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Anticipating Washback in a Computer Based University Entrance Examination: Key Issues

Abstract

The way in examinations influence teaching and learning is called washback. This study examined the attitudes of 100 teachers towards the computerization of English section of the Spanish University Entrance Examination paying special attention to the nature and scope of these changes, and the constraints and benefits. A 10 item questionnaire and 2 sessions with a focus group were used to obtain the data. The paper concludes that although regarded as positive, this change would require additional resources for materials for the schools and the pertinent teacher training.

Short Paper

Washback is the effect that the processes and tasks of a foreign language test have in the teaching and learning towards that exam. The washback effect encompasses how teachers and students accommodate their learning skills, content and strategies to the test and how different teaching strategies can be used to enhance the teaching and learning processes in order to attain better scores. Wasback is a central element when changing a traditional pen-and-paper test into a computer based test. This is partly, because of the very same nature of the new context students need to adapt to new learning styles (Toperoff, 1997). As it has been reflected in current literature, teacher training in ICT depends on a number of variables such as the age, familiarity with computers, and many other influential issues (Drent & Meelissen, 2008). Some of these aspects could be observed as relevant in a research that addressed the importance of computerizing the test. In this project, data were collected through a survey and focus group interviews in a two month period. 100 teachers who are currently teaching for the English section of University Entrance Examination (Prueba de acceso a la Universidad, PAU) which is the largest high-stakes examination in Spain, attended a 30 minutes presentation about the new test form and were asked to suggest possible ways in which this test could change their daily teaching and the effects on their students' learning. A qualitative 10 item questionnaire was distributed and completed. After this first part of the research, a 20 teacher focus group was organized. This group took the 2007 PAU exam personally, and expressed their thoughts and concerns about the new format. This paper will show some of the relevant aspects of their responses.

From the traditional PAU to the IB PAU project
The PAU is considered the most important test for most high school leavers in Spain because its record can determine what studies the student will pursue in university. For instance, a prospective medical doctor student may be required to be in the top 20% of the test passers. That means that students and teachers usually emphasize the skills and strategies that are absolutely necessary to succeed in the test. This is to the point that in not very few occasions the official national curriculum is neglected, and some contents stressed instead. This effect is known as negative washback (Prodromou, 1985). Thus, teachers are eager to learn and even vary their teaching styles if the change is expected to have an impact in the students' final grade. However, this may result in students failing to achieve the competence level that is presupposed after their high school years (a B1 in European Framework).
According to García Laborda (2006) and García Laborda & Gimeno Sanz (in press) new test contexts (we refer context here in the same way as Weir, 2005) may vary the possibilities of

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developing new test items and tasks or even integrating new skills that have not been in use until now (for instance, speaking due to the high cost of delivering personalized oral exams for up to 10,000 students every year). According to the same authors and the results of the TSE research and experience, the IB PAU can integrate oral items that enhance the reliability of the final score in relation to the students' knowledge. In the case of including oral skills in the test, this would imply that teachers would have to strength its importance in the classroom and ultimately devote more time to speaking than they do now. Therefore, what is really important is to get to know if teachers would be reluctant to change their ways and how their classes would be.

How did teachers differ in their perceptions?
In order to order the issue, the researchers differentiated two main aspects in the teachers' responses: a) the implications for the test and its reliability (would the test measure the students' overall proficiency?), and b) the effect in each teacher as a knowledge and strategy facilitator or trainer (would the teacher have to change and learn to do new things), and, in that case, what the implications in language learning would be expected.

Teachers are expected to move students towards the mastery of a second language but if this wish would contradict with the importance of the score in the PAU, teachers need to decide whether score should or should not prevail over learning. Thus, many of the respondents acknowledged that they intentionally jeopardized language learning to favour strategy development towards the test. In fact that means, if constructing sentences using reported speech are likely to be included in the test, should the students learn the strategies and mechanics of sentence building or understand when and how to use reported speech. While the first possibility seems more profitable, the second seems worthier for the student's future. In fact, IB PAU would challenge this position because new types of items would be included both in the language use and also writing or speaking. Given the inclusion of similar tasks across several skills, most respondents answered the current point of view that score prevails over learning (although, according to Rothman, & Iverson, 2007] and Krashen's [1987] even controlled form based instruction should lead to learning) but this would necessarily change and, as a consequence, students would really have to internalize the foreign language structures incurring in better learning and diminishing their anxiety towards the test and the use of technology. This idea was also strengthened by the focus groups who acknowledged that the test would greatly benefit from the inclusion of new skills. In relation to the classroom changes, teachers recognised that major changes would be necessary and new classroom schema would be necessary. Most of them also recognised that it could be difficult to change or adapt to the new situation. They also believed that that although most schools have some hardware equipment, it would need to be updated but this technological improvement would result in better learning. Teachers who acknowledged more computer literacy also showed more prone to undertake the necessary changes in order to benefit their student's learning (Saif, 2006).

Findings and conclusions
According to the analysis of the responses obtained in the research, some suggestions seem advisable if a change into a computer based test is to be done in a near future:

* The Inclusion of all oral and written skills will benefit both language and strategic learning,
* Identifying and including certain language aspects in the test will facilitate and organise the appropriate training for the teachers,
* The inclusion of new computer skills will benefit in language learning but also in means that are not currently associated to language learning in high school such as typing or computer usage,
* Emphasize items that may represent language proficiency or communicative competence may certainly overcome the limitations of paying special interest to just the ability to transform the language or strategic competence to cope with the different items.

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Overall, the changes were considered positively towards foreign language learning and testing but further research in some aspects is still necessary.

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Keywords

Testing, washback, classroom practice, qualitative, teachers

Bio Data

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