

A Study of the Washback Effects of TEM4 on English Teaching

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Abstract: As TEM 4 is a high-stakes and large-scale test, its washback effect has drawn the attention of many researchers. This paper aims to explore what washback effects TEM4 has on teaching and the nature of the washback effects. The findings showed TEM4 influenced teaching content, teaching method, teaching aim and teaching attitude. It has positive effects on English teaching, but it also causes some negative effects.

Keywords: TEM4; Washback effects; English teaching

1. Introduction

As TEM 4 is a high-stakes and large-scale test, its washback effect has drawn the attention of many researchers. However, the previous studies on washback effect of the TEM4 focus their participants on teachers and students in top universities and normal universities. Less research has been done to focus on the teachers and teaching in local universities. This study is intended to explore washback effects of TEM4 on teachers and teaching at the foundation stage in a local university. It aims to investigate what washback effects TEM4 has on English teaching the nature of the washback effects.

2. Literature Review

Washback is simply defined as the effect of testing on teaching and learning (Hughes, 2003). Since the 1990s, theoretical studies on washback have made great progress. Alderson and Wall's (1993) dichotomy and Hughes' (1993) trichotomy have tried to lay out the territories of washback study.

Many empirical studies on washback have been done on different types of the tests and in different parts of the world. Proficiency tests are usually large-scale tests. They assess test-takers' language proficiency so that important decision could be made. Gu and Peng (2010) did a longitudinal study to explore teachers' perceptions on washback effects of CET before and after the CET revision. Guo and Li (2012) explored the washback effect of IBT-CET on college English teachers' professional development. Zhou et al (2013) studied washback effect of IBT-CET on English reading teaching. Zou and Xu (2014) investigated the washback effects of TEM on English teaching and learning of English major students among English discipline leaders, teachers and students.

The previous studies mentioned above have greatly expanded the fields of washback studies and have enabled us to better understand the influence of English examination on English teaching and learning. However, they are limited in different ways. First, among the domestic studies in China, relatively less work has touched upon the washback effect of the TEM4 on English teaching. Second, the previous studies on washback effect of the TEM4 focus their participants on teachers and students in top universities and normal universities. Less research has been done to focus on the teachers and teaching in local universities.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

- (1) What washback effects does TEM4 have on English teaching?
- (2) Are they positive or negative?

3.2 Source of Data

In this study, questionnaire survey was first done to collect information from teachers. The questionnaire for teachers collected, in

its first part, teachers' personal information such as gender, age, professional titles and degree they obtained. In the second part, there were 26 items, one of which was open-ended and 25 of which were close-ended and scaled. The close-ended items were designed to examine washback effects of TEM4 on teaching from three aspects: teaching content (Items 4-8 and Items 14-19), teaching method (Items 9-13 and Items 20-25), and ways of assessing English proficiency (Items 1-3). The open-ended question was designed to investigate the nature of washback effects of TEM4 in the eyes of the teacher participants.

Moreover, classroom observations were conducted after the questionnaire surveys in this study. And interviews were used as a supplementary instrument to confirm the results in questionnaire surveys and to identify possible reasons of conflicting research findings.

3.3 Data Analysis

All the valid questionnaires were numbered and the data of close-ended questions in the questionnaires were put into computer and double checked. Mean values and Standard deviations of the data were generated with SPSS 18.0 (Statistical Program for the Social Sciences) for Windows. The answers got from the open-ended questions were classified. Results of classroom observations analyzed in the aid of the coding scheme were checked carefully to avoid the mistakes and were then transcribed and analyzed. Interview notes and records were transcribed, summarized and classified.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of washback effect of TEM4 on teaching will be presented in the four aspects: teaching content, teaching method, ways of assessing and positive and negative effects of TEM4 on teaching.

4.1 Influence on Teaching Content

As is shown in data, the teachers adopted more authentic materials such as English newspapers, magazines and novels instead of TEM4 reading materials to help students to improve their reading ability. For writing and listening, both the ability-oriented and test-oriented materials were adopted. In interviews, teachers admitted that when the test contents were changed and it is close to the time of the test, they would adjust their teaching contents but the SD value of Item 11 indicated that different teachers were influenced to different degrees.

Classroom observations show that the change of teaching contents could be seen in both of the two groups of students. In the freshmen group, the teaching of vocabulary in intensive reading was influenced by TEM4. As for listening, dictation was added to class activities as a result of TEM4 washback effect, though it needed further check in interviews. In the sophomore group, intensive reading class turned out to be TEM4 preparation class since TEM4 test exercises instead of learning the text in textbook. In listening, dictation and VOA or BBC news were added. As for writing, the learning order of the textbook was changed. In general, teaching contents were influenced by TEM4 especially to sophomores, but some lessons were not influenced.

4.2 Influence on Teaching Method

Data about the influence on teaching methods in general showed that TEM4 could encourage teachers to adopt teaching methods of enhancing students' comprehensive language use ability more frequently than the teaching methods of enhancing students' test-taking skills. Teaching methods were not influenced by TEM4 when it was close to TEM4 and when its test contents were changed. However, the SD of Item 16 indicated that some teachers would change their teaching methods when it was close to the time of TEM4. It needed further analysis.

Data about the influence on teaching methods of specific skills showed that teachers often encourage students to enhance their communicative ability and seldom train the students in test-taking skills in listening and they usually explain the text styles and cultural background instead of imitating TEM4 reading comprehension in reading. However, the SD value of Item 22 showed teachers were influenced differently which was seen in classroom observation and teachers' interview.

In classroom observations, different teaching methods were observed in writing class to freshmen and to sophomores. Teacher B in writing class to freshmen used student-centered teaching methods. In writing class to sophomores, teacher's explanation was the main way in teaching and less time was given to students to do exercise. Some Chinese was used in teachers' explanation. The similar situation occurred in intensive reading class.

In teachers' interviews, most teachers like Teacher B admitted that they could not change their teaching methods owing to TEM4. Only Teacher C and Teacher D changed their teaching methods. The data collected in class observation and interview could further explain that different teachers were influenced differently by TEM4 in their teaching methods.

To sum up, TEM4 could help teachers to concentrate their teaching methods on improving students' language use ability. Most of the teachers would not change their teaching methods because of the test. However, some teachers changed their teaching methods,

especially when it was close to the time of TEM4. This showed that TEM4 influenced some teachers differently.

4.3 Influence on Ways of Assessing

Data about the influence on ways of assessing showed that teachers did not think they should imitate TEM4 in final exams and class tests. They thought various question types should be used in final exam and the question types should be chosen according to test contents. In teachers' interviews, most teachers admitted that they used various question types in the final exams and they chose the question types according to the testing aim and testing content. From the data collected from the questionnaires and teachers' interviews, it could be concluded that TEM4 did not influence the ways of assessing and the ways of assessing are mainly determined by testing aim and testing content.

4.4 Positive and Negative Effects of TEM4 on Teaching

Data collected from the open-ended question in teachers' questionnaires showed that TEM4 have both positive effects and negative effects on teaching.

TEM4 brought about positive effects on teaching. It was mentioned that TEM4 could encourage teachers to focus their teaching on the enhancement of students' comprehensive language use ability. Therefore, it could promote the English teaching. TEM4 could provide motivation to teaching and useful feedback to teaching outcomes.

Besides positive effects, some negative effects of TEM4 were pointed out. It was mentioned by some teachers that TEM4 caused some test-taking activities which interrupted the normal teaching to some extent. TEM4 caused utilitarian thoughts in teachers so that helping students to pass TEM4 became one of the teaching aims. Generally speaking, TEM4 has negative effects on teaching contents, teaching attitude and teaching aim.

To sum up, TEM4 has both positive effects and negative effects on teaching. It could promote teaching and provide good feedback to teaching outcomes. However, it caused utilitarian thoughts in teachers so that test-taking exercises were adopted in classroom teaching which disturb the normal teaching activities.

5. Conclusion

In general, TEM4 influenced teaching content, teaching method, teaching aim and teaching attitude. TEM4 could motivate teachers to concentrate their teaching contents and teaching methods on the improvement of students' comprehensive language use ability. However, TEM4 caused utilitarian thoughts in teachers and led teachers to adjust their teaching aim. It was noteworthy that TEM4 provided more washback effects on teaching contents than on teaching methods and ways of assessing and TEM4 affected different teachers to different extent.

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