

The Washback Effect on Chinese EFL Teaching: Balancing Fluency and Accuracy in Chinese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: The effects of testing systems on curriculum design, teaching practices, and learning behaviors are called the “washback effect” (Shohamy et al., 1996). This paper will focus on the current problems in the Chinese English testing system (CETS) and its influences on curriculum, teaching practices, and learning behaviors to show how washback negatively affects English teaching and learning in China. I will also offer possible solutions for improving Chinese English teaching situations.

We use the testing standard to modify our teaching practices. Our students will learn more comprehensively when we improve our teaching practices. In addition, because of the complexity of the washback effects and the ever-growing testing industry, knowing the testing system comprehensively is becoming more necessary (Saltana, 2018 & Kuang, 2020). In China, many English teachers say, “This knowledge is not included in the tests, and we do not need to focus on it.” Such an utterance indicated that teachers’ curriculums and teaching practices in China are always test-guided. So, exploring testing allows teachers to revisit their curriculums and teaching practices and develop updated teaching methods. Students’ learning behaviors can also be modified.

Keywords: Chinese EFL classrooms; Testing System; Washback Effect

1. Problems in the Chinese English Testing System

To improve Chinese testing-guided teaching practices, scholars have provided a framework for improvement by researching the CETS for many years (Cheng, 2008; Zheng & Cheng, 2008; Sun & Henrichsen, 2011; Jin & Fan, 2011; Wang, 2017). They focused on different English tests in China, but all indicate that CETS marginalizes speaking assessments. Based on Cheng (2008), CETS just began to develop recently (p. 15). Sun and Henrichsen (2011) give a detailed explanation of this situation. Because of the Cultural Revolution in China, China lost connections with Western countries, which inevitably caused a lack of English studying and testing (p. 2). After the Cultural Revolution, English learning and testing began to grow in China. However, Sun and Henrichsen (2011) defined Chinese English tests as “high-stakes English examinations” (p. 2), meaning zero tolerance for mistakes and standard answers. Such a zero-tolerance policy on English tests causes a lack of expressions of students’ opinions. Speaking tests are marginalized in Chinese English Tests, possibly because speaking tests have no standard answers.

Scholars described different Chinese English tests to introduce the marginalization of speaking ability in high-stake English tests. For example, Zheng and Cheng (2008) introduced the College English Test (CET), which is designed to examine students’ English proficiency (p. 409). This exam has several components: listening, reading, cloze, writing, and an optional speaking part (p. 412). The optional speaking section is strange because it hinted a conflict. The test wants to ensure Chinese undergraduates have all necessary abilities in English, but setting up the speaking section as optional wrongly indicates that speaking is not a mandatory ability in English. Similarly, Jin and Fan (2011) describe the test for English Majors (TEM). This test has goals similar to those of CET but is only for English-major students. In this test, translation, grammar, and all English abilities except speaking are assessed, and if students want to measure their speaking abilities, they need to pay an extra registration fee (p. 589). Test takers can make their own choices on whether to take the speaking test. It is ridiculous. Test takers must be measured on their speaking abilities without exceptions, especially for English-major students who might become English teachers in the future.

People may argue that those tests ignore speaking ability because it may have already been assessed before attending university. However, Wang (2017) says Chinese college students’ behaviors are disappointing because they do not have the necessary abilities

beforehand, resulting from lacking speaking assessments in the Chinese College Entrance Examination (CCEE). The assessment of students' speaking ability is absent in English tests in China, and it is an urgent issue that remains in the CETES. CETES marginalized speaking assessments. The Chinese English curriculum, Chinese English teaching practices, and students' learning perceptions toward speaking are negatively affected.

2. Washback Effect on Chinese EFL Classrooms

Curriculum design. Some articles (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Xu & Fan, 2017) debrief the negative influences on curriculum standards caused by the one-sided CETES. Adamson and Morris (1997) researched the development of the English curriculum in China, showing that the Chinese English curriculum mainly focused on reading and writing competence because of the non-speaking test system before 2015. Several interviewees in the article said they were asked to create sentences and write them down during English classes (p. 9 and p. 13). This activity provided an opportunity for students to write English and practice grammar. Students did not have a chance to practice their oral-communication strategies. This lack of focus on speaking ability changed slightly in the curriculum after 2015. In Xu and Fan's (2017) article, they reviewed the contents of Adamson and Morris's (1997) article. They supported that the Chinese English curriculum focused on the "silent abilities" of Chinese students before 2015. However, they supplement that newer English teaching guidelines since 2015 began to stress the importance of English's practical use because some testing systems like TEM optionally assess speaking ability (p. 274). So, the new curriculum guideline said, "Students need to participate in the daily dialogues at a slow speed" (p. 274). However, slow speed is insufficient because students cannot just interact with others slowly in everyday life. In other words, the authentic focus is still weakened here. Although the newer English teaching guideline emphasizes practical use, it is still not that authentic because of the optional English-speaking test. (Xu and Fan, 2017). Curriculums marginalized the speaking component because of the optional speaking tests, and teachers also focus less on speaking training because of the not-mandatory speaking tests.

Teaching Practice. Some studies (Sun, Wei, & Young, 2022; Hu, 2010) show that teachers keep using their old teaching practices to focus on grammar teaching because of the optional speaking assessment. Sun and her colleagues (2022) researched teachers' teaching practices and their feelings about adding oral practices in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)-based classes. They found that during students' communicative activities like role-plays, they had to focus on students' grammar accuracy and disturb students' activities to emphasize accurate grammar because the tests would assess students' abilities to identify different grammar rules (p. 387). Excessive attention to grammatical accuracy inevitably leads to weak attention to students' pronunciations and their formations of critical thinking. Also, disturbing students from their oral activities would prevent them from using English to communicate with others. In other words, students passively receive grammatical knowledge most of the time, but this differs from the emphasis of CLT. One of the interviewees said that they needed to focus on grammar accuracy because this is the part that will be counted for students' final grades in their exams. The speaking test can be waived when counting grades. Theoretical support for this opinion can be found in Hu (2010). Hu's (2010) article introduces the definition of CLT and compares CLT applications in Western countries and China. Hu (2010) says, "Proponents of the communicative approach insist that teaching focuses on fluency. While in Chinese traditional classroom, linguistic accuracy is of primary importance" (p. 80). In other words, because of the accuracy-heavy testing system, teachers ignore students' fluency in using English. Also, because of the optional speaking tests, some teachers think accuracy should be prioritized, but Hu (2010) argues that both accuracy and fluency should be regarded as the same essential components in English learning (p. 80). I agree with Hu's opinion that teachers should find a balanced way to deal with both accuracy-heavy tests and fluency-oriented tests, although speaking tests are optional.

Students' Perspectives. To fill the gaps on CETES's influences on students, some articles (Huang & Hu, 2016; Xiao & Carless, 2013; He, 2013) focus on students' learning behaviors and their preferences when choosing in-class activities. Students tend to avoid speaking tests because they feel nervous (He, 2013, p. 347), and they must improve their accuracy to pass the high-skate tests (He, 2013, p. 339). So, they accept in-class activities if their teachers require them, but they have clear preferences toward specific activities. For example, Huang and Hu (2016) found that all students prefer recreational activities like role plays and song cloze (p. 90 and p. 92). Based on the description of different activities, role-plays require students to use what they learned during classes to engage in the dialogues, and song clozes need them to write down what they have heard in a song. The tests require students to have a high level of accuracy. So, students prefer role-plays because they help them to practice grammar structures. Students prefer song clozes because this activity allows them to practice listening and spelling the words, which are assessed without exception. Students prefer activities that help them increase their accuracy. Such a situation of only focusing on improving accuracy is not uncommon in China. Xiao and Carless (2013) found that most participants followed their teachers' guidelines and focused on vocabulary and

reading-writing competencies (p. 326). Participants believed that focusing on those abilities helped them to get good grades, and they invisibly overlooked their speaking competence.

3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

Based on the literature reviews, the only researched tests are CET, TEM, and CCEE. We still need to learn the situations of speaking assessment in other examinations like Senior High School Entrance Examinations in China (SHSEE). To understand CETS more comprehensively, some focused studies on SHSEE should be added. All the mentioned studies agree that the Chinese English Testing System negatively influences three components of teaching-learning interactions. However, for the curriculum standards research, the newest curriculum standard mentioned in the literature reviews is the version published in 2015. There is a possible gap between the 2015 and after-year updates on curriculum standards. So, some research on curriculum standards after 2015 should be conducted. Then, for the teaching practice research and students' perceptions research, there is a shared problem. We admit that teaching practices and students' behaviors tend to focus more on non-speaking abilities to get better grades because of the test system, but the sample size is small. We cannot use only one hundred participants or dozens of people to represent China's whole population. In addition, all studies were conducted in some major cities in China. Some regional biases may exist in those studies. So, more studies that contain more participants and focus on different regions should be finished. Finally, those studies mainly choose university students as their participants, and more focus on teenagers and pupils should also be considered in future research.

4. Applying Findings to Educational Practices

Although literature reviews showed that speaking abilities are still marginalized in CETS, the testing system has changed from non-speaking tests (Adamson & Morris, 1997) to speaking-optional tests (Zheng and Cheng, 2008 & Jin and Fan, 2011). The curriculum standards changed from reading and writing (Adamson & Morris, 1997) to engaging in daily conversations (Xu & Fan, 2017). So, as educators, we should initially be aware that the test systems and curriculums are updatable, and the optional speaking tests may become mandatory in the future. We need to prepare in advance.

Understandably, teachers do not want to challenge the testing norms in China (Sun et al., 2022). However, teachers themselves can freely change the exam forms in their classrooms by requiring presentations and discussion leadings so that students can reduce their speaking anxiety and prepare for the growing emphasis on speaking ability (He, 2013; Xiao & Carless, 2013) and remain the traditional written tests, which focus on accuracy. Then, Sun, Wei, and Young (2022) indicate that although the speaking assessment is optional in current CETS, teachers are still trying to add some communicative activities like role-plays so that students have chances to practice their speaking abilities. Role-plays are preferable among students (Huang & Hu, 2016). So, we can build a more communicative classroom based on students' preferences. Role-plays are our frameworks for changing our classrooms. This intentional change does not mean giving up traditional language teaching. We still cannot purely use communicative approaches to only focus on fluency. Instead, we need to concentrate on both fluency and accuracy (Hu, 2010) to feasibly deal with the current test system, which is both accuracy-heavy and fluency-hinted. Specifically, we can intendedly embed grammatical points in the activities, let students learn grammar, and practice their speaking fluency simultaneously. In such a classroom, students should be given chances to practice speaking, and teachers should give instructions on grammar afterward rather than disturbing students directly (Sun et al., 2022). Finally, most English testing is designed for university-age students (Zheng & Cheng, 2008; Sun & Henrichsen, 2011; Jin & Fan, 2011; Wang, 2017). So, they may need a more advanced teaching syllabus for fluency-accuracy-balanced classes to succeed in the tests. I advocate using primary school students as the experimental units to try this accuracy-plus-fluency English language teaching first and then gradually infiltrate all students.

Conclusion

In Chinese English Teaching, the lack of speaking assessments in tests causes marginalization of speaking ability in curriculum, teaching practices, and learning behaviors. Such washback effects have negative influences on Chinese students' English learning. Hopefully, this article can help educators realize that knowing the testing system helps us frame our teaching practices and curriculum design. The testing system is changeable, and our teaching practices should also be updatable under the guidance of testing norms. Specifically, because speaking abilities are increasingly emphasized in our testing system, focusing on both accuracy and fluency is our goal. We can use communicative activities as a medium, allowing students to practice speaking and teachers to teach grammar, as shown in the activities simultaneously. Moreover, this is a cooperative and long-lasting process that needs different communities' efforts. Once our teaching practices focus on both accuracy and fluency, our students can receive comprehensive English learning and adapt to this developing testing system.

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