



The Effect of Teachers' Attitudes on Implementing Washback in Regular Versus preparatory Language Classes

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ABSTRACT

Washback as the effect of testing on teaching is far from being straightforward; rather it is affected by numerous factors (Alderson & Wall, 1993). The present paper tries to investigate the effect of teachers' attitude as one of the potential variables on washback in two kinds of classes: regular classes run based on communicative language teaching (CLT) with a low-stake final exam, and preparatory courses for a mock CAE (Certificate in Advanced English) exam with relatively high-stake final exam. Four teachers who were teaching in both low-stake and high-stake classes with the average of 11 students in each class in a well-known language school in Tehran were observed (totally 8 classes with 85 students) for about 750 minutes. The frequencies of different aspects of classroom discourse were analyzed based on a category proposed by Watanabe (2004). This analysis was accompanied by the interview with the teachers whose classes were observed. The result showed that teachers modified the effect of washback in different aspects of the lessons and their classroom management was based on their attitude. However, some aspects showed unexpected results which indicate that washback cannot be considered as a unitary concept with an all-or-nothing nature. In fact, it consists of different aspects, each influencing and being influenced by teachers' attitude as one of the factors. This in turn implies that to have positive washback or a successful curriculum innovation, authorities should have teachers' positive attitude on their side; otherwise all their efforts might be counterproductive.

Key words: Washback, Teachers' attitude, Regular vs. Preparatory Classes

I. Introduction

The effect of exam on teaching and learning or wash back has been recognized and studied by different experts. The scope of studies in this regard indicates both the importance and the complexity of this old but newly-recognized phenomenon. The complexity comes from the fact that it cannot be considered as a unitary fact with a fixed reason. In fact, in Alderson and Wall's (1993) washback hypothesis, it is emphasized that washback is far from straightforward and simple. It is caused and mediated by a plethora of factors. The results of these studies raise our awareness of the different aspects of washback and shed light on these ignored aspects. The purpose of this study is to investigate one of these factors. It tries to determine the possible mediating effect of teachers' attitudes on washback. The rationale is that in the chain between the research and the class, the teacher is one of the influential figures in affecting washback to varying degrees. This mediating effect is assumed to be inextricably bound with teachers' attitudes and beliefs about washback. It seems logical to have an overview of the main items, i.e. washback, factors influencing washback and the teachers' mediating effect on engineering it.

II. Washback

washback refers to the influence or the effect of testing on teaching, learning and the various stakeholders in the education process/ (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Andrews, 2004; Hughes, 2003; McNamara, 2000). Bachman (1990) regards wash back as a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on the educational systems in general, and on society at large. The phenomenon can be expressed as what is assessed or examined in fact becomes what is valued, which in turn becomes what is taught (McEwen, 1995a).

Due to the prevalence of washback, Davis (1990) states that testing always has a washback influence and it is foolish to turn blind eye to it and pretend that it does not happen. Bachman and Palmer (1996) believe that despite the fact that teachers may

personally prefer to teach certain materials in a specific way, if they find that they have to use a specified test, they may find teaching to the test almost unavoidable. They state that the term 'teaching to the test' implies doing something in teaching that may not be compatible with teachers' own values or the goals of the instructional program.

The concept is rooted in the notion that examinations can and should drive teaching and hence learning. That is why washback is also referred to as measurement-driven instruction (Popham, 1987). In order to achieve this goal, a match or an overlap between the content and format of the examination and the content and format of the curriculum is encouraged. This alignment is referred to as consequential validity by Messick (1996), and test impact by Bachman and palmer (1996).

There is little agreement on the scope of wash back. It is believed that washback is applied only to accidental side-effects of examination, and not to those effects intended when the first purpose of the examination is to control the curriculum. However, Cheng (1997) defines washback as an intended direction of curriculum change by means of a change of public examinations on aspects of teaching and learning .

To sharpen the concept, Watanabe (1997) conceptualizes washback on the dimensions such as specificity, intensity, length, intentionality and values. Specificity indicates that washback effect may be general or specific. Intensity implies that washback may be strong or weak. Length refers to the duration of exams which if found to exist, and may last for a short or a long period of time. Intentionality indicates that washback might be intended as in the case of implementation of curriculum innovation (Markee, 1997), which is hoped to be positive, or unintended which might be positive or negative. Finally, values emphasize the point that examination washback may be positive or negative.

The points mentioned above indicate that wash back must be far from being straightforward. In fact, it is influenced by different factors.

III. Factors Affecting Wash back

The research to date suggests that various factors seem to be mediating the process of washback. These factors may include test factors (e.g. test methods, test content, the skill tested, purpose of the test, decisions that will be made on the basis of test results, and etc. Cheng, 2004); prestige factors (e.g. stakes of the test, status of the test within the entire educational system, etc.); personal factors (e.g. teachers' educational background, their beliefs about best methods of teaching or learning, etc.); affective factors, e.g. anxiety (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007); micro-context factors (e.g. the school setting in which the test preparation is being carried out); and macro-context factors (e.g. the society where the test is used).

because the present paper intends to study the mediating factor of teachers' attitude on washback, this factor will be reviewed separately and in more detail below.

III.1. Teacher Factor Mediating Washback

Watanabe (2004) considers teachers' personal beliefs, past education, and academic background as important factors in determining the methodology they employ and the extent to which they implement or ignore washback; These factors are confirmed by Cheng (1997) and Pearson (1988). McNamara (2000) states that the examination does not influence teachers' fundamental beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning; the role of teachers and students and how teaching methodology and learning strategies should be carried out. Alderson and Wall (1993) show that tests have impact on what teachers teach but not on how they teach. For Messick (1996) however, the influence of tests on teachers is one of the defining features of washback. Cheng and Curtis (2004) state that one of the potential factors which can determine the positivity or negativity of a test is the attitude, right or wrong, held by the teacher as the implementer of the wash back effect. Stecher et al. (2004) found that teachers' attitudes towards aspects of reform, and their perceptions of the influence of each component on practice are important.

Due to the interplay of so many factors, it is certainly not possible to understand the whole range of teachers' intentions behind their teaching activities (Watanabe, 2004). Nevertheless, in-depth analyses of the information gained in post-observation interviews seem to indicate that several factors are involved in the process of engineering washback, whether negative or positive. The first factor is teachers' concerns for students' proficiency level. Second, the teachers may be placing undue blame on the presence of the examination for what they are doing, the blame which seems to be based on their perceptions, which might not accurately reflect the actual content of the examinations. Therefore, some teachers based on their biased perception of the importance of certain skills, might overemphasize them. Watanabe (2004) believes that teachers seem to be holding various unproven assumptions, which may hinder the generation of beneficial washback. Third, the degree of teachers' familiarity with a range of teaching methods might be a factor mediating the process of producing washback. For some teachers it might be difficult to employ other methods than the one through which they were taught when they were students.

Due to the points mentioned above, the present study aims to investigate the mediating effect of the teachers' attitude on washback in preparatory vs. regular classes. It is assumed that because of the varying importance of the end-of-the-term exams, there will be more washback effect in preparatory classes and this effect will be different in different classes due to many factors including the perception and attitude teachers have about washback and other intervening factors.

Method

I. Participants

The participants in this study were four teachers who were selected from among 35 teachers in one of the prestigious language institutes in Tehran. Because of the aim of the study, four teachers were selected at random from among those teachers who taught in both regular and preparatory classes. In this way it could be possible to see the effect of wash

back (positive or negative) and teachers' attitude in implementing washback in both classes. The classes were single-sex with male teachers and students. The teachers' ages ranged from 28 to 35. The average number of students in regular classes was 12 and 10 in the preparatory classes. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 39 in regular classes and 23 to 30 in preparatory classes. All of the classes had horse-shoe seating arrangements.

II. Material

The textbooks used were 'True to Life' series (Gairns & Redman, 1995; 1996) which included 'Starter', 'Elementary', 'Pre-intermediate', 'Intermediate' and 'Upper-intermediate'. After the upper-intermediate level, students attended the advanced level which lasted 6 terms. In the first 5 terms the students studied 'Landmark' (Date, Haines & Sayer, 2004) with no end-of-the-term exam and in the 6th term, they studied "CAE Study Pack' (McAndrew, 2002) for the mock CAE exam. The exam was important because it paved the way for most of the candidates' employment as teachers of English which is thought to be a decent job for most of them.

From the starter course to the end of the upper-intermediate course, each term consisted of 20 sessions plus one end-of-the-term exam session. Each session was 105 minutes. From the starter to the end of the upper-intermediate terms, the total score which was expected to be assigned was 100, sixty for the class participation and 40 for the end-of-the-term exam. The passing score was 65. To pass the mock CAE exam however, all students had to get a passing score at the end-of-the-term exam since there were no scores for class participation or activity. The mock CAE exam included listening, speaking, reading and writing sections which were covered extensively in the CAE study pack in the preparatory term.

III. Procedure

Classroom observations were done to examine the validity of the predicted form of washback in both regular and preparatory classes. Each class was observed once or twice depending on the topic. The

length of each observation varied from 95minutes to 139 minutes in regular classes with the total of 446 minutes and 75minutes to 107 minutes in preparatory classes with the total of 347 minutes. Of course these figures were equated to take care of the differences. The teachers were informed of the general purpose of the study but no specific points were discussed about the possible washback or their attitudes about the possible differences between the regular and preparatory classes to avoid raising their undue awareness and possibly polluting their teaching.

During the observation, various classroom activities were ok down extensively on note-taking sheets. To analyze washback, Watanabe's (2004) category was used in this study. A defining point in Watanabe's paradigm is that to the degree that attention is paid to formal aspects of language, it is an example of wash back and to the degree that the premium is put on communicative aspects of language, it moves away from washback. The points (adopted from Watanabe, 2004) are:

1. Reference to the examination: frequency of referring to test-taking techniques; frequency of predicting future test questions

2. Frequency of translations at the word, phrase, clause, or sentence level(as an indication of wash back effect)

3. Frequency of explanation of English structures/giving metalinguistic information

4. Frequency of error correction (local errors; where emphasis is on grammatical form or pronunciation rather than communication)

5. Frequency of errors ignored by the teacher (an indication that communication was important)

6. Frequency of language skills used to practice formal aspects of language as an indication of wash back effect

7. Frequency of language skills used communicatively which can be interpreted as a shield against washback effect

8. Length of utterances made in Persian [Japanese in Watanabe's (2004) study]

9. Frequency of requests made by students for

information which were answered by the teacher (an indication of students' motivation)

10. Frequency of the requests for information made by the students which were turned down by the teacher (an indication that students should keep communicating in spite of problems; without getting involved in the formal aspects of language)

Different CLT and washback categories were coded and the occurrence of each principle was noted in observations. Upon completion of each observation, each teacher was asked in Persian about his intention behind a variety of classroom activities in both the regular and the preparatory classes. Each discussion took 5 to 15 minutes in the

form of an unstructured interview. This revealed teachers' attitudes about implementing both CLT principles and washback effects.

Data Analysis

The frequency of different principles mentioned in the previous part is shown in the following table:

Teacher	A	B	C	D	Total
1. Reference to examination ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	0 (0) 5 (5)	0 (0) 4 (5)	0 (0) 6 (8)	0 (0) 4 (5)	0 19 (23)
2. Frequency of translations ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	0 (0) 0 (0)	20 (16) 4 (5)	15 (14) 3 (4)	53 (45) 0 (0)	88 (75) 7 (9)
3. Frequency of explanation ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	0 (0) 17 (16)	5 (4) 3 (4)	7 (6) 0 (0)	8 (7) 0 (0)	20 (17) 20 (20)
4. Frequency of error correction ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	7 (7) 16 (15)	3 (2) 12 (15)	37 (34) 14 (18)	24 (20) 0 (0)	71 (63) 42 (48)
5. Frequency of errors ignored ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	25 (26) 12 (11)	0 (0) 3 (4)	0 (0) 0 (0)	4 (3) 0 (0)	29 (29) 15 (15)
6. Length of language skills used formally ?? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	0 m (11) 30 m (39)	0 m (16) 11 m (14)	2 m (58) 27 m (34)	27 m (23) 50 m (60)	119 (108) 118 (147)
7. Length of language skills used Communicatively ?? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	5 m (5.3) 0 m (0)	10 m (8) 18 m (23)	25 m (23) 17 m (22)	0 m (0) 34 m (41)	40 (36) 69 (86)
8. Frequency of utterances made in Persian ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	40 (42) 35 (33)	13 (11) 3 (4)	0 (0) 3 (9)	5 (4) 0 (0)	58 (57) 41 (46)
9. Frequency of requests answered ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	5 (5.3) 0 (0)	19 (15) 6 (8)	0 (0) 0 (0)	17 (14) 0 (0)	41 (34) 6 (8)
10. Frequency of the requests turned down ? Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam	0 (0) 0 (0)	11 (9) 1 (1)	6 (6) 5 (6)	5 (4) 3 (3)	22 (19) 9 (10)
11. Total observation time in minute Regular classes Preparatory classes for exam equated	95 107 101	139 90 114	104 75 97	108 75 91	446 347

Table 1: Aspects of classroom discourse (Adapted from Watanabe, 2004), modified and expanded. ● Frequency equated, ●● Length equated, m = minute. The figures in parentheses indicate the equated measures.

The table shows that indeed there were cases in which the predicted types of negative washback were present. The most obvious case was the reference to exam which was exclusively high in the preparatory classes but it was not mentioned in the regular CLT classes at all. However, the results are by no means dichotomous in other cases. Frequency of explanation, for example, though insignificantly higher in preparatory classes, is observable in regular classes too, which is an indication of the complexity of the issue. The same is the case in using language skills formally which, based on the paradigm, must be more in preparatory classes. However, one can see that these skills are used formally in both kinds of classes which can indicate that some washback effect is present in regular classes too. Another case that shows washback effect is the frequency of requests answered or turned down as the sign of lack of washback for the reasons mentioned earlier. While in the first case the result is in favor of our prediction because it is more frequent in regular classes, in the second case the difference between the classes diminishes and the effect can be seen in both classes which attest to the point that other factors are at work.

In other cases, the predictions are rejected. The most extreme case in the data is the frequency of using translation as a sign of washback in regular classes and its near absence in preparatory classes. Post-observation interview with the teachers revealed that other factors such as the content of the lesson and more importantly the teachers' attitude about the best possible form of presenting information make such a difference.

Another case that rejects our prediction is using language communicatively which is higher in preparatory classes than in regular ones, showing once more that it is not just the presence or absence of a high-stake exam but other factors such as the content of the book and the level of learners' proficiency that play a role too.

However, what may strike us most is that there were some data showing mixed results. Frequency

of errors corrected or ignored is a case in point. While the frequency of error correction as a sign of negative washback is higher in regular classes, rejecting our prediction; the number of ignored errors is higher in regular classes which is in line with our prediction on the ground that by ignoring the errors the learners are pushed to communicate with whatever they have in their language repertoire.

Discussion

The categorical presence of 'reference to the examination' in preparatory classes and its total absence in the regular classes is explained by analyzing the structure of the 'CAE Study Pack' (McAndrew, 2002). It clearly shows that the main reason is that such references are part of the contents of the book and not a point specifically emphasized by the teachers themselves due to washback. This point was confirmed by three out of four teachers, who believed that although the students in these classes were expected to have a CAE exam at the end of that term, all the references about exam techniques were those mentioned in the book itself.

The violation of our prediction about the higher frequency of translation in regular classes seems to be due to the combination of teachers' attitude and the content of the lesson. The content of the lessons in one of the classes was related to food items and the post-observation unstructured interview with the related teacher showed that he believed that translating proper nouns was the best way to help students remember them. The same point seems to be the case with the other teacher who was teaching idioms. He too had the same attitude towards teaching idioms, believing that if students knew the Persian equivalents, they would be able to memorize the idioms and use them properly. Related to the necessity of translation, as far as students' level of proficiency is concerned, we can see a wide gap. All of those who attended preparatory classes were in the advanced level, who seem to have obviated the necessity of translation, whereas students in regular classes were in different

terms with varying proficiency levels who often made translation a necessity or an optimal teaching technique to resort to.

The frequency of using explanation shows once more that washback, as it was mentioned in the literature, does not affect all the teachers the same way, this can be an indication of a teacher mediating factor. Teacher A who was using explanation more was one of the highly experienced and qualified teachers in the language school observed. In the post-observation unstructured interview he stated that in spite of being in the advanced level, most of the students could not get rid of the ingrained old habit of having the gist of grammar and other metalinguistic tips in Persian. In fact he said: "I try to cater to their old habit, that is to say, it is more psychological than purely educational". The other teachers (B, C, and D) teaching in preparatory terms did not have the same attitude. They believed that "students were proficient enough to learn what they wanted by themselves or with each other's help, which made our explanation unnecessary"

The main reason for the unexpected result in error treatment, which must be more in preparatory classes under washback, seems to be due to teachers C and D. Teacher C paraphrased nearly all of the wrong sentences produced by the students, only some of which were noted by them. Teacher D was teaching vocabulary for food in an elementary class. In the post-observation informal interview with these two teachers, teacher C said that because he believed he was the main source of providing input to students, he thought it was his duty to expose the students to 'correct English' as much as possible even if just some of them paid attention. He believed that the important thing, which he tried to practice, was correcting 'unobtrusively'. The same teacher (C) had the second highest rate of correction in his preparatory class. Teacher D believed that since students in the elementary level were exposed to most of these vocabulary items for the first time "it was important to emphasize correctness". The lack of any correction in his preparatory class was justified by him on the ground that "correcting at

that level is a little demotivating to the students since they are in advanced level", putting too much premium on the affective factor from another teachers' point of view.

The frequency of using four language skills with an emphasis on the formal aspects of the language (as an indication of washback) is in line with the prediction that it must be higher in preparatory classes under washback. A possible reason for this can be the fact that in teacher D's class, the subject was writing an informal letter, with the emphasis on the accuracy and adherence to the layout of the letter format, to a friend which was both authentic and time consuming (30 minutes). Therefore, washback in this case can be attributed more to the content rather than the methodology which determined the teachers' practice in that class.

An interesting point regarding using mother tongue was that it was in teacher A's classes where most Persian language was used in both regular and preparatory classes. In the post-observation informal interview with this teacher, he stated that "as far as using Persian can facilitate learning, it is allowed and welcomed in my class, and it makes no difference whether I'm teaching in regular or preparatory classes" (a rather too extreme or permissive attitude as far as principles of the school were concerned). The rate of using Persian in other classes dropped drastically. Teacher C and D believed that if the learners were allowed to use Persian, students would overdo it and the class would turn to a Persian rather than an English class. Probably it was based on this attitude that the amount of mother tongue used was so low in both their regular and preparatory classes. Therefore, it was not based on which class they taught at; the teachers seemed to practice what they believed rather than what they were expected to comply with.

Concerning the high number of requests in regular classes as a sign of learner motivation, if we accept Watanabe's interpretation, it can be said that regular classes were more interesting and stimulating for students than preparatory ones under washback, which is in line with the general trend in literature

that washback prevents students and teachers from doing something they would otherwise do or like doing. However, since the emphasis is on teachers' rather than students' attitudes in this paper, these requests were divided into two categories: those acknowledged and answered by the teachers and those turned down. As shown, the frequencies are high in both cases in regular classes. However, we can see the influence of the teacher factor here, too. It seems that it was teachers B and D who answered most of the requests for information in regular classes and just teacher B in the preparatory class. Teachers A and C did not do so that much (5 and 0, respectively) and teachers A, C, and D did not do so in preparatory classes. In this regard, teacher D's attitude was a combination of educational and affective. He believed that "acknowledging those requests made by students was important because they were in elementary level and they needed to be acknowledged more to have a positive feeling or a less daunting one in the face of difficulties in the class." Teacher B with the highest number of answering these requests for information considered it as a part of his duty and believed that it did not matter whether it was in regular or in preparatory classes; whenever he regarded a request important he would acknowledge and answer it. That is why he is the only one with cases of answering the requests in the preparatory class. So it can be seen that answering or rejecting is not just due to the presence or absence of washback. In fact, this practice is caused by what the teachers believe. Interestingly, teacher B also ignored most requests in the regular classes but just one in the preparatory class. Perhaps based on what he said, he did not regard them 'important', which can indicate the role of teachers' perceptions rather than the students' problems which can lead a request to be acknowledged or turned down. Concerning the low number of answering requests in preparatory classes, all four teachers mentioned their students' high proficiency level as the main rationale which seems to be independent of washback.

Conclusion

The result in the present paper attests to the fact that we must be cautious in dealing with washback or interpreting the result of classroom observation in washback studies. The main reason is the inherent complexity of washback itself and the plethora of factors which are intertwined with each other in engineering the washback. Teacher's attitude seems to be just one of the factors in this regard. It affects and is affected by numerous other factors. Awareness of those factors enables us to have a comprehensive view of the washback phenomenon and avoid jumping into conclusion and justifying the quality, methodology or the outcome of a certain class with certain students and a certain set of educational policy exerted by the authorities.

Pedagogical Implications

This paper tries to present teachers with a clear notion of the roles they can play and the decisions they can make concerning washback. It emphasizes the point that, as an exam cannot be the sole factor leading to washback; by the same token, washback cannot be considered an automatic effect of exams. Degrees and kinds of washback occur through the agency of various intervening factors and are affected by them. An important and influential agent in this regard is the teacher (Sprat, 2005). This suggests that teachers face a set of pedagogical and ethical decisions about what and how best to teach and facilitate learning if they wish to make the most of teaching towards exams. It should not be forgotten however, that the teacher in the classroom operates within an ideological, historical, economic and political context, each of which can potentially be another influential factor in shaping wash back.

The bottom line is that ignoring the role of teachers can possibly lead to a less-than desired level of washback expected or hoped by the authorities to be seen either for practical reasons or as an implementation of curriculum innovation which in turn can lead to the loss of time and resources.

Suggestions for Further Research

The focus of this paper was investigating the effect of teachers' attitude on shaping washback. Another study can investigate the opposite case; the effect of washback on teachers' attitude as an important factor in learning and teaching processes. Still another relevant point can be the attitude of the learners about washback. This is particularly important due to the presence of hundreds if not thousands of preparatory classes throughout the country preparing students for the most important exam in their life, university entrance exam. Knowing how students perceive these classes can be an important factor in their success or popularity.

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