

R reinterpretation of the Concept of Washback in Language Testing

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Park, Seunghae. 2018. R reinterpretation of the Concept of Washback in Language Testing. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* 16, 125-142. Washback refers to the influence that language teachers and learners (or test-takers) have on the existence of a particular test. So far, in terms of learners or test takers' perspective, the study of washback has mostly been conducted on students who are about to take the test in a short period of time. However, washback does not only affect the students who are soon going to take the test but also the "potential" test takers who will take exams in the distant future. That is, the extent or range of washback may be much further and deeper than the previous studies. The purpose of this study is to explore the washback effect on students who still have a plenty of time to slowly prepare for the language tests. In particular, it looks at how students in middle school and in high school changed their English study style due to the changed scoring system in the English area of Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced measurement. The data of this study consist of a survey of students and an interview with an English teacher. The survey demonstrates that learners as preliminary test takers were also under the influence of washback caused by English section of CSAT. (Seoul National University)

Keywords: washback, language testing, learners, test takers, CSAT

1. Introduction

Washback means the degree of behavioral change for teachers and learners that result from the introduction and use of tests (Messick 1989). The term washback itself is simply a neutral concept meaning influence. These influences are the things that teachers and students do because of the existence of tests. Pearson (1988: 98) have argued that public examinations affect the attitudes, behavior, and motivations of instructors, learners, and also parents. The claim that tests distort what students learn was also introduced Vernon (1972: 75), meaning that the

curriculum is designed simply as a means of passing tests. Against a negative washback, Morris (1972: 75) have argued that exams encourage teachers and learners to follow the curriculum, showing the positive or good side of the washback. In spite of the different perspectives, implicit assumptions that underlie these arguments are that the washback exists on the educational field and that innovations in the language curriculum are attributed to the innovations in language testing as Alderson (1986: 104) reported.

It is admitted to some extent that change in the motivation and behavior of both the teaching and learning positions are through the existence of a certain test. According to Fransson (1977), increase in motivation leads to increase in learning, and consequently reach his or her optimal point of learning. Here, the optimal point is determined in part according to how high the motivation is. For example, if the motivation goes high, then the upper limit of the optimal point might also be high.

Some previous hypotheses of washback that researchers have been trying to verify are as follows:

- (1) A test will influence teaching.
- (2) A test will influence learning.
- (3) A test will influence what teachers teach.
- (4) A test will influence how teachers teach.
- (5) A test will influence what learners learn.
- (6) A test will influence how learners learn.
- (7) A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching.
- (8) A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning.
- (9) A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching.
- (10) A test will influence the degree and depth of learning.
- (11) A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc. of teaching and learning.
- (12) Tests that have important consequences will have washback.
- (13) Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback.

(14) Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers.

(15) Tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not for others.

(1) and (2) are the most general washback hypotheses that asks about the existence of the washback. In general, researchers agree that a test has an influence on both teaching and learning. Researchers such as Messick (1996) explored the concept of washback, and Alderson and Wall (1993) looked through the empirical studies to see the actual existence of the washback. Two sentences of the same words except the last word are presented with different hypotheses because teaching and learning are basically viewed as separate processes in education, and this applies to the rest of the possible hypotheses. (3) to (6) discuss what and how the teachers teach and students learn. It is about the washback effect on the content and the methodology of teaching and learning matters. (7) and (8) are about the order of curriculum and the pace at which it is implemented, while (9) and (10) literally indicate the degree and depth of teaching and learning. (11) mentions about the motivations or attitudes toward teaching or learning a particular subject. This might be related to the next two hypotheses (12) and (13), which talks about the effect of the importance of the test. That is, if the test has a high stake, then the teachers and test-takers might consider it as one of their most important things to focus on, and therefore the test will have a significant effect on both the teachers and learners. Finally, (14) and (15) discuss the number of people influenced by the test.

The hypotheses mentioned above, however, does not include the range or distance of how far the influence of the test can reach. On the learners' perspective, the washback of a certain test may not only apply to the ones who will soon take the test but also to the "potential" test-takers who will take the exam in the distant future. That is, it may have an effect on the groups that are preparing for the test at this moment and also on the potential learners who are likely to belong to such groups in the future.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate the range of influence of a certain language test has on the learners.

2. Literature Review

The study of washback in language testing has focused on either the teaching position or the learning position, or both. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) demonstrated the negative washback of the English proficiency test TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) on both the teachers' and the students' sides employing the empirical methods. They conducted an interview with instructors and learners and also went into actual classrooms (one that prepared TOEFL and the other that did not) to compare the differences of these two lectures. The students were asked in the interview to tell how they would like to learn TOEFL compared to their previous experiences. They said that getting along with Americans, watching movies, and using English in any place etc. were the ideal ways of getting a good score on TOEFL, which were different from how they learned in the classroom. Also, teachers' negative attitudes toward the test were reported through the interview. They thought the test was inauthentic and little interaction between the teacher and the students were going on. Finally, in comparison to non-TOEFL classes, TOEFL classes were more standardized, and there was little laughter in the class.

Cheng (1999) studied the washback effect on teachers' perspectives caused by the changes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), which is a high-stake public examination. Here, the data were also collected by actually observing the classrooms and having an interview with the teachers. Through the interview, in particular, it was found that teachers' thoughts about their teaching method was undergoing a significant change because of the test. The study also reported that the content of teaching and the way activities in

class were accomplished could be changed due to the revision of the exam.

Shohamy et al. (1996) showed the nature of washback that changes over time due to such factors as the language status, use of the test, and so on. The data, here, consist of interviews, surveys, and the study of documents. By analyzing the different impact of two public examinations, they found that washback was of different form. While little variation was shown by the change in Arabic as a second language (ASL), a small change in the English as a foreign language (EFL) made a significant change on how much time were spent for preparing the test, what kind of activities were held in the class, etc.

According to Kim (2015), the modification of the way the History exam in the Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) was presented led to changes in both the teachers and the students. In particular, changes in the number of questions being applied have changed the importance of the test that teachers and students think, and contents that were considered as important also changed according to the questions given every year. Moreover, the focus was on memorizing certain expressions in class, rather than understanding the flow of the historical events, considering that the test came up with multiple choice questions.

As seen, previous studies have been conducted based on learners who will be test takers for the year. However, younger students who have not yet taken the test but are likely to take it in the future may also be within the range of washback. They are the preliminary test takers, who are closely watching how the system of examination works, what has been changed in the test, etc. These successors of the test may be less affected by the washback compared to the test takers, but they are still the ones who are under the influence of washback as well. Therefore, how far the washback can exert its influence and how the intensity of washback changes in step with the distance should be investigated in this paper.

3. The Study

3.1 Hypotheses

In the study, it proposes three additional hypotheses that might extend the concept of washback:

Hypothesis 1: Washback will not only have influence on the learners as test takers but also on the preliminary test takers who are going to take the examinations in the future. In this study, Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) will have washback on high school third grade students and also on other lower grade students.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the stake of the test, the farther the range of washback will reach to the preliminary test takers. That is, Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), which is a very high-stake national examination, will have a wider range of effects than the test held on individual schools such as midterms or finals.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the stake of the test, the stronger the intensity of washback will have on the preliminary test takers. Since CSAT has a very high-stake, it will receive more attention from many preliminary learners and have a bigger impact than other exams.

3.2 Method

Participants

One hundred Korean students (twenty students each from middle school first grade to high school second grade) participated in the survey. All participants were native Korean speakers and were learning English in the regular Korean school curriculum.

Materials

A set of twenty multiple-choice questions were produced (Appendix A) in Korean language. Here, as the level of understanding the sentences in the survey differed from grade to grade, the words used to generate the sentences were manipulated, i.e. the vocabularies that appeared for the lower grade students such as students in their first year in middle school were of a basic level. As the students got older, the sentence level went up. However, the individual questionnaires asked to the students were same, differing only in the word choices.

Procedure

Subjects participated in the survey using Google Forms and started by entering a few simple personal information such as names and grade (e.g. middle school first grade, high school second grade, etc.) in their school. These private information were later disposed after the data analysis was completed.

Some questions were asked to answer only when the subjects satisfied certain conditions in the previous questions as follows:

(16) 8. Did you know that English section of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) has been converted from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced measurement since 2017?

- ① Yes ② No

(When selecting “② No” in No. 8, please go directly to item No. 9)

8-1. After you have noticed the change, were there any changes made on your English learning?

	Decreased	No change	Increased
Number of English institutes currently attending			-

Time spent on studying English			-
Importance of studying English			-

9. Considering the English section of the CSAT (Listening and Reading Comprehension. questions only), would you be interested in taking private education for English speaking and writing?

- ① Very interested ② Interested ③ Neutral ④ Not interested
⑤ Not at all

In (16), if the participant answered *Yes* in number 8, then he or she may proceed to 8-1 and then question 9. However, if the answer to number 8 is *No*, then he or she passes the next question and moves to number 9. After one's survey is done, the result was sent to a single Google Drive file.

Results (Results of the pilot study)

Twenty-four first grade middle school students have given the answers to the survey. Of the students who participated in the survey, sixteen students (66.7 percent) were attending at least one private institute. Among those students who were taking at least one outside-of-the-school education, fifteen students (93.8 percent) were attending at least one English institute. This data seems to show that students are aware of the importance of learning English. Moreover, of the sixteen students who enrolled in one or more institute, half of them were attending only one academy. However, every student except one, which is seven chose to learn English, accounting for 87.5 percent. The number demonstrates that if students can only attend a single private institute, then most of them are likely to choose an English academy first than any other subjects. That is, English is more than just one of the important subjects to learn, but it comes at the top of the list among various subjects.

Table 1. Survey results

Number of students participated in the survey	24
Number of students attending at least one private institute of any kind	16
Number of students attending only one private institute	8
Number of students attending at least one private English institute	15
Number of students attending only one private institute and that institute is teaching English	7
Number of private English institute that prepared CSAT	1
Number of private English institute that prepared English language test such as TOEIC, TOEFL, TEPS, and so on.	2
Number of private English institute that prepared students for their midterms and finals	11
Number of students who were studying English for getting good grades on CSAT in the future	8
Number of students who were aware of the change in the English section of CSAT since 2017	5
Number of students who had negative opinions on taking private English speaking and writing classes	6

The number of the English institute that prepared for CSAT, however, was only one out of fifteen (6.7 percent). In connection with the previous data, it is true that English is considered very important for first-year students in middle school, but it is not the phase of preparing for the CSAT itself yet. The only student who went to the English academy that

prepared CSAT was attending more than four institutes in total and thought himself to be very good at speaking, writing, and reading. Also, he was aware of the system of English section in CSAT changed over time.

There were a total of two students (13.3 percent) who were preparing the English test such as TOEIC, TOEFL, etc., but one of the two was the student who was also preparing CSAT as mentioned above. The other student was attending more than four academies, knew the modification made on English section in CSAT, and thought himself to good at English. These students, who have knowledge in English and are aware of future tests, were already preparing for CSAT or higher-level tests.

Among the survey participants, eight students (33.3 percent) said that one of the reasons for studying English is to get good scores on English section of CSAT in the future when they become the test taker. Although very few students were currently preparing for CSAT with their private teachers, still quite many students were studying English with certain amount of attention on CSAT.

Five students (20.8 percent) already knew that English test in CSAT has been converted from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced measurement since 2017. These students were asked to answer the changes in their learning style of English and their thoughts about English. Since one student did not answer to these questions, the data from four students had to be used only.

Table 2. Answers to 8-1 from students aware of the change in the English section of CSAT

	Decreased	No change	Increased
Number of English institutes currently attending	-	4	-
Time spent on studying English	-	4	-
Importance of studying English	-	4	-

Table 2 shows that there was no remarkable change in all three items. None of the students decreased nor increased the number of English institutes they are attending, and the time devoted for studying English also did not change after they recognized the changes made to the English section in CSAT. More importantly, the attitude toward studying English underwent no change. Five students who were not aware of the changes in the exam system inadvertently misinterpreted

Table 3. Answers to 8-1 from students who were not aware of the change in the English section of CSAT

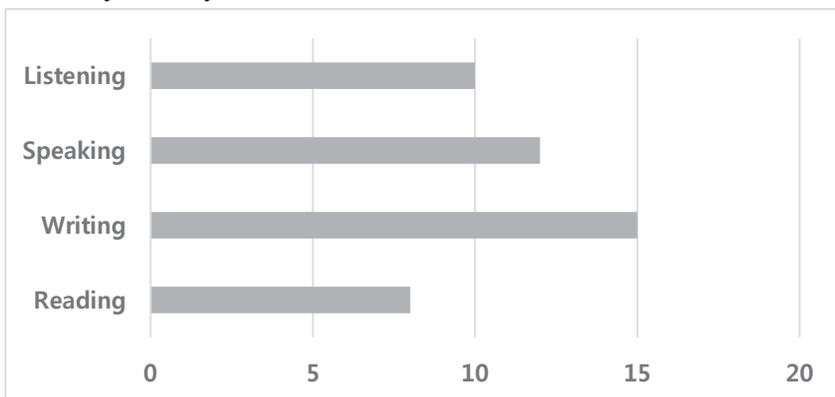
	Decreased	No change	Increased
Number of English institutes currently attending	1	4	-
Time spent on studying English	2	3	-
Importance of studying English	3	2	-

the questions and submitted additional answers to the three items above. Presumably, they were able to give responses to these questions because they might have thought not based on their current situation but on their prediction of what would happen in relation to English study after recognizing the change in the test. One who chose decreased in item for the number of English institutes currently attending, he might have thought the number of English institutes will be reduced when the test turns into an absolute scoring system. Likewise, it is possible that some students think they would lower the time spent on studying English, and the importance of studying English will decrease. And other students who made different answers would have believed that there will be no change in any of those three items attributed to the modification in CSAT. In this way, it is possible to interpret that the test has some effect on prospective test takers.

Figure 1 shows the English field that students think is the most necessary

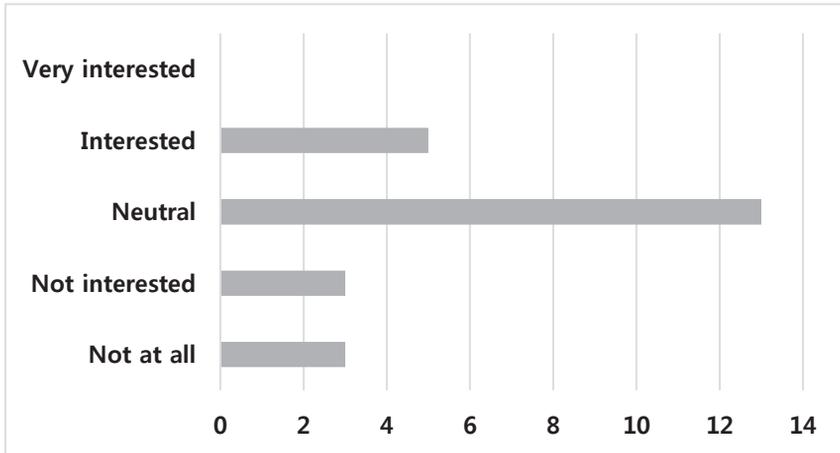
to study. As seen, writing (62.5 percent) was considered necessary for the largest number of people, followed by speaking (50 percent), listening (41.7 percent), and reading (33.3 percent). It can be seen that more students

Figure 1. The field of English which the students think is the most necessary to study



than expected think writing and speaking took priority over listening and reading. However, only four out of twenty students (25 percent), who have chosen speaking or writing, or both as the most necessary field to study, said they would still have private education on speaking and writing when they were told that only listening and reading sections are tested on English section of CSAT. As in Table 2, no one answered that they were very interested in taking speaking and writing courses, given the characteristics of English test of CSAT.

Figure 2. Students' interest in attending English speaking and writing institutes after being told about the way English section of CSAT is made



Of the six people (25 percent) who made negative opinions on taking speaking and writing classes, four students said they needed speaking or writing the most, and the remaining two said listening or reading. According to Table 4, subject no. 5, 11, and 17 responded they were not interested in learning speaking or reading outside the school, and subject no. 12, 23, and 24 said they are absolutely not interested in the courses. In any cases, all these six students can be said to be under

Table 4. Students who answered *not interested* or *not at all* for question no. 9

Subject	Answers to No. 5	Answers to No. 9
5	Listening, Speaking	Not interested
11	Listening	Not interested
12	Reading	Not at all
17	Writing	Not interested
23	Speaking	Not at all
24	Writing	Not at all

the influence of the English test of CSAT. First, the fact that students who answered that they needed to take speaking and writing classes answered negatively after learning the nature of the English section of CSAT means that they are strongly affected by the big test waiting in the future. Second, the students who considered listening and reading important made the situation in which speaking and writing are once again excluded due to the test.

4. Discussion and Limitation

Based on the results of the analysis, the three hypotheses presented above are examined in turn. First, hypothesis 1 was to raise the possibility of wider influence of washback. English section of CSAT, for instance, would influence not only the learning of students who are on the verge of the examination but also the preliminary test takers that are going to take the test at least one year later. Table 4 shows that first year students in middle school who have at least five years to take public examination were within the range of washback caused by the English test of CSAT. Students who were interested in learning speaking or writing said they actually would not pay for the private institutes that teach speaking or writing when they noticed that English section of CSAT mainly focused on measuring the students' listening and reading abilities. The result demonstrates that to some extent, learners who were far distanced from CSAT changed their thoughts about what they would learn and what they would not.

The number of students who were directly affected by the English language test of CSAT were six, accounting for a quarter of the total participants. In order to see whether the range and intensity of washback get bigger in proportion to the value of the test as in hypotheses 2 and 3, there should be more data on students of various grades. In this pilot study, it only collected data from first grade students in middle school.

As seen, it shows the influence of test on the potential test takers, but it is hardly enough to confirm the variation in the washback distance and intensity. Therefore, the study should be conducted on wider variety of students, and the more students from different grades participate, the more data and evidence will be presented to examine second and third hypotheses.

Finally, the survey was given to students whose school was located in Iksan-si, Jeollabuk-Do. According to the state agency, the North Jeolla province is one of the regions that has the eldest population with an average of forty-three in Mar. 2017, and for Iksan-si, the ratio of people aged under nineteen was around seventeen percent in Dec. 2017 which is one of the lowest in the country. Students learning in this area may not have as much opportunities to participate in private institutes than students living in Seoul, the capital of Korea. In fact, about sixty percent of successful applicants in Seoul National University came from the Seoul metropolitan area in 2017. On the other hand, only two percent were from North Jeolla. Therefore, if the data were collected on students from Seoul, or surrounding Incheon or Gyeonggi province, it will make more reliable results.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. How many private institutes are you attending currently?

- ① Zero ② One ③ Two ④ Three ⑤ Four or more

(When selecting “① Zero” in No. 1, please go directly to item No. 2)

1-1. If you were attending at least one private institute, how many of them are related to English?

- ① Zero ② One ③ Two ④ Three ⑤ Four or more

(When selecting “① Zero” in No. 1-1, please go directly to item No. 2)

1-2. If you were attending at least one private English institute, what kind of tests are those institutes preparing for? (Multiple selections available)

- ① School exams (e.g. midterms, finals etc.)

- ② English section of CSAT
- ③ English test as a Foreign Language (e.g. TOEIC, TOEFL, TEPS etc.)
- ④ Others

2. Do you think it is necessary to attend more English institutes other than English classes at school?

- ① Not necessary
- ② Necessary

3. What is the overall level of the current English classes in your school?

- ① Very easy
- ② Easy
- ③ Normal
- ④ Difficult
- ⑤ Very difficult

4. How do you think the overall level of English classes currently taught in school should change?

- ① Very easy
- ② Easy
- ③ Maintain
- ④ Difficult
- ⑤ Very difficult

5. What area of English do you think is the most necessary to study now?
(Multiple selections available)

- ① Listening
- ② Speaking
- ③ Writing
- ④ Reading

6. What is your English level?

	Very poor	Poor	Normal	Good	Very good
Listening					
Speaking					
Writing					
Reading					

7. Why do you think you are studying English? (Multiple selections available)

- ① To get good grades on English exams on school (e.g. midterms, finals etc.)
- ② To get good grades on English section of CSAT

- ③ To get scores on English test as a Foreign Language (e.g. TOEIC, TOEFL, TEPS etc.)
- ④ To use in daily lives
- ⑤ To use English in overseas travel
- ⑥ Others

8. Did you know that English section of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) has been converted from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced measurement since 2017?

- ① Yes ② No

(When selecting “② No” in No. 8, please go directly to item No. 9)

8-1. After you have noticed the change, were there any changes made on your English learning?

	Decreased	No change	Increased
Number of English institutes currently attending			-
Time spent on studying English			-
Importance of studying English			-

9. Considering the English section of the CSAT (Listening and Reading Comprehension questions. only), would you be interested in taking private education for English speaking and writing?

- ① Very interested ② Interested ③ Neutral ④ Not interested ⑤ Not at all