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Revisiting the Concept of Language Washback: Results from an Empirical Study

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Researchers have recently begun to examine issues of test impact concerning the wider socio-political level (e.g., Brindley, 2001; Shohamy, 2001; McNamara & Roever, 2006), and research the effects of language assessment on teaching and learning, referred to as “washback” (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Various models have been proposed in the literature (Alderson and Wall, 1993, Hughes, 1994, Bailey, 1996, Watanabe, 2004) which specified the ways in which high-stakes impact on participants, processes, and the products of teaching and learning.

The study that I am going to present, based on doctoral research, aimed at investigating the washback effect of a high-stakes language test on a variety of stakeholders in the context of Greek private language schools.

During the presentation I will report the results of the data collected for the purposes of the study based on teachers’ interviews, detailed analysis of exam-oriented textbooks and students’ diaries and demonstrate how the mechanism of washback of high-stakes language tests operates in the present context. The paper will also discuss how the results advance our knowledge of the complexity of washback, and to what extent they confirm or disconfirm what we already know about washback and what questions remain to be explored. The discussion will round off with suggestions for future researchers in the area.