field is in vogue within recent research worldwide and the introduction of new testing system is the responsibility of teachers and policy makers alike. A glance through the past century or so of language testing gives us an interesting picture of the varied testing systems that have ever been introduced to

this field. The feasibility and application of psychological variables in language assessment put teachers in a maze of choices ; previous studies have provided evidence that individual characteristics of anxiety seem to play a pivotal role in learners' proficiency. It is a truth generally acknowledged that the results of some standardized tests seem to be so important for students and for educational programs as well. There are clear indicators that the student is having some psychological state mainly test anxiety if he/she fails to recall knowledge that was previously done in the classroom, encounters problems while being tested, and eventually fails with low scores on tests. This appears to be preventing him from being an active performer, ready to overcome anything that gets into their way towards success.

Teachers and learners must become aware of the possible facts related to washback and test anxiety and learners must become more aware of the internal and external factors that affect their performances on standardized test scores. Results of this reflection could help in the design and administration of tests so as to decrease negative washbaack, test anxiety and increase test scores.

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Abstract

Testing has become an integral part in language education as it is needed for a variety of purposes. This high-flying aspect of education should be reflected upon the amount of the literature. The reservation of testing policies seems to be among the most fundamental issues occupying language education research. Therefore, it is difficult to speak about educational reforms and revolutions without speaking about reforms in the testing arena. This paper seeks to review the existing literature related to the study; it highlights concepts-related like standardized tests, language testing, and their relations to learners' overall outcome.

Keywords

Washback, Assessment, educational Reforms, Language Testing, Students Outcomes

الملخص

أصبح الاختبار جزءاً لا يتجزأ من تعليم اللغة حيث إنه ضروري لعدة أغراض. يجب أن ينعكس هذا الجانب الفائق من التعليم على كمية المادhez يبدو أن حجز سياسات الاختبار من بين أهم القضايا التي تشغل أبحاث تعليم اللغة. لذلك ، من الصعب التحدث عن الإصلاحات والثورات التعليمية دون التحدث عن الإصلاحات في ساحة الاختبار. تسعى هذه الورقة إلى مراجعة الأدبيات الموجودة المتعلقة بالدراسة ؛ عبر تسلط الضوء على الاختبارات المتعلقة بالمفاهيم مثل الاختبارات الموحدة واختبار اللغة وعلاقتهم بالنتائج الكلية للمتعلمين.

مفتاحية

انعكاسية الاختبار ، التقييم ، اختبار اللغة ، الإصلاحات التربوية، نتائج الطلاب.

Résumé

Comprendre l'Influence du Phénomène du Washback sur la Performance des Apprenants : Principaux D détails

Les tests sont devenus partie intégrante de l'enseignement des langues car ils sont nécessaires à diverses fins. Cet aspect de haut vol de l'éducation devrait se refléter sur la quantité de littérature. La réservation de politiques de tests semble faire partie des enjeux les plus fondamentaux de la recherche en éducation aux langues. Par conséquent, il est difficile de parler de réformes et de révolutions éducatives sans parler de réformes dans le domaine des tests. Cet article cherche à passer en revue la littérature existante liée à l'étude ; il met en évidence des concepts liés aux tests standardisés, aux tests de langue et à leurs relations avec les résultats globaux des apprenants.

Mots-clés

« le Washback », l'évaluation, réformes éducatives, tests de langue, résultats des étudiants.