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Liyong Cheng

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to my parents who have, to their best knowledge and ability, encouraged me to reach the highest level of education possible throughout my life, for which I am greatly indebted to them.

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## Series Editors' note

It is now commonplace to regard validity as a unitary concept with theory based, content and criterion related validation processes all having a part to play in contributing evidence in respect of the interpretation of test scores. High stakes test providers such as Cambridge ESOL are also concerned with the ethical dimension of testing in terms of the impact of a test on individuals and society and place equal emphasis on social values and social consequences in any considerations of the validity of test scores.

Test impact is concerned with the influence of a test on general educational processes and on the individuals who are affected by the test results. It is recognized that examination boards have a major impact on educational processes and on society in general because their examinations often have widespread recognition and 'cash in' value. Washback is an important element of test impact. While impact may occur at a 'macro' or social and institutional level, washback occurs at the 'micro' level of the individual participant (primarily teachers and students).

There is now a clear consensus on the need for a concern with, if not agreement on, the effects of what has been termed 'washback/backwash'. Washback is considered a 'neutral' term (which may refer to both (intended) positive or beneficial effects and to (unintended) harmful or negative effects and is broadly defined as the effect of a test on teaching and often also on learning. It has been associated with effects on teachers, learners, parents, administrators, textbook writers, classroom practice, educational practices and beliefs and curricula although the ultimate effects on learning outcomes should perhaps be the primary concern.

Given that language teachers have to equip students with the skills that tests are intended to provide information about, it seems likely the closer the relationship between the test and the teaching that precedes it, the more the test is likely to have washback on both staff and students. Some authors caution that although the test may influence the content of teaching this may not be uniformly positive and more critically tests may have little impact on methodology, how teachers teach. Liying Cheng found such a situation following the exam reforms in Hong Kong but her research clearly indicates that if adequate training for teaching the new test is not provided we should hardly find it surprising that old methodologies persist. The same is true in the Sri Lankan washback study described by Wall to be published in a later

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volume in this series where additionally a debilitating civil war was hardly conducive to change.

This volume looks at the impact of the 1996 Hong Kong Certificate of Education in English (HKCEE), a high stakes public examination, on the classroom teaching of English in Hong Kong secondary schools. Liyong Cheng investigates the effects from the decision-making level of the Education Department (ED), the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC), and the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA), down to the classroom levels of teaching and learning, with reference to aspects of teachers' attitudes, teaching content, and classroom interaction.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What strategies did the HKEA use to implement the examination change?
- (2) What was the nature and scope of the washback effect on teachers' and students' perceptions of aspects of teaching towards the new examination?
- (3) What was the nature and scope of the washback effect on teachers' behaviours as a result of the new examination in relation to:
  - (a) Teachers' medium of instruction, teacher talk, teaching activities,
  - (b) Teaching materials used in teaching, aspects of lesson planning,
  - (c) Assessment and evaluation in relation to their teaching.

Despite widespread lip service to the mantra of 'washback' in the international testing community, until recently only a limited number of research studies have been undertaken to study the effects of high stakes language tests on teaching and learning and even fewer were based on samples as adequate as the one employed in this study in Hong Kong.

An important strength of Liyong Cheng's work is the use she made of both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate these effects. A balanced combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods is employed to explore the meaning of change in the Hong Kong context as a result of the new examination. Phase I utilized interviews, observation, and initial surveys of teachers and students. Phase II involved two parallel survey studies of teachers and students. The major research methods used in Phase III were classroom observations and follow-up interviews. The triangulation of the methodology (multi-method methodology) and inclusion of comparable student and teacher data is of interest to all those contemplating researching in this area.

The overt aim of the HKEA, in introducing the examination, was to bring about positive washback effects on teaching and learning in schools. However, the study shows the washback effect of the new examination on

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classroom methodology to be limited in many respects although the content of lessons shows marked change. Of particular interest is the identification of washback intensity (potential areas in teaching and learning that experience more washback effects than others within the given context of the study).

Two forthcoming volumes in this series on washback by Wall on the O level English examination in Sri Lanka and Green on IELTS should further enrich our understanding of this under-researched area of validity and help further ground the methodologies for investigating it.

Cyril Weir  
Michael Milanovic  
2004