

THE WASHBACK IMPACTS OF CONTINUATION-TASK
WRITING IN CHINA'S NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION
ON HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHING

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Laura E Roberts, PhD

The examination is a significant approach to evaluate the language teaching and learning. The washback effect of examination has a great impact on teaching and learning process. The continuation-task writing is a new writing requirement in China's National College Entrance Examination, and research of this writing showed its effectiveness in improving the second language learning. This paper focused on the washback of continuation-task writing. Related literature of washback was reviewed, including definition, types of washback and 15 hypotheses. Then, review of literature concerning continuation-task writing was conducted. The findings revealed that both positive and negative washback of continuation-task writing exist, and suggestions for teachers, government, and test designer were provided to help increase the positive washback effects and reduce the negative ones.

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Chapter I

Introduction

For the English examination paper of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), Provincial Bureaus of Education are allowed to design their own examination questions in terms of difficulties and types of questions. In other word, students from different provinces in the Chinese mainland may have different questions on their papers. This means that each province in China is allowed to make NCEE requirements of their own, and this reason is why continuation-task writing was introduced to some of the provinces for experiment and afterward was applied in the Chinese mainland as a whole. Continuation-task writing was first introduced in the NCEE in 2016 in Zhejiang Province. Before that, most of the types of writing were practical writing: letter of invitation, application, recommendation, apology, written proposal, speech draft, etc. These writings were not too difficult for students, because teachers can teach some templates of each practical writings. Students only need to replace words to the template, and they can have a presentable practical writing submission for their life-changing examination. The problem with practical writing was that most of the students could achieve a high quality of writing with the help of the template which had been provided by their teachers. Therefore, the tests cannot help universities to distinguish students' English writing proficiency effectively, and "quick" writing templates fail to develop students' ability and interests in writing. In 2020, the national Bureau of Education adopted continuation-task writing as one of the writing requirements, and practical writings were maintained. This new type of writing is challenging for not only test-takers but also English teachers in China. According to Wang and Qi (2013), the challenge mainly comes

from the lack of continuation-task writing in NCEE for study, practice, and training. In other word, more investigations concerning relevant aspects of continuation-task writing are needed to provide constructive suggestions for both teachers and students.

The impact of language testing on teaching and learning is referred to washback (Hughes, 1989). This kind of impact can positively or negatively affect language teaching and learning at different levels. Against the background of examination-oriented education system in China, it is a common consensus that examinations or tests are of significant importance for Chinese students, who need to attend all kinds of examinations as they start learning at schools. The impact of language testing on teaching and learning is referred to washback (Hughes, 1989). This kind of impact can be positively or negatively to language teaching and learning at different levels. Against the background of examination-oriented education system in China, it is a common consensus that examinations or tests are of significant importance for Chinese students, who need to attend all kinds of examinations as they start learning at schools. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and education managers to grasp the washback effects in order to understand the existing problems within high school English writing teaching and learning practice more clearly through reduction of negative washback effects and promotion of positive washback effect, and even adjust current curriculum standards and requirements to assist cultivate students' language and communication skills and help them lay a better foundation to achieve higher proficiency of English.

Statement of the Problem

Continuation-task writing is new type of writing for high school students and teachers. Therefore, there is a need to study the impacts of such writing on teaching and learning.

Research questions are addressed as follows:

1. What are the impacts of continuation-task writing on teaching?
2. What are the suggestions for Chinese English teachers according to these impacts?

Definition of Terms

Continuation-Task Writing: a method of writing through reading comprehension, which erases part of an English original reading material, and requires the writer to complete the rest part of the article according to the theme, character images, ideas, and styles of the original text on the basis of reading the previous text (Wang, 2012).

Washback: “the impact of language testing on teaching and learning, including both positive and negative effects.” (Hughes, 1989, p. 1)

Purpose of the Study

Washback is a specific term, which has been widely applied in the field of applied linguistics, especially for language testing, teaching, and learning. The washback of continuation-task writing is a significant indicator whether the purpose of writing test has been realized for future teaching and learning. Therefore, this research is made to explore the specific washback effects of continuation-task writing on English writing teaching and learning in a senior high school in China. Afterwards, certain practical suggestions will be put forward to improve the positive washback effects and reduce the negative ones.

Significance of the Study

Given the importance of washback to language testing, considerable scholars and experts have made relevant research concerning washback effects of other examinations. Few of them focuses on washback effects of NCEE. Therefore, this research can further the

implications for washback study in terms of NCEE. In addition, the findings are hoped to provide enlightenment for English teaching and learning in China.

Methodology

The research method for this research is literature review. First, I will present the relevant study concerning the washback effect. Then, I will illustrate the investigations of continuation-task. Sources for this study are from two search engines both in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (www.cnki.net) and U.S., including the Karmann Library of the University of Wisconsin Platteville (www.uwplatt.edu/department/karmann-library) and Google Scholar (scholar.google.com). The key words that I researched for were “washback” and “continuation-task writing.” Because there are few studies on continuation-task writing in U.S., available sources mainly come from the CNKI. The definition, classification and working mechanism of washback, as well as sources concerning continuation-task writing will be reviewed for conclusion on improvement of positive washback and reduction of negative washback.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

This chapter includes two main sections to review related literature. It starts with the introduction of washback including definitions, previous study of washback, classification and 15 hypotheses. Then, a general introduction is provided concerning the continuation-task writing, a new kind of writing approach in China. It ends with review of studies of continuation-task writing in China.

Washback

1. Definition of Washback

Specific and widely applied in the field of linguistics as washback is, it can seldom be found in the English dictionaries. Therefore, numerous linguistics and scholars have provided their own definition of washback. Although the emphasis of these definitions lies in different aspects, washback generally refers to impact of tests on teaching process and learning process. The different definitions are reviewed as follows.

There are two existing words “washback” and “backwash,” which are widely applied in the literature of linguistics. They are two synonyms used in different fields according to Wall (1997). “Washback” is applied more extensively, compared to the “backwash”, which is usually used in language education and testing. These two terms are considered as the same in this paper.

At the starting age of development of washback study, scholars focused only on the activities within the classroom in terms of teachers and students. One of the influential definitions was brought up by Buck (1988), who believes that test apparently plays an

important role in adjusting and modifying classroom activities for both teachers, who are measured by the pass rates, and students, whose futures are largely influenced by test.

Therefore, washback is a natural tendency of teachers and students. Hughes (1989, p. 1) notes that the washback is “the impact of language testing on teaching and learning, including both positive and negative effects,” which is most accepted definition and classification by present researchers.

During 1990s, the definition of washback was not only concerning teaching and learning process but considered from a boarder perspective of educational system and even the society as a whole.

Cheng (1997) states that washback refers to active direction and function of curriculum which change in accordance with the adjustment and/or change of public examinations.

Hamp-Lyons (1997) states again that washback refers not only those influence on teaching and learning, but also impact on the field of education and society.

Clapham and McNamara (2000) use “test washback” to refer to the effect of test on teaching and learning, and use “test impact” to demonstrate the more extensive effect of the test on the community.

During 2000s, the research mainly focused on the washback of specific tests instead of providing definitions of washback. Clapham and McNamara (2000) use “test washback” to refer to the effect of test on teaching and learning, and use “test impact” to demonstrate the more extensive effect of the test on the community.

In summary, linguistic scholars have determined that washback is the impact of examinations on teaching and learning, and, more extensively, the community and society.

2. Previous Study on Washback

There are three approaches which were applied by the scholars to the study on washback effects—classroom observation, survey, and experiment.

Wall and Alderson (1993) evaluated the impact of the new O-level test in Sri Lanka on teaching and learning. A sample of 38 schools across the nation were the subject for data collection. The influence of the exam on teaching and learning did not have the anticipated impact in accordance with the comparison of the teaching environment before and after the test. The test contributes to modify the material that teachers taught, but it did not alter the way they taught it. The study also discovered that classroom observation was a useful tool for testing washback, which could determine whether teachers had altered their teaching strategies or whether the test had accomplished its intended objective of promoting educational reform.

To evaluate the washback impact of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation programs, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) recruited two teachers' classes to carry out an empirical study involving interviews and in-class observations. As a consequence of their empirical analysis, they conclude that TOEFL tests have a washback effect on what and how teachers teach, while the degree and nature of the washback vary from teacher to teacher.

In the same year, Watanabe (1996) selected two teachers' classes from a preparation school to participate in an empirical study involving interviews and classroom observations in order to examine the washback impact of Japan's college entrance examination on teaching. He concludes from the study that examinations do, in fact, have an impact on all teachers, but

this influence differs from individuals in many aspects, such as academic background, teaching experience, personal values.

Beside the classroom observation, survey and questionnaire are also applied by many scholars to obtain teachers' and students' perceptions towards the examination.

Hughes (1988) investigated the impact of English proficiency testing on teaching at Strait University in Istanbul. The education management department intended to use the newly developed new English exam and Michigan English proficiency test to improve the students' enthusiasm to learn English, since the level of their proficiency in the language was declining in that time. The study discovered that pupils' English proficiency had significantly increased due to the two examinations. This demonstrated that the Michigan English Proficiency Test and the New English Test both had the anticipated favorable washback effects on teaching and learning.

Jin (2000) explored the value of taking the college oral English test as well as the washback effects on students. The findings indicated that most educators and learners well recognized the college oral English test. The introduction of this exam had a beneficial washback effect on college English instruction, particularly spoken English instruction.

Han, Dai, and Yang (2004) explored and studied a number of issues in the College English Test (CET), including the design of the test questions, the interpretation of the outcomes, and the washback effect on teaching. The study revealed that CET-4 and CET-6 had some negative effects on college English instruction, for example, the English proficiency of students who passed the examination did not correspond to their real language proficiency while applying English in real life.

Gu and Xiao (2013) investigated 284 non-English major students and their strategies applied in test. The result reveals that during the test, students tended to pay more attention to how to take the tests, that is, achieve higher scores, than how to apply language learning strategies they learned before.

Experiments were utilized by the researchers to test the effectiveness of factors related to washback effect.

In order to illustrate his washback model, Saif (2001) conducted an experiment involving three groups of participants with various language proficiency levels and learning needs. The results were quite valid, and if a test is designed in accordance with his model, it may be utilized to enhance positive washback. It was also suggested that a number of factors that are unrelated to the tests are essential to improve beneficial washback.

Based on previous research, Hay and Read (2004) investigated the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) English test's washback impact. In two IELTS classes (a preparation class and a course class), two teachers and 17 students were observed. They discovered that there were significant variations in the washback effects of the IELTS test on the two classes through the methods of questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, interviews, pre-tests, and post-tests. The IELTS test preparation class's teaching content was limited to IELTS test taking methods and strategies, whereas the course's teaching content was richer and more diverse. While the course class was student-centered, with rich methods and a livelier classroom environment, the preparation class's teaching methods were simple and the environment was dull. The findings indicated that the main causes of two differences were different teaching approaches and objectives.

3. Positive Washback and Negative Washback

Washback is commonly regarded as the effect of testing on language teaching and learning that can be classified into positive washback and negative washback. The focus of present empirical studies concerning the washback vary greatly. In other words, some researchers lay emphasis on the positive washback, while others attach great significance to the negative washback.

Heaton (2000) and Hughes (1989) states whether the washback effect is positive or negative highly is up to the influence of tests on the behaviors of participants in the classroom. In other words, a test is thought to have positive or beneficial effect if it facilitates the teaching and learning process. On the contrary, if a test holds back or hinders teaching and learning process, its washback will be considered harmful and negative.

In terms of positive washback, Bailey (1996) argued that tests with positive washback effect had functions to reflect and encourage good classroom practice. Bailey (1999) also summarizes the positive effect which includes but is not limited to the following aspects:

1. Improvement of teaching and learning.
2. Enhanced motivation for teaching and learning.
3. Uniformity of methodology and/or content across school.
4. Increased available time for other exploration or practice experience.

Negative washback, as the opposite side of positive washback, is considered harmful and detrimental effect, and can hold back and hinder teaching and learning practice.

According to Alderson and Wall (1993), negative washback might lead teachers to narrow the curriculum and pay less attention to the skills which are not involved in the tests. For

instance, if speaking is not tested or includes a memorized speech, teachers and students may choose not to practice speaking in classroom or spend time in try to memorize the speech instead of developing their speaking skills, which would be useful in real life. Prodrumou (1995) holds the view that negative washback on teaching and learning might fail the new teaching approaches to be adopted and rooted in classes. Based on the previous studies, Bailey (1999) also provides the negative effect which includes but is not limited to the following aspects:

1. Narrowing of the curriculum.
2. Lost instructional time.
3. Ignoring the skills which need complex thinking or problem-solving ability.
4. Pollution of the test, leaning to the emergence of score-oriented education.

In summary, there are both positive and negative effect of washback form the examinations. Positive washback improves the teaching and learning and increases learning motivation. On the contrary, negative washback leads to less attention to specific skills and narrowed curriculum.

4. Alderson and Wall's Hypotheses

Along with the increasing interest and development in washback, a large number of researchers have conducted studies for further investigations of working mechanism of washback and proposed many hypotheses, among which Alderson and Wall's hypotheses is the most influential and representative. Most of analysis of washback refers to or is based on these hypotheses.

Alderson and Wall (1993) proposed 15 hypotheses in an article named *Does washback*

exit?, which are considered highly valuable and play a significant role in previous studies related to washback. These are listed as follows:

1. Teaching will be affected by tests.
2. Learning will be affected by tests.
3. Teaching content will be affected by tests.
4. Teaching methods will be affected by tests.
5. Learning content will be affected by tests.
6. Learning methods will be affected by tests.
7. Rate and sequence of teaching will be affected by tests.
8. Rate and sequence of learning will be affected by tests.
9. Degree and depth of teaching will be influenced by tests.
10. Degree and depth of learning will be influenced by tests.
11. Attitudes to the content, methods etc., of teaching and learning will be influenced by tests.
12. Tests having significant consequences will have washback.
13. Tests which do not have significant consequences will have no washback.
14. All learners and teachers will be influenced by tests.
15. Some learners and some teachers will be influenced by tests, but not for others.

The 15 hypotheses can be generally divided into three parts: Hypotheses 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 11 are concerned about the impact of tests on teachers and teaching practices, including teaching facts of content, methods and attitudes. The second part consists of Hypotheses 2, 5, 6, 8, and 10, which focus on the washback of tests on learners and learning process, covering

content, attitudes, strategies, degree and depth of learning. The last four hypotheses consist of the third part, centering on the strength and scope of washback. The last part ranges from significance of tests to features of individuals. From the Alderson and Wall's hypotheses, the conclusion can be drawn that washback is related not only to the teachers and students but also the environment. Besides, the type and amount of washback on some teachers and students varies from other teachers and students.

Based on the 15 hypotheses of Alderson and Wall, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) conducted further empirical research concerning the washback effect in the context of USA Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) learning through class observation. Their findings reveal that the production of washback requires a test as well as other factors, such as teaching insight and teaching style. In short, Alderson and Wall's hypotheses mainly focus on the two aspects of teaching and learning to study washback.

Continuation-Task Writing

The continuation-task writing is a new method of English writing instruction, which is introduced and advocated by professor Chuming Wang (2012) after conducting several theoretical and empirical studies and examining many hypotheses. Wang also points out that this kind of writing is a combination of language comprehension and production, which plays a significant role in improving students' foreign language learning. Later on, more and more Chinese researchers followed the pace to conduct relevant studies concerning continuation-task writing. It was first adopted in National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) by Zhejiang province in 2016, and it is adopted in NCEE nationwide.

1. Characteristics of Continuation-Task Writing

The continuation-task writing is a new type of writing approach in China, requiring test-takers to complete a story which includes roughly 600 to 1000 words in total (the given incomplete story is roughly 350 to 500 words for reading) with its ending removed. Students are required to read the incomplete story twice to have a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding, then start continuing the story to make it into a whole story logically and coherently.

This is unlike the traditional writing task which can simply be achieved through drills that most Chinese English teachers adopt in classroom. Instead, it is an interactive, creative one with the story plots, relationships and characteristics of characters, and their life experience taken into consideration to continue the thought and direction of the story. Therefore, continuation-task is considered an effective method to facilitate learners' English writing and learning in classroom, because it efficiently integrates both input and output of language learning and teaching. Wang (2011) developed an input-output hypothesis, in which an attracting, relevant, adequate and comprehensive input is the fundamental premise for language acquisition. In addition, output also is as significance as input for second language acquisition (SLA), for it facilitates students' awareness of their deficiency in language learning and triggers them to make up the deficiency. Besides, output also helps to identify how well the target language is acquired. In acquiring the language, the better integration between language comprehension and language production, the higher efficiency of language learning will be. However, the relationship between the comprehension and production is always asymmetric, which means what a student can acquire from the teaching practice is not always equivalent with what this student can produce (Wang, 2011 & Wang, 2014). In order

to solve this asymmetry, Wang (2011) put forward the “alignment”, which refers to a process in which test-takers apply their language knowledge to mental presentations based on their daily life experience, and he thinks alignment is the solution to improve the integrating progress, whose degree highly depends on the strength of alignment.

2. Relevant Studies on Continuation-Task Writing

Since the continuation-task writing is a relatively new writing approach, there is a small number of scholars conducting research concerning the continuation-task writing at present, and there is seldom research on continuation-task writing outside of China.

Quite a few empirical studies are conducted by Chinese scholars. One study on the validity and credibility of the continuation-task writing was conducted by Wang and Qi (2013), whose result revealed that such writing can improve learners’ both reading and writing abilities effectively. This study also provided analysis that continuation-task writing helps distinguish students’ ability in terms of the reading and writing comprehension.

Later on, Jiang and Chen (2015) examine that the continuation-task writing could exert great impact on the language complexity and flexibility. In this study, they pointed out that there are two methods to improve English proficiency through creation and imitation in China—the first one is to communicate with native speakers, and the other one is through continuation-task writing, which is more feasible in Chinese classrooms lacking opportunity for listening and speaking practice.

After this new writing approach was proposed, Wang (2016) advocates that creating content and imitating language are only way to strike the balance between comprehension and production. Besides, seven aspects of improving second language learning in

continuation-task writing were presented in this study, compared to the traditional writing.

First, the given context arouses learners' willingness to communicate, thus, activate the use of language. Second, the given context scaffolds the use of language, including both increase of understanding and limitation of content and style that the learners can use. Third, the learners can use the language structure and style used in the given context to decrease the mistakes in their writing. Fourth, continuation-task writing helps reduce the interference from the first language. Fifth, discourse coherence can be improved. Sixth, learners can notice the gap between language proficiency of given context and theirs. Seventh, the use of language in a context is more practical, compared to practicing just one single word or sentence. These factors showed the potential of continuation-task writing in improving the second language learning.

Summary

To sum up, scholars have provided the definition of washback, and investigated the working mechanism of this effect in some specific types of tests. In these tests, both positive and negative washback effect are revealed. Additionally, continuation-task writing is new type of writing in the Chinese NCEE, which was introduced and studied by numerous Chinese scholars. This kind of writing is proven to be an effective integration of both input and output of English in Chinese classroom teaching and learning practice.

Chapter III

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, previous studies on washback effect achieved fruitful results in some specific tests, which mostly focused on the existence of washback, classification of washback, working mechanisms of washback, and factors influencing washback in terms of research topics and subjects. Based on the literature reviewed above, it is not difficult to see that examinations have washback effect on foreign languages instruction and acquisition. The influence mainly lies in the teaching contents and teaching approaches and time. Besides, continuation-task writing, as a new testing method in writing part, has many strengths in improving the proficiency level of foreign languages, for it requires both input and output of the target language. However, there is still negative washback that needs to be avoided in practice of teaching and learning.

In the view of above studies, some practical suggestions and recommendations are presented as follows. First of all, during the process of writing instruction, students' competence of thinking, imagining and creating should be brought to the forefront. Meanwhile, more time should be spent in assisting students to deepen their understanding of the whole text, such as analysis of the whole story in details and relationship of characters in the original texts. Then, teaching and reading materials should be made full use of and analyzed, since continuation-task writing demands students to creating new content based on the original text. In addition, comprehensive assessment system should be established in order to reduce the negative washback of continuation-task writing on English teaching, thereby developing English teaching in a healthy and lasting way. Moreover, teachers should

continue to update and enhance the professional skills in terms of teaching this kind of writing, and at the same time, more opportunities and support of further study and development should be provided by the government. Last but not least, continuation-task writing designing should conform to the real situation and focus on students' communicative competence, which means the authenticity of language, that is, applying language in real life, should be ensured.

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