

# An Investigation of the Washback Effect of the New National Matriculation English Test (NMET) on Senior Three English Teaching in a State High School in Hunan China

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**Abstract:** The National Matriculation English Test (NMET) is one of the compulsory parts of China's college entrance examination that is designed and organized yearly by the National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA). In addition to improving the fairness and authority of the NMET, as a high-stake test, allowing it to play the guiding role in high school English teaching and learning is one of most important reasons for its continuous reform. Hunan province located in central China has undergone two major NMET reforms in the last four years, which has had a great impact on high school English teaching and learning and this phenomenon is called the washback effect in the field of language education.

**Keywords:** Washback Effect; The NMET Reform; The New NMET; Teaching Improvement

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## 1. Context

The school is a state high school with a history of more than 60 years, which is known locally for its high university enrollment rate every year and is rated as a key high school by the Hunan Education Department. This high school currently has approximately 4,400 students and around 250 teachers in total. There are 3 grades with 18-20 classes in each grade within this school.

Basically, there are at least 1 forty-five-minute English classes conducted in each high school class from Monday to Friday in this school and these are all taught through Chinese. Different from the senior grade one and two, the school will often arrange extra remedial English classes for senior three students on the weekend in order to help students get high scores in the NMET.

## 2. Washback effect of the new NMET on teaching

### 2.1 Teaching materials

It is noticeable that the main teaching materials used by teachers in senior three now are the new NMET model test papers, previous authentic test papers and test preparation materials, taking up 100%. Regarding the change in the main teaching materials after the new NMET reform, 80% of teachers admitted that their main teaching materials had changed in frequency and contents.

“In fact, the textbooks we used now is still the old version compiled 10 years ago, which contains very few passages, the contents are out of date and lack of authenticity. This series of text books do not conform to the new requirement of the NMET. Thus we need to find a lot of supplementary materials from the internet or other original English books for students to read and study in order to enable students to better adapt to the new NMET and get good scores.” (Teacher B explained)

However, this situation contradicts the arguments of Pearson (1988) and Spratt (2005); They note that the new test

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has a strong washback effect on the textbook writers and publishers thus promote the application of the new textbooks. The reason why new textbooks have not been used in the context yet might be because stakeholders need to take time to adapt the reforms (Wall, 1997). Also, a further 20 percent of teachers thought that the main teaching materials they used have not changed after the reform, which is matched with one of Alderson and Wall's (1993) hypotheses that the test only produces washback for some teachers, not all.

## 2.2 Teaching contents

A total of 60% of teachers think their teaching content has changed since the reform, teacher a explained in depth in the interview as follows:

“The new NMET reflects the requirements of the new curriculum standards namely strengthening exam students' culture background knowledge and reading ability, which especially reflects in there a ding test of the new NMET. Hence, we now not only to pay more attention to selecting various forms of discourse for students to learn but also help students understand more relevant background and cultural knowledge based on the discourse content as well.”

## 2.3 Teaching activities

In terms of the changes in the aspect of teaching activities, the data from the questionnaire indicates that all participants have changes in this aspect and those could be summarized in four main aspects.

Firstly, all teachers help students review the grammar and vocabulary according to the new testing syllabus instead of the previous one. This is principally because “The testing syllabus has also been reformed”. The reason written by participants in the questionnaire could reflect again that testing instead of the curriculum standards determines what is taught by the teacher (Read and Hayes, 2003).

Secondly, teachers would not ask students to do grammar practice separately as often as before. More than half the teachers never ask students to do separately grammar practice in class now. In response to the question some teachers commented in the questionnaire that “Since the new NMET deleted the previous exam of single-choice grammar items”, “Because the grammar items in the new NMET are all designed based on the different discourse with specific context”.

Thirdly, teachers would let students practice their reading skills more often than before. Nearly 100% of teachers would always ask their students to practice reading in the class now since they thought that “The question items in new NMET are all designed based on articles” and “the new NMET more emphasized on students' reading ability”.

Fourthly, there are as many as 8 teachers admitted that they would often teach test-taking skills in class, as “the proportion of multiple-choice questions increases dramatically in the new NMET”, and “In order to enable students to achieve high scores in a short time”. However, Smith (1991) argues that teachers in order to help students get desired scores in the test in a short period of time, will teach students some relevant test-taking skills instead of focusing on help students to understand knowledge itself, which does not develop students' real knowledge level and ability of critical thinking.

## 3. Implications for more positive washback effects on teaching in the context

First of all, improving teachers' professionalism degree and their ability to apply the new teaching method by strengthening teacher's education and training. Secondly, in order to improve this situation, schools should reduce the teaching pressure on teachers by improving the rewards policy and guide teachers to arrange teaching in a scientific and reasonable way.

The Ministry of Education of Hunan province should accelerate the reform on teaching materials especially on textbooks, helping promote the more positive impact of the new NMET on teaching. Additionally, the NEEA could appropriately add some subjective question items to balance the proportion and the score of objective questions in the new NMET for improving the test validity, so that the new NMET can better guide the teaching.

## 4. Conclusion

The new NMET reform has brought some changes in senior three English teaching and some applicable and useful suggestions involving further joint efforts of relevant stakeholders were proposed to deal with these problems for promoting more positive washback effect of the new NMET on high school English teaching in this school.

However, the size of sample of this present study was small with only 10 current senior three English teachers which may not provide rich quantitative data to strengthen the reliability of the findings in this research. Secondly, this research only investigates one aspect of the washback namely teaching. Hence, the washback of the new NMET would be more complete and comprehensive by exploring both teaching and learning.

## References

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