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The Mechanism of Washback on Teaching and Learning

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Psychology,

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Abstract

The current research investigated the mechanism of the phenomenon known as washback (i.e., the impact of assessment on teaching and learning) in the context of a new national standards-based assessment system in New Zealand, particularly focusing on the area of the teaching and learning of Japanese as a foreign language. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was progressively implemented across all subjects in the final three years of secondary schooling from 2002. It replaced norm-referenced assessments and aimed to function as assessment for learning as well as of learning.

The research consisted of three studies. Studies One and Two investigated washback effects of NCEA as perceived by teachers and students of Japanese, and beliefs about NCEA which contributed to the washback effects. Participants claimed that the majority of the intended positive washback effects were promoted by the assessment, but the nature of the washback depended on beliefs about NCEA held by teachers and students. Students tended to report more negative washback of NCEA than did teachers. Study Three explored the role that contextual factors (e.g., subject, gender) and beliefs might play in mediating washback. This large-scale study involved teachers and students of Japanese, French, History, and Mathematics. Teacher and Student Questionnaires were developed to investigate washback of NCEA and beliefs about NCEA, Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Efficacy as well as to collect relevant background information on the participants. The study revealed that some contextual factors played a role in mediating certain types of beliefs and washback effects. The results also confirmed the crucial role that beliefs play in mediating washback, indicating that positive washback was promoted when participants’ beliefs were in line with the intentions of the assessment.

It is concluded that for educational reform through assessment change to be successful, stakeholders’ beliefs about the role of assessment may need to be altered. A model is presented to describe the mechanism of washback, showing how washback could be mediated directly and indirectly by contextual factors and beliefs.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my closest Kiwi friends, Rosalie Smith and Heather Ashcroft, who have been the most influential people in my life in New Zealand. Both have amazingly big hearts and took me under their wings when I came to the country as a short-term visitor feeling distressed after my devastating experience in the Kobe Earthquake in 1995.

Rosa has helped me improve my English. With her help, I have adjusted to New Zealand life so well that I often feel I was born in the wrong country. She has provided me with a place I can call home. She showed an interest in whatever I did and supported me in many ways. She listened to me talking about my study with great interest and helped me clarify my ideas. She also helped me go through some rough patches. I am very grateful for her generosity and patience.

Heather has also taken care of me, especially my well-being. She is very quick to help me in any way possible. She is always rock solid when I need some emotional support. Her advice is very much appreciated. I admire her kindness and strengths.

Rosa and Heather have both shown me the power of love. They have always been there for me no matter what. Without them, I probably would not have stayed in New Zealand. Thank you so much for being part of my life! I love you both dearly.
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