

The Washback Effect of College English Test Band 4 in Three Application-oriented Universities

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Abstract: College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is one of the most important and high-stake English tests in China and its washback effect on test takers and teachers deserves great attention and intensive research. After taking the methods of questionnaire and semi-structured interview with 300 students and 10 teachers from three application-oriented universities in Xi'an, the author points out that CET-4's positive washback on students far outweighs its negative side and it also affects classroom teaching with teachers usually devoting class hours to training test-taking skills.

1. Introduction

CET-4, a national English test run by China's Education Ministry, is one of the most important and high-stake English tests in China with millions college students taking it every year. In applied linguistic field, washback is seen as language assessment's impact on language teaching and learning and must be concerned about to ensure the validity of test (Weir, 2005). Therefore, the washback effect of CET-4 on test takers and teachers deserves great attention and intensive research.

Application-oriented universities refer to higher education institution that focuses on training practical talents to meet social demands. Such universities usually emphasis students' pragmatic competence in language learning.

This research adopts the methods of questionnaire and semi-structured interview in 3 Chinese application-oriented universities to answer the following research questions: (1) Does CET-4 have positive washback on language learners in 3 application-oriented Universities (2) how CET-4 affects language teachers.

2. Literature review

The washback effect of language testing was firstly discussed comprehensively and thoroughly by Alderson & Wall (1993) with proposing fifteen washback hypotheses, which clarify several washback concepts to facilitate corresponding researches in the future. Quite a lot of empirical researches on washback have been done in recent years covering a wide range of tests like O-level test in Sri Lanka (Wall, 2005), IELTS (Green, 2007) and China's CET (Gu, 2007). In empirical studies, students, teachers, textbook providers and educational policy makers are involved as objects of studies. As for research methods, questionnaire, interview and classroom observation are widely employed. As washback is known as a complex phenomenon, it is necessary to get both quantitative and qualitative data to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research.

To summarize, there are many factors involved in research on washback and it is impossible to develop an inclusive approach which is able to cover all aspects of washback. As a result, research purposes of washback should be seen as the top priority and then corresponding participants and methods can be determined based on them.

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants

The participants involved in this study were 1) 60 students participated in pilot questionnaire (all of them took CET-4 before) 2) 687 students took questionnaire (208 got over 425 in CET-4 while others did not) 3) 10 experienced English teachers and 15 students took the interview. All participants come from three application-oriented universities in Xi'an.

3.2 Procedures

The questionnaire used in this research is composed of multiple choice questions, fill-in blanks, five-level scale questions, ranking questions and short answers. It investigates test takers' evaluation of CET-4 and their preparation for it in and out of class, as well as their motivation and influencing factors in English learning. Questionnaire's design mainly refers to CET-4 examination syllabus, language points tested in previous years, college English teaching syllabus and literature review on washback effect. This study conducted a pilot experiment on the questionnaire at first. The author used SPSS 17.0 to analyze the pilot experimental data and test the reliability and construct validity of the questionnaire before determined the final questionnaire and interview topics.

A total of 810 questionnaires were sent out and 687 valid questionnaires were collected. The author conducts semi-structured interviews with questionnaire participants to verify and explain the results of the questionnaire. Interviews lasted about 15 minutes per person.

4. Findings and Discussion

68.2% of the students believe that CET-4's washback effect on their learning is mainly positive. Their learning depth and speed are greatly encouraged by the test. And the possible washback effect of CET-4 is shown in the table.

Table 1. Possible washback effect of CET-4

	Agree	Unclear	Disagree
Increases English learning time	92.1%	0.5%	7.4%
Encourages higher learning efficiency	81.3%	5.6%	13.1%
Finds out weakness in learning	72.5%	8.7%	18.8%
Provides learning objectives	93.4%	1.3%	5.3%
Increases pressure	89.2%	2.1%	8.7%
Enlarges vocabulary	95.6%	0.9%	3.4%
Affects the normal learning arrangement	61%	4.2%	34.8%
Improves listening competence	72.6%	2.7%	24.7%
Improves reading competence	61.8%	3.1%	35.1%
Improves oral English	38.3%	8.6%	53.1%
Improves writing competence	45.1%	6.3%	48.6%
Improves translation competence	81.9%	2.3%	15.8%

Improves overall competence	79.3 %	5.6%	15.1%
Improve the ability of English for Specific Purpose (ESP)	19.2 %	28.9%	51.9%

As is illustrated in the table, CET-4 enables most students to find language learning objectives and encourages them to spend longer time in English learning with higher efficiency, which evidently has positive washback for students. When it comes to the enhancement of language competence, participants believe their listening have been improved most notably when they are preparing for the test. Listening has been a long-neglected area in students learning, but it takes up 35% in CET-4 so students have to make elaborate preparations in listening to meet requirement. On the other hand, over half of the students argue their oral English has not witnessed improvement because oral English score is calculated separately and does not affect whether students can pass CET-4. Unfortunately, just like most high-stake tests, CET-4 has put great pressure on students with 89.2% of students supporting the statement that CET-4 increases pressure.

English teachers are also affected by CET-4. Over 90% of students said their teachers would not only share new trends of CET-4, but also practical techniques to cope with the test in class. Meanwhile, doing CET-4 exercises as class activity and after class assignment has become a regular basis. In the following interview, teachers pointed out that CET's passing rates have become an indicator to judge teaching quality. Consequently, they have to sacrifice some class hours to CET training.

5. Conclusion

The research found that CET-4's positive washback on students far outweighs its negative side, especially in terms of improving English listening, reading and translation competence. It also affects classroom teaching to some extent with teachers devoting class hours to training test-taking skills. Unfortunately, the test does not have obvious influence on Students' language pragmatic competence since passing the test has become the ultimate goal for them.

This research is only a preliminary study on the washback effect of CET-4, and the related follow-up studies need to be carried out with more diversified methods like classroom observation. The results of this research may provide inference for the reform of CET-4 and English teaching in application-oriented universities to some extent.

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