The washback effect of Cambridge English examinations in German secondary school contexts

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Work-in-progress (early stage)
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The German context

- 16 states in Germany, each with own curricula
- Professional conception of “the autonomous teacher who has complete freedom”
  
  (Westbury et al., 2000, p.17)
- Testing considered an integral aspect of teaching. Teachers traditionally wholly responsible for assessment. No external testing bodies.
The German context

Since the early 2000s

Move towards more standardization

National and state comparison studies

Publication of *Bildungsstandards*: national standards for education to underpin curricula
The German context

Since the early 2000s

More emphasis on “can-do” (*Kompetenz*)

Orientation to CEFR

Move towards new formats for assessment
Teachers and change

Wall (2005) points out that it is
“necessary for the right conditions to be in place in their classrooms, schools, local systems and higher levels of educational administration so that if teachers decide to open up for change they will be supported” (283)

Fullan (1999) points out that
“Top-down mandates and bottom-up energies need each other” (19)
Cambridge English exams

Since the early 2000s

Growing numbers of secondary school students in Germany taking Cambridge English exams and being prepared for these by their secondary schools:

- School-based decision
- Add-on to the public curriculum with its own assessment provisions
Important to collect “ecologically grounded understandings of how a test operates within an educational context”  (Green 2007, 30)
Examinations which are “designed to impact positively on the teaching and learning of English in a wide range of contexts”
(UCLES, 2011)

Washback as “impact but at the micro level”
(Weir, Vidakovic and Galaczi 2013, 10)
MPhil/PhD project

What is the nature of the washback effect of Cambridge English examinations in German secondary schools? A case study of teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse.

Mixed-methods study
Sequential design
Mixed-methods study

1. Exploratory survey of teachers in NRW and Hessen with experience of Cambridge exam preparation, via online questionnaire

2. Comparative document study: Gymnasium curriculum NRW and Hessen and Cambridge English: First (FCE)

3. Small-scale qualitative teacher case-studies (Gymnasium teachers preparing for FCE)
Qualitative case studies

• What are the teachers’ perceptions of their role when
  - delivering the local curriculum?
  - preparing students for Cambridge English: First (FCE)?

• How do the teachers model and implement
  - the local curriculum classrooms?
  - the FCE exam-preparation classrooms?

• What informs and directs the teachers' assessment
  of students' performance
  - within the local curriculum?
  - with respect to FCE?
Case studies - why FCE?

Stakes. CAE (and to a certain extent PET) have more apparent external uses

Upper secondary described in Bildungsstandards as B2, with C1 features in some areas

Local perception of “good understanding up to B1” within the system – need now to improve understanding of B2 and above
Teacher questionnaire - pilot

- Background data about the teachers, their schools, length of experience, etc.
- Teachers’ motivation to prepare students for Cambridge English exams
- Organisation of exam preparation at the school (length, nature/status of course, etc.)
- Teachers’ perceptions of
  - what exam preparation needs to prioritise
  - what facilitates or hinders preparation
  - effects on their own teaching/assessment
Teacher questionnaire - pilot

Pilot in progress at present.

Analysis still to follow.
Teacher motivation

Helping students get an internationally recognised language certificate

*Increasing my knowledge and understanding of the CEFR levels*

Increasing my knowledge and understanding of language assessment / testing methods

Doing work which is respected, good for my professional profile/portfolio

A change from my usual school routine

Developing my English teaching skills

Using the exams to help me with our own English curriculum/Lehrplan
Teacher questionnaire - pilot

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  - effects on their own teaching/assessment
Perceived effects

Do you think that your experience of Cambridge English exams has been useful for you as a teacher?

Do you think your experience of Cambridge English exams has had any effect on how you teach English in general?

Do you think your experience of Cambridge English exams has had any effect on how you evaluate students’ English?
'Teacher comments

“speaking”, “oral”, “communication”

e.g. when it comes to oral exams, which are becoming more important …, Cambridge has given me a good insight into the structure of meaningful oral test arrangements and how to prepare students”

“The strengthening of orality in English classes, i.e. the improvement of the students' speaking skills became much clearer to me.”

“The communicative approach, use of communicative classroom activities”
Teacher comments

“Grammar is still important, but in class discussions or presentations I consider it more important that students can interact and get their message across. I try to help them gain self-confidence, encourage them to speak a lot”

“I now regard it as much more important that pupils can speak and write English well rather than being sure about certain facts, dates etc which the curriculum requires us to teach for the 'A' level exam. Facts about the history of GB or the USA, for example, can be found on the internet, but speaking and writing needs to be practised.”
Bibliography


