意愿与现实：
中国高等院校统一招生英语考试的反拨作用研究

The Intended Washback Effect of the National Matriculation English Test in China:
Intentions and Reality

亓鲁霞 著

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Washback, or influence of testing on teaching and learning, has been a frequent topic for discussion in education. In spite of the many assumptions and claims about how teaching is affected by testing, insufficient empirical research has been conducted to look into the issue. This book reports on a large-scale study on the intended washback effect of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) on English teaching and learning in secondary schools in China. Findings from the study throw much light on the tough issue: why powerful high-stakes tests like the NMET could not serve as effective agents for educational reform that is intended by test constructors and policymakers.

Qi Luxia is currently on the Faculty of English Language and Culture at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and the study reported in the book was supported by MOE Project of the Centre of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

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ABSTRACT

The present study, which adopted the approach of use-oriented language testing proposed by Shohamy (2001), investigated the intended washback effect of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China. Specifically, it aims to find out whether the test has fulfilled its mission to induce an intended effect, which is to make English language teaching in secondary schools shift from its previous focus on language form to an emphasis on language use. In the study, factors that contribute to the test's success or failure in this mission were scrutinized. A multi-method design was contrived, using interview, observation, and questionnaire to collect data from eight NMET constructors, six English inspectors, 388 secondary school teachers, and 986 students.

The results show that the NMET has largely failed to achieve the intended washback effect. The failure is attributable mainly to an inherent conflict between the two functions of the test. One function is to select students for higher education. The other function is to bring about changes in teaching and learning, which is the intended washback of the test per se. While injecting high-stakes into the NMET and empowering it to effect educational reform, the selection function also imposes constraints on the test design and production, and thereby hinders realization of the intended washback effect. In addition, the pressure arising from the testing process encourages teaching and learning mainly to achieve higher scores rather than to develop the desired ability to use language effectively. These findings demonstrate that a high-stakes test is a powerful encouragement to "teaching to the test", but an ineffective means to promote learning

or development of the educationally desired knowledge and ability.

Other factors that have been found to interact with the NMET to shape teaching and learning include teachers' own language proficiency and learning experience, and misuses of test results to evaluate schools and teachers.

On the basis of the findings of the present study as well as other washback studies, it is argued that the potentiality of a test to achieve strong intended washback effects is determined, to a large degree, by the stakes attached to the test. Neither low-stakes tests nor extremely high-stakes tests produce high intended washback effects. The tests that are likely to succeed in bringing about intended effects on teaching and learning are those whose stakes are at the right level. The stakes are high enough to make users pay attention to the message encoded in the tests but not so high as to trigger intense test preparations at the expense of teaching and learning to the objectives laid down by the curriculum.

The study also suggests ways to modify the NMET with a view to facilitating intended washback effects and minimizing unwanted side effects on teaching and learning.

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