

Washback – the Effect of Assessment on ESOL Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated evidence of positive and negative washback (the influence of tests or examinations on the teaching and learning leading up to the assessment) in Year 11 ESOL classes following the implementation of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2002. Previously, ESOL teachers had used a range of programmes and assessment tools for Year 11 students. In 2002, ESOL teachers were faced with a smorgasbord of achievement and unit standards from a range of possible fields. Choosing appropriate standards proved to be a real challenge in the absence of ESOL curriculum guidelines, with the potential danger of programmes becoming assessment driven. Most departments offered a course that gave students the required eight credits to meet the level 1 literacy requirement from a range of English or Communication Skills standards. This was supplemented with ESOL unit standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE WASHBACK EFFECT

The washback or backwash effect has been generally defined as the effect of assessment on teaching and learning. This effect can be either positive or negative. According to Bachman (1990), positive washback occurs when the assessment used reflects the skills and content taught in the classroom. However, in many cases and particularly in high stakes testing, the curriculum is driven by the assessment leading to negative washback.

Luke Prodromou (1993) points out in his overview of the washback effect that the issue has not been fully explored in second language research in spite of playing such a dominant role in classrooms. He believes that many assumptions about washback are simplistic and untested with little observation to back them up. This is confirmed by Alderson and Wall (1991) who have conducted extensive research into the area. They argue convincingly that washback is a far more complex issue than simply the effect of testing on teaching. They believe that there is not an automatic relationship between tests and their impact. Rather, specific areas such as teaching content and methodology, teacher competence, assessment methods and resources available need to be investigated as well as the extent of the impact and whether or not it is positive or negative. Their findings also include the potential effect of washback on the whole education system.

Washback is also described in the literature as overt or covert. According to Prodromou (1995, p.14), overt washback is usually negative and seen in the explicit use of examination papers or examples from textbooks that emphasise the skills used in exams. As a result, reading and writing are given more emphasis than speaking and listening. He sees the implicit consequences of covert washback as more of an

underlying, unconscious process stemming from assumptions about how students learn. He likens it to “teaching a textbook as if it were a textbook” (1995, p.15).

McNamara (2000) raises the possibility of the type of assessment being an important factor. He sees performance assessments that require integrated content and skills as having more positive washback than discrete item testing which often stifles communicative teaching approaches. Other research on the effect of the introduction of outcomes based assessment in Australia, tends to support this stance. Brindley (1998, p. 52) talks of the dominating effect of assessment on teaching and learning to the point where the standards “assume the status of a covert curriculum, thus forcing teachers to teach to the test.” McKay (2000) further discusses the effects of the format of standards that consist of a checklist of outcomes listed vertically. She believes that this encourages teachers to focus on individual descriptors rather than engage students in an integrated, cyclical learning approach.

However, positive washback effects have also been noted. In England, Rea-Dickens and Gardner (2000), (cited in McKay 2000, p. 207)), found that ESL standards were “central to legitimizing the English as an Additional Language work in schools.” Brindley (1998, p.52) comments on students receiving diagnostic feedback on the success of their learning because of explicit performance criteria.

“There is a direct link between attainment targets, course objectives and learning activities. Therefore assessment is closely integrated with instruction.”

Prodromou (1995, p.21) offers a solution for transforming negative washback into positive by shifting to a learner centred approach with an emphasis on the language process rather than “preoccupation with the end-product.”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research aimed initially to give an overview of the effect of standards based assessment on programme planning and teaching. This was followed by a more specific focus on changes in teacher practice and the effect on the NESB students.

Specific questions this research aimed to answer were:

- Has the introduction of NCEA changed the focus for ESOL teachers with regard to programme planning and teaching?
- What are some of the benefits/disadvantages teachers have observed from changing to standards based assessment?
- What changes are teachers aiming to make as a result of their experiences in the first year of implementation?
- What has been the effect of the introduction of standards based assessment on the NESB learner?

THE PARTICIPANTS

For most of the ESOL teachers this was their first experience of standards based assessment. Only four of the respondents (all from South Auckland schools) were familiar with unit standards. The teachers represented a variety of types of schools including state, private and integrated. They had a range of student NESB numbers – some had very few students while others had three classes. The composition of classes was also an important factor - eg whether there was a majority of international, refugee or migrant students in the class.

The student interviewed was a seventeen-year-old Korean boy who arrived as an international student in June 2001. He began attending a local secondary school in July and was initially placed in the 'Foundation Course for International students'. In 2002, he was placed in the top Year 11 ESOL class and was doing four mainstream subjects. Since arriving in New Zealand he has been granted permanent residency. His experience of learning English before coming to New Zealand was with Korean teachers of English who, in his opinion, were not good at speaking because they had not mixed with native speakers. They were better at writing, grammar and reading so that was the focus of the English lessons. He described learning lots of grammar points from the English textbook. His ESOL teacher described him as a well-motivated student who thinks deeply about issues. He was working at an intermediate level and had already passed all the year's unit standards. In the final ESOL exam he gained first place in his class.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

A written questionnaire was distributed to ESOL teachers in the Auckland/Northland area. This included sets of open and closed questions as well as ranked option questions and concluded with an option to comment on any uncovered issues. One NESB student was also interviewed using audio recording. The scope of the interview was deliberately broad and initially unstructured in order to provide a framework for the participant to tell his own story and express his understanding of NCEA in his own words unprompted by the interviewer. Once he had finished answering the first general question a series of questions was asked to find out the participant's perceptions of the following:

- NCEA;
- effect on motivation of NCEA;
- a balanced teaching programme;
- the effect of the literacy requirement;
- the assessment load;
- engagement in the learning process;
- achievements passing unit standards so far.

Some relevant questions also emerged from the interaction process. During the interview I took brief notes of impressions gained from body language, particularly when points or feelings were emphasized by gestures. The complete interview took twenty minutes.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method of data analysis was found to be best suited to my purpose of investigating a broad focus of inquiry - the effect of NCEA ESOL unit standards. I also found the procedural detail that Lincoln and Guba (1985) added to the steps, a useful tool.

Data analysis was an on-going activity throughout the investigative process. The initial analysis occurred when collating questionnaires and during the student interview. Impressions, unexpected patterns, emerging and new insights were noted on a large sheet of paper as recurring concepts, themes, phrases and words during the transcription process.

The next step was to use a process described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as unitizing data. The purpose was to identify smaller units of meaning that would later serve as the basis for defining larger categories. The criterion used was that each unit of meaning had to be independently understood. Following this, open coding was used as similar units of meaning (now on cards) were grouped together and a category assigned. This was a word or phrase chosen from earlier noted recurring themes and concepts. Data cards that looked as though they would fit into the provisional coding category were grouped. As this procedure progressed, initial categories were renamed or merged and relationships between data noted. It soon became evident that some data cards fitted more than one category.

In order to further refine categories I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion of writing a rule for inclusion into categories as a propositional statement. This was inductively derived by looking at the characteristics of a group and summarising the meaning contained as a statement. Data cards that did not fit were re-categorised. Category codes were then assigned to each card. The final stage was to review categories for overlap and to present relationships and patterns in a visual form.

RESULTS

It is clear that for ESOL teachers unit standards have been the driving focus in programme planning and teaching practice in this first year of NCEA. The main themes that emerged showed evidence of both positive and negative washback. Imbalance of programme focus, assessment overload and professional confusion were evidence of negative washback, whereas motivation, recognition of ESOL and more focused students emerged as features of positive washback.

Imbalance of programme focus

The need for students to pass eight literacy credits at level 1 dominated the choice of standards and programme focus. Teachers chose literacy standards that looked manageable and geared the whole year to getting their students through whether they were at that level or not. This led to an overall emphasis on writing to the detriment of the other skills. Eighty five percent said that their teaching focus had changed markedly this year and the following comments were typical:

*The programme has to fit around assessment requirements.
My programme is assessment driven rather than meeting the students' needs.
Supporting language across the curriculum died this year.*

Teachers reflected on whether their students were learning relevant skills and expressed concern that they were rote-learning to pass assessments.

Assessment overload

The heavy emphasis on assessment was evident in comments such as hectic, never-ending, unmanageable and total overload to describe workload issues. In particular the resubmission/reassessment process took up valuable teaching time and caused good lesson planning to suffer. Teachers commented on a less flexible way of teaching and made the following comments:

*The fun has gone out of teaching.
I'm on edge.
I'm always thinking how can I help my students' achieve.*

Those schools that found the workload easier assessed a similar number of standards but their school policy allowed for few or no reassessment opportunities.

Professional confusion

A high level of confusion was commented on in a range of areas. Teachers talked of a lack of access to clear information and constant changes made, particularly in resubmission/reassessment practices. The lack of resourcing in the implementation of ESOL unit standards meant that there were few sample activities and no exemplars. This caused uncertainty in gauging the level expected by a standard and confusion in assessment practices. Questionnaires revealed that many teachers were still unaware that ESOL unit standards belonged to the NCEA framework. Comments included the following:

*I am still coming to grips with all the changes.
NZQA keeps making changes and we hear about them from others.
I don't know how I'm supposed to judge the level.*

Motivation

On the positive side, the ability to gain credits in ESOL classes was perceived as a great motivating factor for students. Many students who would normally not achieve in School Certificate English are now able to get credits for NCEA and have a sense of achievement and purpose.

My students attend school more regularly now because they realise they have to work hard right through the year.

Recognition of ESOL

In many schools ESOL is now recognised as a subject, raising its status and adding to its value for students who, according to the teachers:

now feel part of the wider school.

Other comments included:

For the first time I have been able to put ESOL in option lines on the school timetable.

ESOL has greater validity now – students perceive it as worthwhile.

Focus

Many commented on a tighter focus in ESOL departments with more consistency in programme planning and a better understanding of assessment. They felt that students were more focussed on clearly defined tasks.

The results thus far examined the issue from the perspective of the teacher. Boud (1995) comments that student perceptions are more important to learning than the reality of the assessment. He adds that these perceptions cannot be assumed but must be sought from the learners themselves. Many themes similar to those talked about by the teachers such as motivation, workload and imbalance, emerged from an in-depth interview with a Year 11 student. Those that were different involved the aspect of risk and the lack of integration in ESOL programmes.

The risk factor

The concept of unit standards being less risky than achievement standards was an unexpected finding. Because there is only a pass/fail with unit standards it was perceived as easier to satisfy yourself and your parents. This was in contrast to achievement standards that were seen as divisive, separating students into three groups and resulting in students feeling depressed if they just got 'achieved'. The number of credits for each part of a unit standard was seen as positive in allowing students to spread the risk. Similarly the ability to have another chance through the resubmission/reassessment process was seen as positive. This factor was closely linked to motivation to attend school regularly because if a re-sit was missed, another chance was not given.

Lack of integration

A large number of effects were categorised under the code 'lack of integration', a code chosen to describe the effect of unrelated unit standards and feelings of confusion and uncertainty. The student made the following comment when asked what was most difficult about unit standards.

...we have huge parts... about 5 or 4 and it's not I think... they are not related.

The emphasis was seen to be always on writing even when the focus of the unit standard was on another skill.

... in unit standard they're concerned to write something... because we have interview stuff an reading stuff, listening stuff yep but we have to write something before we have interview an we have to write something after reading.. so we do lots of writing.

IMPLICATIONS

One of the main implications for ESOL teachers is the need to return to the basics of sound pedagogical planning and to choose standards as assessment tools rather than making them the driving focus. This would lead to a more balanced approach across the skills and a return to more communicative teaching and learning practice.

Teachers need to see good assessment activity models that use curriculum content in order to promote a return to a language across the curriculum focus.

As teachers become more familiar with the variety of standards available, it is to be hoped that they will use standards at different levels to assess their multi-level classes. This should reduce the need to offer so many resubmission/ reassessment opportunities and thus help to reduce the workload.

The standards used for the literacy requirement need to be carefully chosen and only used to assess students when they are at that level. This will become even more important as teachers are faced with choosing level 2 literacy standards for University Entrance in 2004.

From the students' point of view it is important that teachers take time to explain the NCEA framework, the literacy requirement and the variety of assessments used.

ESOL classes that worked well and resulted in positive washback were those in which unit standards were integrated into a programme which had a focus on language learning in context.

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