

Book Review

Booth, Dawn (2018). *The Sociocultural Activity of High Stakes Standardized Language Testing: TOEIC Washback in a South Korean Context*. Springer.
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Reviewed by Ellen Head

The impact of TOEIC on the lives of language learners in Japan and Korea can hardly be overemphasized. At university level, TOEIC is a convenient tool to assist decisions about placement and entry to higher levels of courses, and in the world of work, it is used as a criterion to screen applicants for competitive jobs. Although language professionals may express ambivalent or critical views of TOEIC, learners cannot help being influenced by the gate-keeping functions of the test. In *The Sociocultural Activity of High Stakes Standardized Language Testing*, Booth attempts to dissect the influence of the TOEIC in the lives of individual learners, at the same time as proposing an innovative model of test washback which uses sociocultural theory and activity theory to look at test consequences from overlapping perspectives. As Booth writes:

Where washback is concerned, a sociocultural perspective can help shed light on how human social and mental activity is organized through standardized testing – powerful mediatory artefacts that adapt to meet the needs of communities and individuals. (Booth, p. 79.)

Booth's research centered on the study habits and emotions of Korean students during the 6 months prior to taking the TOEIC, through a series of in depth interviews of six students, supplemented with survey and diary studies of a group of 23. Relationship to the wider context is amply provided by a consideration of the theoretical concepts related to language testing as well as the historical background to language testing in Korea (and the influence of Confucianism), the TOEIC test itself and research

into the TOEIC in the global context. Booth proposes a new model of washback, arguing that washback should be socially situated and calling for a greater emphasis on student agency in research. The theoretical framework is somewhat complex but the explanations are clear and the implications are that reliance on TOEIC can have detrimental impacts on motivation and study. However, taking a positive approach, Booth believes that this is not a reason to abandon TOEIC but to carry out further research on its impact. The models and approaches used in Booth's study could be adapted to research into other situations of test-driven study, not only the TOEIC.

The book can be divided into three parts. Chapters 1 to 5 cover the necessary background to the study, with introductions to South Korea, the TOEIC, washback and sociocultural theory. Chapters 6 to 8 consist of detailed case studies of six students, three majors and three non-majors, showing how they prepared for the TOEIC. The final three chapters relate the case-histories to the wider context of washback studies and describe Booth's model of washback which synthesizes activity theory and sociocultural theory to emphasize the role of learners and learning communities in washback.

Readers who are involved in language teaching at university level may find the case studies the most interesting part of the book. The students differ widely in their approach to study. Generally they are motivated by the need to have a TOEIC score for work, by parents and by the community around them. The English majors tended to spend more time on studies which were not directly related to TOEIC while the non-English majors attended classes in TOEIC preparation schools and were strongly influenced by the teachers they encountered there. Some of the tropes that recur are emphasis on memorization, "everybody is doing it", stress, and the tension between

exam-focused study and broader English learning. Booth's research questions look at the motives and goals of learners who prepare for the TOEIC, the actual actions they take and the perceived outcomes of the actions. Among the case study subjects, we see the negative effect of narrower studies and disappointment, particularly in one student who seemed to join a class which was too high for her level (about 550 at the end of the period). "If students could study something they were interested in, in the time they spend on the TOEIC, they could use their knowledge for their majors more efficiently." (p.131) It seemed that students whose level was already quite high had a more positive experience. However one remarked that TOEIC study did not help him to progress in oral English and actually made him more hesitant. There was also an effect over time when getting a higher-than-expected score on a preliminary TOEIC-like test made the student stop studying, leading to a lower score on the real test.

Why should we concern ourselves with such matters if we are already free of the responsibility to teach students for the TOEIC due to our own institutional situation or to our own feeling that it is not educationally justifiable to "teach to a test"? The answer is that TOEIC has a great impact on our students. Although Japanese companies are generally not as demanding as Korean ones in terms of TOEIC score, the use of TOEIC for program evaluation, placement and course entry gatekeeping gives it face-validity to students. Rather than weaning students away from seeing their progress in terms of a TOEIC score, perhaps we should be researching exactly what actions they are taking in relation to TOEIC and how that fits into the pattern of their all-round proficiency development. This book would be of great interest to anyone in teaching who would like to deepen their knowledge of language testing, as the explanations are very clear. It is also a well-documented account of how to do mixed-methods research with a focus

on longitudinal studies of student experience and autonomy. For those who are professionals of language testing, it provides an innovative model of washback with implications for the way researchers deal with issues of content validity and ethics around washback.