

Research Note

Washback and the Teacher-Based Assessment Practices of EFL Instructors at a Japanese University

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Background

The topic of washback itself and how it applies to oral assessment procedures/contexts is a relevant and important topic for the field of English language teaching, and there have been a number of studies into oral washback in evaluation of students (Khan et al., 2019). Washback effect refers to the impact of testing—whether positive or negative—on teaching practices, curriculum design, and learning behaviors. This has led to increased understanding of how to promote more positive kinds of washback. Washback can be positive when it provides students an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Previous studies have investigated ESL/EFL instructors' classroom assessment practices to find out their purposes and methods (Cheung et al., 2004). One of particular interest investigated the washback of an oral assessment system in an EFL classroom (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010). In this article, the authors used a mixed methods approach and found that positive washback occurred in some areas, but that constant guidance and support is required to help teachers create positive washback in other areas.

Investigation

This study was done in order to understand more about why educators consider washback and how important it is in relation to assessment. I first explored how to conduct an effective qualitative and quantitative mixed method survey with regards to oral assessment washback. A quantitative survey (as used by Cheng et al., 2004) was given to five university English instructors at the beginning of the semester to find out more about the instructors and their beliefs regarding assessment. The first section consisted of their personal background, and the next section asked the instructors to rate their purposes and reasons for assessing their students. This included asking about their primary source for test items and assessment procedures, and how they provide feedback, if indeed they do so (see appendix for full questionnaire).

Discussion

While all of the instructors provided feedback to students after their assessments, there was not much feedback taking place during the assessment. This may have been done for several reasons including time restraints and not wanting to unfairly affect the outcome of an assessment, but this

is a chance wasted for positive washback as students who receive feedback immediately are more likely to remember it and use it to improve the remainder of their performance or on one that takes place in the future (McKinley & Thompson, 2018). In my experience, in particular, students are often interested in little more than their final score, and this was also mentioned by three out of the five instructors during the interviews conducted.

Instead of merely providing students with written feedback, it might be more useful if verbal feedback was provided either during or after the assessments depending on the kind of oral assessment being done. If the assessment is a presentation, for example, then feedback after, and not during, would be more appropriate to avoid the student being embarrassed during the class, and peer-assessment should be encouraged based on the literature review, which suggests it can be valuable and little bias occurs in most situations. Self-assessments may be useful as a way of seeing if a student understands how successful their performance was with regard to the assessment criteria, but it appears to be unhelpful when used as part of the actual assessment method based on my experience and the results of this study.

Recommendation

In this study, I found that while all of the instructors appeared to understand the importance of trying to promote positive washback, more needs to be done to ensure that every aspect is covered. Providing more feedback to students, and at relevant times depending on the kind of oral assessment being undertaken, must be carefully considered and appropriate for the context. Through more mixed method studies of this nature, we can continue to learn more about how to provide positive washback with oral assessments in particular settings within language schools or universities in various countries.

References

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Author

Lee Hughes is a British national with a Masters degree who has been working as a visiting faculty member of Asia University in Tokyo, Japan for three years. Previously, he was a visiting professor at Keimyung University (four years, 2007-2011), and an assistant professor at Hongik University (two years, 2011-13) and Yongin University (two years, 2014-2016). He is an active member of the Global Issues in Language in Education (JALT SIC) and has published an article about Black Lives Matter and Racism in Japan (July, 2020).

Appendix

Quantitative survey to analyze the personal profile and assessment beliefs of instructors:

Personal Profile and Assessment Beliefs

Personal Background

1. Name _____
2. Age _____
Gender _____ Female _____ Male
3. Academic/Teaching Qualifications _____

4. Teaching Experience (duration/kind of institutions/level of students)

Your Purposes and Reasons for Assessing your Students

- 1 = Strongly agree 3 = Somewhat agree 5 – disagree
2 = Agree 4 = Somewhat disagree 6 – Strongly disagree

1. To group my students for instruction purposes in my class _____

2. To obtain information on my students' progress _____
3. To plan my instruction _____
4. To diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my own teaching and instruction _____
5. To provide feedback to my students as they progress through the course _____
6. To motivate my students to learn _____
7. To make my students work harder _____
8. To prepare my students for standardized tests they will need to take in the future (e.g. the TOEFL) _____
9. To diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my students _____
10. To formally document growth in learning _____
11. To determine the final grades for my students _____

Methods for Assessing your Students' Oral Skills

- Check (X) the methods that you use

1. Oral reading=dictation _____
2. Oral interviews=dialogues _____
3. Oral discussion with each student _____
4. Oral presentations _____
5. Teacher made tests asking students to:
 - a. give oral directions _____
 - b. follow directions given orally _____
 - c. provide an oral description of an event or object _____
 - d. prepare summaries of what is heard _____
 - e. answer multiple-choice test items following a listening passage _____
 - f. take notes _____
 - g. retell a story after listening to a passage _____
7. Peer assessment _____
8. Self assessment _____
9. Standardized speaking test _____
10. Standardized listening tests _____

Procedures of Assessment and Evaluation

1. Which of the following represents your primary source(s) for test items and other assessment procedures?

Please check (X) all that apply.

- a. Items developed by myself _____
- b. Items prepared together with other teachers _____
- c. Items from published textbooks _____
- d. Items from mandated syllabuses=curricula _____
- e. Items found on the Internet _____
- f. Other published test items _____
- g. Other (please specify):

2. When you give feedback to your students during the course, how do you provide that feedback? Please check (X) all that apply.

- a. Verbal feedback _____
- b. Checklist _____
- c. Written comments _____
- d. Teaching diary=log _____
- e. Conference with student _____
- f. Total test score _____
- g. A letter grade _____