

Washback in language testing

If tests are to have beneficial effects on teaching, teachers will need to understand fully the rationale behind the test and they will need to reflect carefully on appropriate test preparation practices and on their own teaching practices.

Teachers and students often complain about the washback effect of tests on teaching, claiming that certain exam requirements make them do things in class that they do not want to do. Teachers who are preparing students for City & Guilds International ESOL and SESOL examinations however are bound to see the positive washback effect, saying that a good test will encourage teachers to do good things in class. One of the strengths of City & Guilds International ESOL and SESOL qualifications is the focus on communicative competence: communicative tests will encourage communicative teaching.

The washback effect is not only about teachers' or students' judgments. Some writers claim that a test's validity (the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure) should be established by the degree to which it has a positive influence on teaching. The problem however lies with the evidence of washback: a test might influence what is taught but not how it is taught, might influence teacher behaviours but not learner behaviours, or might influence both with little or no influence in skills.

The test properties likely to produce positive washback are authenticity and directness. *Authentic* assessments include engaging tasks in realistic settings or close simulations so that the tasks, as well as available time and resources, parallel those in the real world. *Direct* assessments involve open-ended tasks in which the respondent can freely perform the complex skill at issue unfettered by structured item forms or restrictive response formats. City & Guilds International ESOL and SESOL examinations are based on authentic or semi-authentic tasks based on real-life tasks and include a variety of open-ended or semi-structured questions. Rather than seeking washback as a sign of test validity, we seek validity by design as a likely basis for washback.

References:

- Alderson, J.C. 1998. Testing and teaching: The dream and the reality. *Novelty*. pp. 23-37.
Messick, S. 1996. Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing* 13/3. pp.241-257.