

Washback in language testing

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Abstract: The term Washback or Backwash has come to the prominence in the literature of English language teaching due to the contributions of Applied Linguistics in the field of ELT. It denotes to the influence which brims from the ongoing testing process on teaching and learning concerns. This term nowadays plays a critical role inside and outside the educational institutions in terms of positive or negative outcomes. Hence, the mismatch among the context, format, examination, and the instructional management would lead into derailing to achieve curriculum objectives, effectively. Such scenario will daunt English language learners to further their communicative competence to learn and affect on the stakeholders perspectives, forwardly. It is worth of note that, researchers in the field of ELT like Wall (1997) made a clear distinction between the micro-washback (the effects on learners and teachers inside the school) and the macro-washback (the impacts on individuals, practices, and policy makers). Consequently, this term has the capacity to create a positive or negative condition which in turn can enhance or obstacle language learning process or stakeholder's strategic attitudes.

Keywords: Impact, Stakeholders, Test-Takers, Scholastic Environment, Pedagogical Practice

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to introduce an effective concept in the world of testing English language and teaching domain. It is evident that, in recent years the revolutionary movement of testing language development has been pruned the stifled odorless traditional methods to understanding the core of testing applications entity in the educational field, scientifically. The mode of testing concerns was based principally on subjective criteria. In accordance with this scope, Weir (2004) puts it, "in developing tools a decision must be taken on what is critical in the particular domain under review, and this decision and the test measures used for operationalizing it must be ethically defensible. Test developers must be made accountable for their products" (p.1). Therefore, testing and assessment affairs in the currently scientific stage have been developed around the world. The standardization criteria come to the prominence as unavoidable requirements to the agenda of the educational strategic pedagogical system.

It is clear to see that, the Applied Linguists developed and recalibrated the testing strategies moreover, teaching language theories in order to make English language teachers comprehend as well as imbibe ELT practices logically or to apply principles of language testing pedagogically. In accordance with this, Weir (1993) argues that, "close

attention is paid to establish what can be tested through each format and its positive and negative attributes" (p.xi).

However, psychometrics as a mental effective tool for measurement comes to put the derailing criteria of a good test under investigation. English language testing is considered as unavoidable pedagogical practice because it plays a vital critical role in the development of scholastic curriculum and the stakeholders' objectives in terms of creating whether a positive or negative backwash in the school environment. So, it is worth of note that, if the tests do not meet with the curriculum objects or could not meet the principles of a good test like reliability or validity concerns for example. This will create a negative backwash effect. In accordance with this, Fulcher and Davidson (2007) believe that, "If the concept of washback is to have any meaning, it is necessary to identify what changes in learning or teaching can be directly attributed to the use of the test in that context" (p.221).

However, the cognitive scientific stage of current years in the field of educational testing research sounded thunderously in terms of targeting this domain, effectively. McNamara believes that, "language tests play a powerful role in many people's lives, acting as agate ways at important transitional moments in education, in employment, and in moving one country to another" (2004, p.4).

2. What is Washback or Backwash in Language Testing?

The experts of ELT have written about the power of examinations which holds in the schools and their critical importance in furthering the educational process. Pearson (1988) comments that, "It is generally accepted that public examinations influence the attitudes, behavior, and motivation of teachers, learners, and parents" (cited in Fulcher and Davidson, 2007, p.222). So, there are variable faces of washback in the testing scholastic applications for example. Many of the under skilled tutors who are (pre-service or in-service process) could not meet the criteria of achieving or managing the curriculum items, effectively. This dominant phenomena is in charge to daunt learning as well as distorting English language learners psychologically and cognitively. Ellis and Tod (2015) believe that "from a behavior for learning perspective, the importance consideration is the compatibility of any framework with the principle of at least protecting and when possible, enhancing the three relationships (with self, with others and with the curriculum) and fostering the development of positive learning behaviors. Any practice where a potential detrimental effect on these relationships for learning could reasonably be predicted should be avoided" (p.101).

Henceforth, most of teachers are still affected by the roots of Audiolingualism and extending its methods in terms of applying testing across the Communicative Approaches of teaching languages or testing concerns. It is evident to see that, instructors are conducting the syllabus for the purposes of testing according to high stakes of the central authority to take decisions of students' pass or fail without paying attention to some scholastic impacts on test-takers' affairs.

In this sense, the term *Washback or Backwash* represents one of five important criteria of a good test. It denotes to the impact which yields from the ongoing process on individuals, school teachers, policy makers, and the entity of educational strategic system. In accordance with this vision, Shohany (1996) argues that, "results obtained from tests can have serious consequences for individuals as well as programs, since many crucial decisions are made on the basis of test results. The power and authority of tests enable policy-makers to use them as effective tools for controlling educational systems and prescribing the behavior of those who are affected by their results-administrators, teachers and students" (cited in Loumbourdi, 2013, p.10). So, Washback comes to the prominence to be widely used in the applicable field of Applied Linguistics as a predominant and prevalent phenomenon in the educational academic research.

Hence, some relevant authors in the field of ELT like (Alderson, 1986 and Person, 1988) symbolize the tests as 'changeable levers' or levers for change which dig harmfully or beneficially in the pedagogical measurement area. Hughes (2003) opines that, "If a test is regarded as important, if the stakes are high, preparation for it can come to domain all teaching and learning activities. Then the author adds that, if the test content and testing technique are at variance with

objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash" (p.1).

Therefore, Wall (1997) made a clear distinction between the test impact and washback terms. In terms of effects concerns, the writer believes that, the impacts denotes to "any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole" (quoted in Cheng et al, 2004, p.4). Whereas backwash according to Hughes (2003) stand of views that, "the effect of testing on teaching and learning" (cited in Brown, 2004, p.28).

So, English language teachers play a vital critical role in conducting their classroom materials. They are in charge to find a positive scholastic environment in terms of accomplishing language tests affairs, wisely and fruitfully. Language testing is considered as tools through which washback is achieved. School teachers have the capacity to interpret or to align the curriculum items to enhancing learning process in terms of feedback and motivation or developing students' strategic cognitive skills, forwardly. Therefore, such effective procedures can decrease learners' affective filter and fostering or triggering their learning ahead as well as finding positive attitudes towards the educational process. Celce et al, (2014) deem that, "positive reinforcement such encouraging feedback at the end of each step enhanced learning by motivating learners to continue their efforts" (p.321).

Fulcher and Davidson comment that, "part of what fairness in language testing means is making sure that procedures for every stage in the testing process are well planned and carefully managed, including the way each test is produced, and the way it is administered, marked and graded" (2007, pp:127-128). In accordance with backwash effect, the test takers in the final high-stake examination (matriculation one) or in Toefl test for example, are reacted negatively in terms of their achievements which daunted by the testing pressure concerns. Person (1988) purports out that, "public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, 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" (quoted from Cheng et al, 2004, p.7).

However, this term has already bifunctional nature which yields the negative or positive aspects on teaching or learning process. A great deal of criticism has targeted the entity of tests or language tests in terms of their influence on the educational process. Here, the first mode of negative washback is represented a pitfall that reincarnates into teaching process where Bachman and Palmer argue that, "in situations where there is clearly *mismatch* between the characteristics of instructional tasks and of the tasks in an obvious relevant real-life domain, it will be necessary to try to find a balance between the qualities of authenticity and impact. On the one hand the test developers could choose to maximize fairness, an aspect of impact on test takers, by designing test tasks whose characteristics correspond to those of the language teaching tasks" (2000, p.105).

Henceforth, such undesirable effect would daunt the effectiveness of achieving learning principles in the classroom as well as obstacle the strategy of accomplishing the educational objectives. Such scholastic conditions occur in our daily life due to variable reasons. For example, the under skilled teachers who could not meet the good criteria of instruction or managing classroom issues effectively or adopting badly strategy in terms of constructing testing formats. Brown and Hudson (2002) believes that, "good format would seem to be a precondition for effective testing of any context" (p.63).

Moreover to this scope, Noble and Smith (1994a) also find that, "high-stakes testing could affect teachers directly and negatively, and that teaching test, taking skills and drilling on multiple-choice worksheets is likely to boost the score but unlikely to promote general understanding" (quoted in Cheng et al, 2004, pp:9-10).

On the other hand, the coin of two faces (washback) has a positive scenario which brims from the curriculum alignment in terms of modifying the teaching affairs or the mode of trial examination strategy. To accomplish this, Bachman and Palmer (2010) deem that, "the act of using the assessment will be beneficial to stakeholders who will always be affected by the use of the test takers. They may have either positive or negative perceptions of the process of preparing for the test, of taking it, and of waiting for the results" (178).

Consequently, the reaction towards the positive washback will contribute directly in terms of accelerating or enhancing the educational process as well as to achieving the educational objectives, effectively. Cheng et al, add that. "Whether the washback effect is positive or negative will largely depend on where and how it exists and manifests itself within a particular educational context" (2004, p.11). In addition, the inclusion of test developers and the test takers together to have a mutual scope and compromising strategy in terms of aligning the curriculum items effectively. Here, the test developers' responsibility task is to, "convince the decision maker that the assessment records are consistent and that the assessment-based interpretations are meaningful, impartial, generalizable, relevant, and sufficient" (Bachman and Palmer, 2010, p.433).

3. Conclusion

It is clear that, the entity of testing has been moved from the applications and influences of behaviorism to the cognitive constructivist views of learning and teaching. So, in the present times, tests have come to create a negative influence on the educational syllabus. Then a clear distinction has been increasingly paid which targets the possibility to make use of the tests powers in terms of advantage to find a positive environment for testing achievement concerns, effectively. Tang and Biggs (1996) confirm that, "the quickest way to change students learning is to change the assessment system" (cited from Cheng et al, 2004, p.39).

So, the modification reform of ELT should target the educational system in order to seek better scholastic

conditions for achieving testing issues as a pedagogical change like adopting or adapting the informal tests as an alternative to standardized or formal ones. Washback has two faces of change, the micro (the effect) and the macro (the impact) scenarios. Therefore, testing influence is so evident on the stakeholders. English language teachers are in charge to manage their classroom and curriculum item wisely in order to trigger students' minds for learning affairs. They can make use of testing as a powerful tool for the benefits of learners.

Moreover to the aforementioned issues, teachers 'feedback and motivation can pave learners ability to interact in the scholastic environment, comprehensively. According with this, Davidson and Fulcher comment that, "extrinsic motivation might be better than no motivation at all then any test, good or bad, can be said to be having beneficial washback if it increases such activity or motivation" (2007, p.224).

Consequently, tests are a double-edged sword; they can have both harmful and beneficial effects on the stakeholders in the system. As Hughes (2003) illustrates, "If a test is regarded as important, if the stakes are high, preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities. And if the test content and testing techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash"(p.I). Person (1988) also points out "public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, 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" (as cited in Cheng et al, 2004, p.7).

In order to remedy such effects, Lynch and Davidson (1994) describe an approach to criterion-referenced testing which involves "practicing teachers in the translation of curricular goals into test specification. They claim that this approach can provide a link between the curriculum, teacher experience, and test and can therefore; presumably, improve the impact of tests on teaching" (Alderson and Banerjee, 2001, p.214). Similarly, Shohamy (1997) stresses that "the true power of tests is that of offering pedagogical benefits (i.e., promoting beneficial washback). This is exemplified in involving teachers in the test development process, and improving teaching through testing by considering concepts coming from innovation theory (Wall, 1996)" (as cited in Elder et al., 1998, p.147).

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