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0521680972 - Impact Theory and Practice: Studies of the IELTS test and Progetto Lingue 2000

Roger Hawkey

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Impact Theory and Practice

Studies of the IELTS test
and *Progetto Lingue 2000*

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Acknowledgements

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Series Editors' note

Cambridge has always taken a great interest in the educational and social impact of its tests and assessments. For many years while testing experts around the world were preoccupied with the quantitative aspects of assessment worrying about impact was not considered to be particularly relevant. The Cambridge attention to this area was probably even thought of as slightly quirky and old fashioned. However, in recent years, the concept of identifying and measuring how tests impact on the environment in which they operate has been recognised as a very relevant concern. Indeed, three further volumes in this series by Liying Cheng, who looks at washback in Hong Kong, Diane Wall, who documents an impact study in Sri Lanka, and Tony Green, who focuses on IELTS, demonstrate the growing importance of impact research as an aspect of test validation. Languages in general and English in particular, are of ever growing importance, not only for economic reasons, but also for social and political ones. Stakeholders in the language assessment process increasingly require evidence on the interactions between examinations, the stakeholders involved and the outcomes expected. The effective conceptualisation of the dimensions of test impact and its systematic study – within the context of test validation research – is one of the ways that will help us to address this requirement better.

This volume is written from the perspective of an international language testing agency although the issues discussed are of relevance in national and local assessment situations. Roger Hawkey, who has now conducted extensive work in the area of test impact, considers its dimensions and why understanding test impact is important. After some discussion of the concepts of impact and washback and how they fit into a broader educational, research and social context, he looks at the role of impact studies in the Cambridge ESOL test development, validation and revision systems, with particular reference to the *Progetto Lingue 2000* in Italy and the study of IELTS impact.

In the fields of language teaching and testing, the concepts of washback and impact, as Hawkey explores in some depth, are a matter of both theoretical and practical differentiation and concern. Through the 1980s and into the early 1990s attention focused on the concept of test washback and as such took a relatively narrow view, focusing largely on the teaching–learning relationship with some attention paid to the role of publishers and course materials. But beyond the learners and teachers affected by the washback of a language test

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are a range of other stakeholders on whom an examination has impact even though they do not take the test or teach it. These stakeholders, for example, parents, employers, university admissions officers and others, form what we might refer to as the language testing constituency. Cambridge ESOL has defined this constituency particularly in relation to candidates taking its own examinations but the definition applies in other contexts too. Different tests will have different constituencies and an examination board like Cambridge ESOL will be dealing with numerous and varied constituencies, quite possibly for the same test and at the same time. The stakeholders interact with the test construct, format, conditions and assessment criteria in various ways.

Cambridge ESOL routinely conducts impact studies as part of the test validation process on an ongoing basis. It is our view that an examination board must be prepared to review and revise what it does in the light of how its stakeholders use and feel about its examinations. As educational processes and social needs change it is vital that examinations adapt to meet the requirements of these changes and the study of test impact facilitates this process even if the interrelationships involved are complex and highly context-dependent. Hawkey rightly points out that impact research is an exemplification of the growing importance of evidence-based approaches to education and assessment. Evidence-based education requires policy and practice capable of being justified in terms of sound evidence about their likely effects. Given that education, or indeed assessment, is not an exact science, it is too important to allow it to be determined by unfounded opinion, whether of politicians, teachers, researchers or anyone else. Validation research, including research into test impact, aims to seek out the evidence necessary to develop, redevelop or indeed operate a testing system in an appropriate and ethical manner.

The role of ethics in language testing has risen to the fore much more significantly in the last decade or so. The intention of those concerned with ethical language testing is to implement codes of professionally and socially responsible practice. These codes should provide tighter yet feasible guarantees of test development rigour and probity, with properly-defined targets, appropriate and reliable evaluation criteria, comprehensive, transparent and fair test interpretation and reporting systems, continuous validation processes, and a keener regard for the rights of candidates and other stakeholders (for example, see the ALTE Code of Practice, the ALTE quality assurance work, and the IELTS Handbook and Annual Review).

An ethical approach to language testing is a must in the modern world and test impact studies play an important role in demonstrating that language tests are used ethically. However, impact studies can also help address some of the concerns raised by the critical language testing lobby. The critical language

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testing movement characterises tests as, intentionally or not, biased, undemocratic, and unfair means of selecting or policy-changing. It is argued that the main actual impact of language tests is the imposition of constraints, the restriction of curricula, and the possible encouragement of boring, mechanical teaching approaches.

Whether this is the case or not needs to be a matter of research rather than opinion and in such a general context a focus on test impact is an important area of study. It is driven by considerations in the field of language testing of wanting to do the job right and providing the appropriate evidence to back any claims. It is also driven by a broader social, political, educational and even cognitive impetus, and we see again the growing movement in education to develop the notion of basing what we do on sound evidence. Indeed, the evidence-based education manifesto argues that we need a culture in which evidence is valued over opinion, and where appropriate action (or inaction) is valued over action for the sake of being seen to do something. This applies just as much to what critical language testers have to say as it does to the claims of examination boards, education departments, schools and so on.

This volume is intended to provide the reader with an approach to the study of test impact which allows evidence to be gathered and displayed. It documents in some detail aspects of two impact studies that have been conducted in the Cambridge context and as such, we believe it makes a unique and much needed addition to the field. Its focus on the use of international assessments in state systems in the *Progetto Lingue 2000* is relevant as English becomes a core subject in many countries around the world, and it is vital that there is a good understanding of what impact international assessment may have. The focus on IELTS is no less significant as international mobility continues to increase. The extensive IELTS research takes us beyond a narrow focus on the test itself to the broader impact that it has and demonstrates very clearly that IELTS impacts positively on language learning and teaching in addition to its well known measurement attributes.

Two further volumes on IELTS will be published soon after this volume. The first, entitled *IELTS Collected Papers: Research in speaking and writing assessment* and edited by Lynda Taylor and Peter Falvey, documents a range of research studies with a particular focus on speaking and writing. The second, written by Alan Davies and entitled *Assessing Academic English: Testing English proficiency 1950–2005 – the IELTS solution*, documents the development of the testing of academic English from the 1950s to the present day.

Michael Milanovic
Cyril Weir
2005