Title of Project:
Washback Effect of Classroom-Based Assessment from Learners’ Perspectives

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Motivation for the Research
The majority of washback studies have focused on the effect of large-scale high-stakes tests on different aspects of teaching and learning. Compared with the large number of washback studies that focus on teachers and their teaching practice, research from learners’ perspective is scarce (Cheng, 2008; Spratt, 2005; Wall, 2000; Watanabe, 2004). More importantly, there has been little investigation into the effect of classroom-based assessment (CBA) on instructional and learning practices (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010; Yu, 2010).

However, CBAs have long played a critical role in pedagogical practices and learning processes. As the designers and users of CBAs, classroom teachers often choose to use certain types of CBAs more often than other types, with an intention to facilitate and enhance students’ learning. Although there is evidence of some shared views of washback effects brought about by the use of such CBAs among teachers and students, a mismatch might still exist between teacher and student perceptions, particularly with regard to the specific functions and effectiveness of different types of CBAs for language learning (Qi, 2007).

How assessment is integrated into classroom instruction and the process of language teaching and learning has been widely researched (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Brindley, 1998; Davison, 2004; Davison & Leung, 2009; Llosa, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012; McNamara, 2001; Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Rea-Dickins, 2001, 2004), but studies investigating how students perceive the intended washback effect of CBAs are scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the washback effect of classroom-based assessments from the learners’ perspective.

Research Questions
This study addressed the following research questions:
1. What are the most prevalent types of CBA adopted by English instructors in an English Language Centre (ELC) at a major English-medium university in an EFL context?
2. To what extent, if at all, do teacher perceptions of the relevant effectiveness of the CBAs align with student perceptions?
3. How does the use of CBAs influence students’ second language (L2) learning in an intermediate-level EFL classroom over the course of one semester?

Research Methodology
This research was situated in the English Language Centre (ELC) at a major university in the Greater China region. ELC is a teaching unit that works with other departments to encourage and help students to improve their English skills, including general, academic, and professional English. All undergraduate students are distributed into different levels of compulsory English courses at ELC. Instead of one or two achievement tests (i.e., mid-terms, finals), ELC English courses evaluate students’ English abilities based on their performance in various CBAs during the semester, including essays, presentations, discussions, projects, reading and listening quizzes, and textbook-based activities.

A mixed-methods design was adopted in this study. Data were collected through surveys, classroom observations and student interviews at various points over a semester. Specifically, teacher and student questionnaires were designed and administered to obtain an overview of the perceptions from both teachers and students about the nature, types, and functions of CBAs they work with in an EFL language center. Weekly classroom observations and student interviews over a semester supplemented the survey data and allowed the researcher to explore how exactly classroom-based assessments influenced L2 learners’ language learning practices and attitudes.

Survey participants comprised of 16 teachers and 245 students. In addition, classroom observations (27.5 hours) of a class comprising 19 students were conducted. While four students from the class initially agreed to take part in the interview, only two of them completed the interviews over the course of ten weeks (14 interviews).

Three data collection instruments were developed for this study: a questionnaire, a classroom observation form, and a semi-structured interview protocol. A teacher questionnaire and a student questionnaire were used to elicit teacher and student perceptions of the frequency of various types of CBA used in the classroom setting and their perceived effectiveness for language learning. The items were designed based on Purpura and Turner’s (2014) conceptualization of 17 types of CBAs and Alderson and Wall’s (1993) conceptualization of washback effect in four main dimensions (i.e., an effect on students’ overall learning, learning rate and sequence, degree or depth of learning, and attitude toward learning). A classroom observation form was developed to collect data on activities related to the CBA adopted by the teacher and the students’ reactions to and performance on these CBAs over time. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the weekly interviews with students that focused on three areas: students’ understanding of the nature and function of specific CBAs; their attitudes toward the use of such CBAs and toward language learning; and their self-reported impact of various CBAs on their language learning (Cheng, 1998a; Qi, 2004; Yu, 2010).

Descriptive statistics and independent t-test were conducted to reveal teacher and student perceptions of the frequency of CBA use and its effects on students’ learning, as well as the alignment (or lack thereof) between teachers’ intended effect and students’ perceived effect. The frequency of CBA use and the time duration of each type of CBA as noted down in the classroom observations were also analyzed. Content analysis of classroom observation data also focused on students’ reactions to and performance on the CBAs implemented in the class. The observation data were used to triangulate data collected from the surveys and interviews. The analysis of the interview data consisted of three main stages. Firstly, the 14 interviews with students were transcribed and carefully reviewed to ensure
accuracy. Secondly, notable themes and patterns were initially identified through semantic coding (Dörnyei, 2007) of each student’s interview data. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted, and three salient themes consistent across the narratives of the two students were identified.

Summary of Findings
Results from the analysis of both the survey and the classroom observation data showed that the most prevalent CBAs employed by classroom teachers in this particular EFL context were oral questioning, class discussions, and projects. Compared with the common assessment types (i.e., unit tests, midterms, and finals) the students experienced in their secondary education, the various CBAs used in this EFL course at the tertiary level clearly emphasized the learning process more than the score on one-time performance.

Comparisons of teacher and student perceptions of the washback effect of the three salient types of CBA showed that overall, there was a considerable amount of overlap between the teachers’ intended washback effect on learning and the students’ perceptions of that effect. In particular, projects were perceived by both parties as the most effective CBA that influenced students’ overall English learning and their learning attitude. Despite the overall consistency between the teacher intentions and student perceptions, divergence was found with regard to specific areas of washback effect brought about by different CBAs. For instance, the teacher and student perceptions of the effectiveness of class discussions did not seem to match well. The analysis of the interview data indicated that the discrepancy between the teacher and student perceptions might be associated with the students’ unfamiliarity with the CBA format and a general lack of adequate English-speaking ability. In addition, the students’ personality also seemed to have played a role in their perceptions of the effect of certain CBA types. The role of personality may also be mediated by the students’ self-regulation of their affective responses to the use of certain CBAs. To further complicate the picture, the students’ understandings of the nature and functions of CBAs, and the weighing of specific CBAs in their final grades, might also be important factors influencing the students’ learning attitudes and behavior. Last but not least, adequate learning opportunities provided by assessment users (i.e., classroom teachers) could also be an important factor in influencing the students’ learning attitude and behavior.

Implications
Overall, the results from the current study carry a few important pedagogical implications. First, students’ clear understanding of the nature and teachers’ intended purposes of the CBAs are essential, if ever classroom teachers wanted to introduce and use CBAs to enhance teaching and learning quality. When implementing CBAs, classroom teachers should, therefore, explain explicitly and thoroughly the intended purposes of using one CBA over another. Only when students fully understand how they can benefit from their work on these CBAs, do they become active participants in the learning process, and assume more responsibilities as independent and autonomous learners. Second, when designing CBAs, teachers may want to provide more learning opportunities by extending the time needed for each task, offering more constructive feedback, and providing collaborative working opportunities in classrooms. Third, CBAs that constitute a higher percentage toward the final grades may provide stronger motivation for students’ learning. This does not mean that teachers should simply assign a higher percentage of the final score to an ideal CBA, but rather that students should be involved in the design and evaluation process. For example, with teacher assistance, students could collectively construct a rubric that expresses performance expectations and evaluative criteria in language meaningful to students themselves. Overall, teachers should use various techniques to develop a “learning community” in the classroom and to encourage students to “become more actively interested in the process of learning itself” (Byon 2005, p. 186).
References


Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.


