

A Case Study of the Washback Effects of TEM4 on English Learning

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Abstract: As a high-stake and criterion-referenced test, washback effect of TEM4 has attracted the attention of many researchers. This paper aims to explore what washback effects TEM4 has on learning, the nature of washback effects and the causes of washback effects. The findings showed TEM4 has washback effects on various aspects of English learning in the local university, including positive effects and some negative effects. Two main factors were observed to cause negative effects.

Keywords: TEM4; Washback effects; English teaching

1. Introduction

As a high-stake and criterion-referenced test, TEM4 may provide directive and dominant influence on learning by the feedback information. Therefore, washback effect of TEM4 has drawn the attention of many researchers. However, not many studies have touched upon the washback effects of TEM4 on English learning. The present study is intended to explore washback effects of TEM4 on students at the foundation stage in a local university. It aims to investigate what washback effects TEM4 has on English learning, the nature of washback effects and the causes of washback effects.

2. Literature Review

Some researchers have offered great number of definitions of washback in their studies. It is determinable that washback is a complex phenomenon and can be defined as the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Some researchers have proposed theoretical hypotheses and models to represent the working mechanism of washback.

Besides theoretical studies, many empirical studies on washback have been done on different types of the tests and in different parts of the world. As to the tests for English majors, TEM, draws the attention of researchers who conducted studies on washback effects of TEM. Li (2010) studied washback effects of TEM8 on English teaching and learning in Southwest Jiaotong University. Xu (2012) studied foreign language experts' and English discipline leaders' perceptions of TEM8 and TEM8 washback. 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 contributes a lot to the fields of washback studies and makes the influence of English examination on English teaching and learning to be better understood. However, the researches about TEM washback effect are limited. Among all the studies of TEM washback, they focus their participants on students in top universities and normal universities. Less research has been done to focus on the students and learning in local universities.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

- (1) What washback effects does TEM4 have on English learning?
- (2) Are they positive or negative?
- (3) What are the effect factors leading to the washback effects of TEM4 on learning?

3.2 Source of Data

In this study, questionnaire survey was first done to collect information from students. The questionnaire consisted of two parts.

In the first part, personal information was collected, such as gender, grade, scores in NMET. The second part consisted of 26 items in which 25 close-ended items and one open-ended item. The close ended items were designed to examine the TEM4 washback on learning from three aspects: learning content (Items 4-8 and Items 14-19), learning method (Items 9-13 and Items 20-25) and learning motivation (Items 1-3). The open-ended question was designed to investigate the nature of washback effects of TEM4 on learning in the students' eyes.

After questionnaire, interviews were applied 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. Interview notes and records were transcribed, summarized and classified.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of washback effects of TEM4 on learning will be presented in the following five aspects: learning content, learning method, learning motivation, the nature of washback effects of TEM4 on learning and factors for the positive and negative effects.

4.1 Influence on Learning Content

Data about influence on learning contents presented that students in the two groups agreed that their learning contents were influenced by TEM4. Freshmen thought they concentrated their learning contents on the improvement of their comprehensive language use ability and they would change their learning contents when it was close to TEM4 and when the test content was changed. Sophomores admitted that they changed their learning contents to prepare for TEM4. It also showed in the data that freshmen and sophomores chose different materials to improve their reading, listening and writing. Compared with freshmen, sophomores decreased the use of authentic materials in reading and various types of writing materials in writing but increased the use of authentic materials in listening. One of possible reasons is that VOA or BBC news were the listening test contents, but this need further proving.

In students' interviews, all students stated that TEM4 influenced their learning contents. Freshmen thought that the learning of vocabulary, grammar and listening was influenced by TEM4. Sophomores admitted that they paid more attention in TEM4 model exercises and they adjusted their learning content when they were close to the time of TEM4. They mentioned that TEM4 is one of the reasons to listen to VOA or BBC news.

It can be concluded that TEM4 had influences on students' learning content, especially when they were close to the test and the test contents were changed. TEM4 could help students to focus on the improvement of their language use ability. However, TEM4 influenced sophomore students more than freshmen, especially in the use of TEM4 model exercises.

4.2 Influence on Learning Method

This study has found that learning methods of students in the two groups was influenced by TEM4. They usually adopted learning methods on enhancing their comprehensive language use ability, but they would change their learning methods to prepare for the test when they were close to the test. However, the change of test content did not cause the change of learning methods. One possible reason was that although TEM4 added some new contents in grammar and materials of reading and listening were lengthened, the test contents and test format did not changed so much as to cause the change of learning methods.

In students' interviews, the sophomore students' learning methods were more influenced by TEM4. The change of test content could encourage students to learn more and study harder.

In general, TEM4 influenced students' learning methods. TEM4 guided them to choose the learning methods of improving their language use ability and it also caused the use of test-taking methods. However, the change of test contents did not bring about the change of learning methods, for the test contents comply with the Teaching Syllabus and they could not be changed a lot to cause the change of learning methods. It was also observed that sophomore students were influenced more than freshmen in learning methods.

4.3 Influence on Learning Motivation

From the data about influence on learning motivation, it was seen that finding a good job in the future and passing TEM4 were the main motivations of students in the two groups of students.

In students' interview, they explained the relationship between these two motivations. They admitted that passing TEM4 was an important short-term learning motivation and passing TEM4 would be helpful to find a good job in future.

All in all, students were motivated by both passing TEM4 and finding a good job in future. Passing TEM4 was the short-term learning motivation and it served for the long-term motivation: finding a good job.

4.4 Positive and Negative Effects of TEM4 on Learning

Data collected from the open-ended question in students' questionnaire indicated that TEM4 had both positive effects and negative effects on learning.

TEM4 brought about positive effects on learning. It was mentioned that TEM4 could help students to improve their language use ability and could provide motivation which made them study harder and spend more time on learning. TEM4 let students know their shortcomings and gave them a chance to make up for what they fail to achieve in their learning. Representative ideas were reported below.

TEM4 was also criticized by their negative effects on learning. Students mentioned that TEM4 caused stress and anxiety to them. They considered passing the exam as one of their learning aim, so that test-taking exercises which disturbed their normal learning were chosen as learning contents.

To sum up, TEM4 has both positive effects and negative effects on learning. It could motivate students to study harder to improve their language use ability. TEM4 also provided good feedback on learning outcomes. However, TEM4 caused anxiety to students and led students to adjust their learning aim especially when students were close to the time of the test.

4.5 Effect factors for the Positive and Negative Effects

As is indicated in the findings of the questionnaires, TEM4 could encourage teachers and students to concentrate their teaching and learning on improving students' comprehensive language use ability. That is why TEM4 has positive effects on teaching and learning.

Students' perceptions of importance of TEM4 contributed to the negative effects of TEM4. In the interviews to students, it was observed that students regarded TEM4 as very important exam to evaluate their teaching and learning outcomes. Students even considered TEM4 scores as one of key factors in their job-hunting, because TEM4 scores are used by some organizations to recruit employees. Students' perceptions of importance of TEM4 led them to adjust their learning aim so that some test-taking activities occurred.

The conflict between students' eagerness to pass the exam and their poor language foundation was another factor to cause negative effects. Since the students who participated in this study had rather weak foundation in English, such weakness led students to practice on test-taking contents and methods so as to pass the exam, even though they knew clearly that their learning aim was to improve their ability to use the English language. This conflict was also an important factor for teachers to adjust their teaching aim especially when students were close to the time of the exam.

5. Conclusion

All in all, TEM4 influenced learning content, learning method, learning aim and learning motivation. TEM4 could motivate students to concentrate their learning contents and learning methods on the improvement of their comprehensive language use ability. However, TEM4 led students to adjust their learning aim, so that test-taking activities occurred in their learning. It was noteworthy that TEM4 provided more washback effects on sophomore students than freshmen.

References:

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