The Importance of Motivation Theories for Understanding Washback to the Learner [†]

Yoshinori WATANABE[*]

Faculty of Education and Human Studies

Akita University, Japan

ABSTRACT

The present paper portrays three theories of motivation in the expectation that it will help to understand the washback effect of language tests on learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The three theories that are identified involve attribution theories of motivation, flow, and functional theories of motivation. The characteristics of these theories are described in a way in which they may help understand the meaning of the recent attempt by the Japanese Ministry of Education to innovate in EFL practices by means of a Criterion-Referenced Assessment System. The paper concludes with several predictions regarding the effectiveness of the project that should be examined in future research.

Key Words : Washback, English as a Foreign Language, Language Assessment, Functional Autonomy of Motives, Attribution Theories of Motivation, Flow

INTRODUCTION

Washback effects of language testing are normally defined as the influence of language testing on teaching and learning. The research in the field to date indicates that washback is a highly complex phenomenon rather than a unitary notion. Contrary to a widespread belief, there does not seem to be a direct relationship between a test on the one hand and what is taught and learned to prepare for the test on the other. This implies that even if the test were to improve, education would not become more effective in a corresponding manner.

Amongst various findings, relatively well established is that washback is a function of the test and other factors. The factors may include the prestige of the test, the degree of congruence between the test content and the lesson content, the stakes of the test, and the attitudes and knowledge of the test on the part of test users (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Shohamy, et al., 1996; Watanabe, 1996; Brown, 1997; Cheng, 1999; Watanabe, 2004). These findings suggest that washback is not inherent in the test, but rather the process of washback being generated is mediated by those users who put the test to use for various purposes. This leads in turn to the assumption that the psychology of test users will be involved in the process in a very complex manner.

There has been very little research that has been conducted in the area exploring washback to the learner (Johnston, 1989; Maeher & Fyans,

1989; Moeller & Reschke, 1993), and yet the results suggest that the condition under which washback operates is not very dissimilar to the one of washback to the teacher. For example, Watanabe (2000) interviewed university students about their test preparation practices to examine if the Japanese university entrance examination would motivate students. The results showed that washback to the learner was far from uniform, although those exams which students perceived to be most important for their future university careers had greater impact than those which those perceived to be less important. On the other hand, those tests which were perceived to be less important induced less impact to the learner. Thus, the process of washback being generated to the learner also seems to be mediated by some psychological factors much as the case of washback to the teacher.

In order to further investigate the issue of examination washback in general, and washback to learner motivation in particular, reviewing relevant theories would be crucial as well as useful. The rest of the present paper will portray three theories of motivation that are deemed to be particulary helpful for explaining a type of washback effects that has been found in the past research and in turn for predicting potential washback effects. In so doing, an attempt will be made to illustrate how various theories of motivation would help explain the complex phenomenon called washback.

THREE THEORIES OF MOTIVAITON

Attribution Theories of Motivation

The first theory that may help explain washback is attribution theories of motivation. McDonough (1981) succinctly summarizes the core notion of the theory as follows:

Attribution theory attempts to describe motivated behaviour in terms of the cause to which the individuals attribute, or ascribe, their own and other people's performance: their own ability, effort, intention, or others' ability, effort, or intention, luck, and so on. ... In so doing, it represents an attempt to ... include perceptions, motives and ideas which learners think influence their own performance—which may loosely be called 'cognitions' (1981, p. 153).

The theory assumes that "on the whole, people tend to refer to four main sets of attributions for their perceived successes and failures in life: (a) ability, (b) effort, (c) luck, (d) the perceived difficulty of the task with which they are faced" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 105). Among these, "ability and effort are forms of *internal* attribution, that is, they are factors that arise from inside us, while luck and task difficulty refer to *external* factors" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 105; italics original).

A key notion of this theory in relation to washback is that attribution to different combinations of these properties is deemed to lead to different consequences in subsequent behaviors. For example, irrespective of the objective reason, if a student attributes his or her failure in the previous test to the lack of his or her ability, he or she is regarded as attributing the cause of failure to a stable causal property. Since attribution to internal, unstable, and controllable causes is likely to lead to future success (Weiner, 1992), some sort of 'reattribution training' (Craske, 1988; Hastings, 1994) should be conducted to help such a learner to attribute to the latter set of dimensions.

The process of attribution is represented in a diagrammatic form in Figure 1. The figure demonstrates that as long as one attributes a cause of a certain phenomenon to uncontrollable, external and stable factors, he or she is very likely to feel helpless (Seligman, 1975). In order to motivate learners by means of assessment, then, it may be important to help learners feel the test to be something which they are able to control over, something which does not exist out there, but
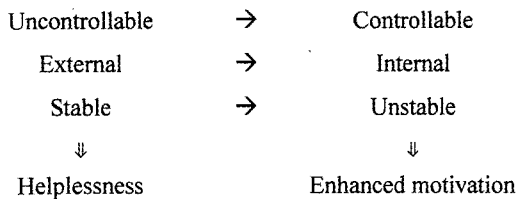
Uncontrollable	→	Controllable
External	→	Internal
Stable	→	Unstable
⇓		⇓
Helplessness		Enhanced motivation

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of attribution and motivation

which relates to something internal to themselves, and something which they are able to change. In other words, test-takers will have a sense of being 'agents,' whereby they will have a sense of control over the assessment practice. This kind of positive attitude toward assessments in turn will help enhance their motivation. The type and content of effective re-attribution processes are yet to be established (Williams & Burden, 1997). Nevertheless, it is assumed that in order to make better use of assessment in a way in which it generates beneficial washback, it is important to render the whole assessment process interactive, in the sense that feedback is exchanged between test-takers (i.e., learners) and test constructors (i.e., teachers). For example, such feedback may involve the information gathered from test-takers at the end of each test

administration, a record of what has been taught in the classroom, so that the information can be incorporated in the achievement test.

Flow

The second theory of motivation that will help explain washback is Czikszentmihalyi's theory of flow (1992). The notion of flow is very similar to Maslow's idea of "peak experience" (1970). That is, when we are deeply engaged in a certain task, which is so intriguing, we often feel as if we 'forgot' ourselves. After researching a number of people who have a sense of flow or peak experience, Czikszentmihalyi found that there is a certain common characteristic among them. That is, they are engaged in a task, of which difficulty level is appropriately challenging, but not too easy, and at the same time not too difficult. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the skill level of the subject and the level of a task difficulty.

In summary, the diagram reads as follows (Czikszentmihalyi, 1992, pp. 74-75). The two theoretically most important dimensions, challenges and skills, are represented on two axes. The letter A stands for a boy Alex, who is
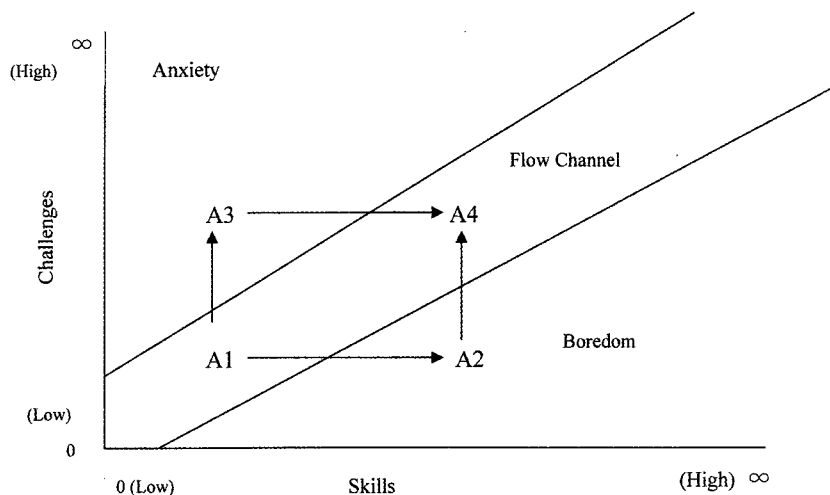

Figure 2: "Why the Complexity of Consciousness Increases as a Result of Flow Experiences" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, p. 74.)

learning to play tennis, for example. Alex starts in the area where he experiences flow, or a highly motivated state. At this stage, Alex has very little skill, and the only challenge he faces is hitting the ball over the net. But as he continues to practice, his motivational state may change either of the following two ways; his skill may go well beyond the degree of challenge of the task, which in turn bores him. Or he may meet a more practiced opponent, which will arouse anxiety. In order to be back to the state of 'flow,' he has to set himself a new and more difficult goal that matches his skill.

This metaphor helps explain the observation that has been briefly reviewed above. That is, the degree of impact on a learner's motivation is a function of the perceived difficulty level of a given test. It could be said then that Czikszentmihalyi's theory of flow implies that in order to motivate students by means of testing, the difficulty level of the test should be appropriately challenging but should not be too challenging, and also it should not be too easy. It leads to the idea that computer-adaptive testing (CAT) based on Item Response Theory (IRT) will be helpful for motivating test-takers, because in this type of test, in principle, test-takers are provided slightly more challenging items at each step.

Functional Autonomy of Motives

The third theory of motivation is Allport's theory of functional autonomy of motives. Simply put, this theory holds that a means may become an end. Allport (1937a, 1937b, 1960) provides several anecdotes. For example, a sailor would go to sea just to gain money to support his family. However, as he went to sea again and again, he became intrigued by it. Eventually, he would go to sea even after retirement. Another anecdote is that during World War II, a large number of illiterates turned up in the American draft. They were sent to a special training center, where they acquired a degree of literacy equal to

that of four years of schooling within eight weeks. When these men returned home, most of them had acquired an interest in reading.

Thus, the theory of functional autonomy of motives suggests that tests may help students become interested in English during the process of preparing for a test. To translate the theory into the terms that are used in the field of second language acquisition, it could be said that 'instrumental' orientations in motivation (arising from external goals) may become 'integrative' orientations in motivation (arising a wish to identify with the culture of speakers of the target language). Recent research shows that the difference between these two types of motivation is not as clear (Gardner & MacIntyer, 1991; Ager, 2001) as initially assumed to be by Gardner & Lambert (1972). It may be predicted that the learner who starts to learn a foreign language as an instrument of passing a test may eventually become genuinely interested in it.

The theory of functional autonomy appears to be attractive, but obviously the role a test plays in helping learners become functionally autonomous is likely complex. Not all test takers become interested in the target language while they are preparing for a test. It is assumed that if a learner becomes functionally autonomous, he or she should have a sense of achievement at some stage of learning process. Thus, what researchers should identify is a characteristic of the test that is most likely to motivate test takers.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, a brief description is in order below about a recent attempt of the Japanese Ministry of Education to innovate in EFL by means of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) practice. CRA was implemented at junior high schools in 2002 and at the senior high schools in 2003 nationwide. At both levels, each student's achievement should be measured by a set of criteria consisting of attitudes towards

communication, reading and listening abilities, writing and speaking abilities, and the knowledge of foreign cultures. Junior high school students are evaluated by three levels in each of these criteria, A (more than satisfactory), B (satisfactory) and C (less than satisfactory), while senior high school students are evaluated by a five-scale standard ranging from A (more than satisfactory) to E (less than satisfactory).

In light of the theories of motivation, it is predicted that CRA will be superior to Norm-Referenced Assessment for the following reasons. First, the former is expected to give each student a greater incentive to aim at one level higher than his or her present level of achievement (flow). Second, each student is likely to perceive attaining a higher grade to be within the domain of his or her effort (attribution theory).

However, CRA will help enhance students' motivation, only in so far as it satisfies several requirements. First, the teacher should understand the principle of CRA and the meaning of each descriptor well enough. It is also crucial that the teacher implements the criteria consistently. A recent newspaper article reports the case of junior high schools in Tokyo, where the grade distribution has changed since the CRA was implemented, in that there were virtually no students who were given the lowest grade. This may indicate that the teachers have become lenient in applying the CRA grade system. Third, the students should understand that they are evaluated on their own performance rather than being compared with other students. Students as well as teachers should also understand the meaning of descriptors; that is, they should know what they are expected to achieve at a level one step higher than their current level of competence. And fourth, each level of standard should be set at a reasonable level; that is, it should be assured that the student feels confident that each level is achievable if he or she spends a reasonable amount of time and effort.

A comprehensive theory that explains and predicts how testes motivate learners is yet to be established. Admittedly, the three theories of motivation that have been outlined above are still pre-mature. Nevertheless, it seems that this is a promising area which is expected to yield information that will help us make better use of language tests for education.

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日本語抄録

外国語指導において評価活動を動機付けの契機とするためにはどのような条件が必要となるのかを，3つの動機付け理論－原因帰属，フロー，機能的自律－を基に考察した．これまで評価の波及効果について行われた実証研究の示すところ，テストをはじめとした学習評価が直接指導方法や学習方法に影響を与えるわけではない．どのような効果を上げるかは評価活動を行って得られた結果をいかに使うかに左右される．動機付けの効果についても単にテストを実施するだけで学習者がやる気を出すとは限らない．テストのために学習を続けるうちに英語に興味関心が湧いてくる可能性は十分にあるものの，難易度が自分の実力よりやや上にある，努力が結果に結びつく，などと学習者が主観的に感じられる課題であるなどの条件を整える必要があると予測される．