

Original Paper

The Backwash Effect of IELTS on English Teaching in China

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Abstract

The influence of language testing on curriculum design, teaching methods, and learning habits is referred to as the “washback effect.” This effect has an impact on the decisions made by students and teachers. Teachers may, for example, teach to a test, or learners may concentrate on parts of language acquisition that will be tested in their future courses. In language testing, the washback effect is usually categorised as either negative or positive, with the latter being referred to as wash-forward. When definitions of language competence are excessively narrow, it can be destructive to more flexible methods to language education; nevertheless, it can be useful when effective teaching techniques occur. Washback may also be helpful or bad depending on whether it aids or hinders the achievement of educational objectives. Teaching the curriculum becomes the same as teaching to the test if a test has positive washback. When there is a mismatch between the declared aims of teaching and the emphasis of assessment, negative washback can develop, leading to the abandoning of instructional goals in favour of test preparation.

Keywords

Teaching, Washback, IELTS

1. Introduction

Students are increasingly eager to get international education, and English is both a key draw to a UK education and a possible stumbling block to effective study in this environment. Language-challenged students are unlikely to reap the full benefits of university education. As a result, in addition to academic proof, receiving universities frequently request evidence of appropriate English language competency before accepting overseas students into their programmes. The International English Language Testing System is the most commonly recognised exam of English for academic purposes in

the United Kingdom (IELTS).

The International English Language Competency Test (IELTS) is a well-known and commonly utilized international English language proficiency test that is provided in two versions for various purposes: academic and general training. The exam consists of four equal-weighted portions, one for each language skill, with total averages ranging from 0 (lowest) to 9 (highest).

Testing is typically seen as an important element of the teaching process, and it is used to predict classroom teaching outcomes. People believe that testing will have an impact on teaching and learning. This impact is known as backwash, and it is the result of a complicated interplay between testing, teachers, and students (Allen, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Exam-based ESL courses have a negative reputation. According to several research, the curriculum is confined to those areas that will be examined, resulting in a loss of balanced integrated skills work (Read & Hayes, 2003) and a high reliance on practise examinations due to a restriction in the sorts of resources (typically teacher-prepared / reality). Furthermore, test topic areas, such as units on global warming, might be emphasised at the cost of more fundamental language abilities like grammar.

Language examinations, especially those with a high stake, have an effect on teaching and learning (Hung, 2012). In language testing, this type of impact is known as washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993). However, there is debate regarding whether testing has a positive or negative impact on education and classroom methods (Hughes, 2003). Moreover, Alderson and Wall (1993) emphasise that the washback effect is generally shown in behavioural and attitudinal changes in both students and teachers who are in close proximity to the tests.

Washback (also known as 'Backwash') is a hot issue in domains such as linguistic theory and general studies. It's about testing's impact on teaching and learning (Barnes, 2017, p. 1). Overall, experts agreed that washback is a complex mechanism that is influenced by a variety of conditions. Overall, experts agreed that washback is a complex mechanism that is influenced by a variety of conditions.

For instance, consider the washback direction (positive or negative) intensity of washback (Green, 2007), washback's various stakeholders (Pan, 2009), etc. The majority of past research looked at whether specific tests result in a positive or negative washback (Kılıçkaya, 2016). Meanwhile, the subjects in earlier washback research were almost certainly students. Given that "washback" refers to the degree of behavioural change experienced by instructors and students as a result of the introduction and administration of exams (Park, 2018). Given the importance of teachers in education and the fact that they are irreplaceable, there is a strong case to be made for putting more focus on teacher washback.

Students in China are also finding a positive washback to IELTS. A good IELTS score has become almost indispensable for successful employment for university graduates. However, the rapid growth of the modern IT industry requires the literacy skills necessary to send business messages and participate

in interviews or negotiations, which go far beyond the traditional language skills tested by IELTS. Therefore, in order to increase its effectiveness and favourable feedback, teachers have shifted their focus from teaching vocabulary and grammar knowledge to developing students' communication skills, with the help of materials that help build a near-realistic language environment.

3. IELTS Washback in English Teaching in China

3.1 Washback of IELTS on English Language Teachers

The scores of IELTS are used by the general public to assess the quality of schools, as well as by parents and students to assess teachers, which may be an abuse of the test. Furthermore, the majority of EFL instructors in Chinese high schools feel that their students' IELTS scores have a significant impact on their career, including compensation, promotion, and standing in the perspective of their peers, administrators, students, and parents (Cheng & Qi, 2006). As a result, according to Qi (2005, p. 164), "scoring is everything." As a result, this phenomenon may have a detrimental impact on instructors' views and teaching aims, with the majority of EFL teachers seeing teaching as a means of assisting students in achieving higher grades as their primary goal.

Teachers usually believe that doing as many practise versions of a test as possible is the most effective and efficient approach to prepare pupils for any test. Individual teachers, on the other hand, differ in their usage of test-oriented materials. Teachers taught the same test or exam abilities in a variety of ways, according to Alderson and Hamp Lyons (1996) and Watanabe (1996), with some employing a more openly "test-based," "textbook slave" method and others using a more creative and autonomous approach. This is why, in order to satisfy their own and their students' expectations, teachers frequently rely significantly on test-oriented resources. In many circumstances, teachers supply so-called test-taking tactics by stressing the use of a larger range of genuine texts and real-life materials to strengthen language abilities rather than focusing the use of a smaller number of test-like materials.

Teachers can select whether or not to allow backwashing, as well as where and how to backwash, to a greater or lesser extent. As a result, instructors must make a variety of options, including pedagogical and ethical ones (Spratt, 2005). Teachers used more discussion and role-playing after the redesigned exam was introduced, according to Cheng (1997), but there was no substantial difference in the volume of teacher conversation. In many EFL contexts, the IELTS test is also prepared and administered, as a result, to gain a better understanding of how learners receive feedback in different EFL situations (Allen, 2016). Teachers should, however, naturally utilise tasks that are comparable to those necessary for the test.

The importance of authenticity can indeed be emphasized. "A test will provide positive feedback for the learner and the course because it uses real activities and authentic texts," Bailey (1996, p. 276) states of testing to promote positive feedback. Simultaneously, the literature demonstrates a wide range of approaches to teaching ESL exam-driven courses.

Teachers indicated that a new gate-keeping evaluation altered their technique, time allocation, and

attention on learning activities in both positive and negative ways in one writing reform initiative (Cheng et al., 2004). In another research, certain test sessions were characterised by independent and innovative methods, with markers such as pair work, turn taking, laughing, and novel ideas being at least as prevalent as non-exam focused classrooms in some cases (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). Whenever specific criteria are satisfied, high stakes testing and accompanying educational innovation can provide not just positive incentive for improving teaching methods, but also influence and attract instructors' pedagogical practises in desirable ways (Chapman & Snyder, 2000).

High stakes testing - along with associated educational innovation-can, if certain conditions are met, provide not only positive motivation for improving teaching practices but also shape and attract teachers' pedagogical practices in desirable ways (Chapman & Snyder, 2000).

3.2 Washback of IELTS on Text Materials

Exam-related textbooks and past papers are referred to as "materials" in this context. The sort of information in exam-related textbooks might vary. They range from materials that are heavily focused on test technique and make extensive use of parallel exam forms on the one hand, to those that seek to build appropriate language skills and language on the other hand, with a greater emphasis on the topic area from which the exam is drawn. In general, the research focuses on materials that are "extremely examination orientated."

The existence of IELTS exam preparation books might be regarded as part of the test's influence. Some factors are thought to be unique to the IELTS exam. The criteria are derived from a variety of sources by picking relevant elements.

- *Text analysis in preparation for the official IELTS exam.*
- *Feedback on the official IELTS test texts.*
- *Publications on the official IELTS exam preparation.*

When studying for an exam in a guided situation, students prefer to concentrate on test-related tasks and information (Green, 2007). Learners in non-directive environments utilise textbooks and practise exams to learn, albeit the preparatory tactics used vary significantly. The relevance of studies analysing the impact of published materials on stakeholders is clear, as is the facilitative function of learning tools (Saville & Hawkey, 2004). Bailey (1999) cited "the reaction of textbooks," which he believed may be a result of utilising the test. She pointed out that the test preparation resources constitute "indirect recoil evidence," according to Pierce (1992). The appropriateness of textbooks, as well as any potential reaction, must be assessed in the context of the unique setting in which they are employed.

In general, most of the textbooks used in different types of IELTS preparation courses across China are just exam manuals that teach exactly the format of the exam as published by official IELTS bodies (such as Cambridge University Press), with some practice. The four primary categories of IELTS preparation books available on the Chinese market are as follows.

- *Practice exams + task instruction in books*
- *Practice exams, task instruction, and supplementary skill practise are all included in books.*

- *Practice tests in books + further skill practise + language improvement.*

- *Books on language acquisition.*

These provide readers with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the format of the IELTS exam, to use real exam material for strategic tactics, and to master language structure, vocabulary, and the semantics of discourse observed in previous IELTS exams. These materials are generally published by Cambridge ESOL and the British Council. They also provide imitations of actual IELTS exam questions, with a focus on improving and expanding candidates' overall English proficiency or focusing on specific areas where candidates are lacking in order to improve their chances of scoring high on the more difficult exams. This type of resource is usually published by a different publishing company.

3.3 Washback of IELTS on Test Takers

Students' attitudes toward teaching are influenced by the test, and they have a negative attitude toward communication activities and materials, as well as activities irrelevant to the exam, because they believe such activities have nothing to do with the exam's requirements. Students reported a significant need for instructors to be predictable. They want their professors to provide them "repetitive goods." They would be anxious if their professors are unable to completely prepare them for their test performance. Learners are more likely to adapt what they study for the test than they are to change how they learn it (Zhan & Andrews, 2014), and it's assumed that this washing action is just superficial (Cheng, 1998). Importantly, test takers want assistance on how to study for the test, particularly if they come from a different setting that may be unknown to them. Furthermore, because there may be few opportunities to use English successfully in everyday life, education must be tailored to the local context.

The payback of learning, or whether studying for the exam results in quantifiable advances in language competency, has been investigated using test takers' IELTS score development. Individual disparities in score increase have been discovered in studies (Green, 2005). The IELTS Handbook (2000, p. 17) estimates that students may need "up to 200 hours of language tutoring to improve one IELTS level" and that students at lower levels tend to progress faster in order to observe score growth on an exam like IELTS, which is thought to typically require significant time and intensive preparation (Green, 2005).

In China, students are still quite anxious about their language abilities and how they will perform on the exam. Taking an IELTS course, at least for some students, appears to be a direct indicator of how far they are from the total score line required to attend a university programme. They have usually studied for the test by taking a preparatory course, but they are confused how to continue. After taking the course, many of the lower-achieving students in China are more aware of the gaps in their language skills, but many are unclear of what further they can do to enhance their chances of meeting their deadlines. Schools may be able to provide advice, and student feedback might give them an idea of what to expect from such a course. When students are studying for a high-stakes exam like the IELTS,

they are typically under a lot of pressure to do well as fast as possible. A course that alleviates this pressure to some extent can be seen as helping students to perform to the best of their ability on the exam. Students are given feedback on their performance and are offered advice and guidance on the options they have to improve their English to meet the requirements of their academic studies.

4. Conclusion

The data related to the IELTS test feedback study is informative for research and reform of large-scale tests around the world. Indeed, the IELTS test has had a profound impact on all aspects of English language teaching and learning around the world, from concepts of teaching and learning to classroom practices, as well as implicit and explicit effects on the lives of test takers and other stakeholders. This paper argues that IELTS, a highly recommended, globally recognized, and already high-stakes test in China, may offer some important payoffs for language teaching and learning in China. In conclusion, although IELTS is taken by a large number of students every year. However, as an English test, it has some limitations that have brought about a return to English language teaching in China. washback is not inevitable and can be changed. This conclusion puts teachers in a dominant position in some important ways as far as backlash is concerned. When teachers are able to control the factors that determine backwash, backwash itself is largely controlled by teachers.

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