

Washback Effects of New CET-4 Reading On College English Instruction

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I. Instruction

Washback is an important research subject in language testing. Wash back of language examination refers to the effect of it to language teaching. College English Test Band 4 (abbreviated as CET4 hereafter) is regarded as a standardized national high-stakes test in China. It has been a hot research subject and has been studied from every aspect since 1987. Both its advantages and disadvantages have been pointed out. However, little empirical research has been conducted on wash back of CET4. The present study is a preliminary investigation aiming to reveal the CET4's wash back on college English teaching and learning.

II. Literature review

1. Definitions of Wash back

There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and passing rates are used as a measure of teachers' success. This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as wash back by language testers) is of course, very important. This wash back can be either beneficial or harmful.

2. Theoretical Studies of wash back

This part reviews the most important wash back hypotheses and models proposed by Alderson and Wall's wash back hypotheses and Hughes' participants-process(es)-products(s) model and their propositions on improving positive wash back. These hypotheses and models serve as the theoretic foundations for this study.

3. Previous Empirical Study of Wash back

The empirical studies of wash back mainly focus on three aspects: the nature of wash back, the working mechanism of wash back, and strategies to promote positive

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wash back and avoid negative wash back. The empirical studies of wash back can be basically classified into two types: one concerns those of large-scale tests such as TOEFL(Alderson& Hamp-Lyons, 1996) and NMET(National Matriculation English Test in China)(Qi, 2005); the other involves some important local language tests(Wall & Alderson, 1993; Shohamy et al. 1996; Cheng 1995, 1998, 1999;Saif, 2006). These researchers employ such similar methods as interview, questionnaire, classroom observation and comparative survey. The findings suggest that a test influences teaching and learning as a whole, and such influence may be positive in nature, but it also varies in terms of the test itself and the purpose of the test. Those studies seem to imply that wash back effects of a test will vary over time. These empirical studies of wash back effects of tests serve as important references for the present study.

4. Wash back study in China

Since the implementation of CET in 1987, researchers have made relevant studies of CET and its wash back effects on college English teaching and learning from different perspectives and dimensions, which, in all, include eight facets: oral test and wash back (Chen, 2001, 2002; Tang, 2004; Zhang, 2004; Huang, 2006), writing and wash back (Li, 2000; Cai,2002; Chu, 2006), wash back and teaching (Dai, 2002; Han, 2002, 2004; Huang, 2002; Li, 2002; Chen, 2004; Jin, 2006), wash back and teaching & learning (Li, 2005; Qi, 2006; Cai, 2007; Chen, 2007; Jiang, 2007), score report (Yang, 2001), CET design (Han, 2000; Zhu, 2001; Bao, 2004). Studies of CET and its wash back effects bear two characteristics: empirical studies involving interviews, questionnaire surveys and classroom observations and a comparative study of CET with other international high-stakes tests, which was conducted by Liu Runqing(2003). As is mentioned in the introduction of research context, since the earliest reformed CET4 was held in December, 2006, there have been a few empirical studies of reformed CET4 and its wash back effects on teaching and learning.

III. Methods

1. Purposes

The first section has provided a theoretical framework for further research into wash back, which helps to conceive and develop the present design. Based on the previous theoretical framework, the present study aims to 1) examine the nature and intensity of wash back of

new CET Band-4 reading test on college teaching and learning; 2) examine the influence of new CET Band-4 reading test on different aspects of teaching and learning proposed in Alderson&Wall's Wash back Hypothesis.

To investigate these issues, this study employs two instruments: experiment and questionnaire. Firstly, an experiment was conducted among 188 college students who were in their fourth semester. Secondly, two questionnaires were carried out, with the aim to find out the influences of the new CET Band-4 reading test on different aspects of teaching and learning.

2. Experimental study

Generally speaking, the present study aims to find out whether or not the new CET Band-4 reading test can achieve beneficial wash back effect on English teaching and learning. The experiment lasted 7 weeks from April, 2011 to May, 2011. The participants were the second-year non-English majors in four classes, with two as an experimental group, to which some reading tasks related to new CET Band-4 reading test were given at a regular level, and the others as a control group, to which some reading tasks related to traditional CET Band-4 reading test were given regularly. After seven-week experiment, their reading performance was measured to find out whether the two groups had different reading performance.

3. Design of questionnaires

In addition to the experimental study, questionnaires were carried out after the post test. According to Alderson and Wall's 15 Wash back Hypotheses, the following hypotheses are put forward for further investigation and at the same time several research questions are posed to examine how wash back influences College English teaching and learning. Questionnaires were designed based on the following hypotheses.

- (1) CET Band-4 reading test will influence attitude of teaching.
- (2) CET Band-4 reading test will influence attitude of learning.
- (3) CET Band-4 reading test will influence objective of teaching.
- (4) CET Band-4 reading test will influence objective of learning.
- (5) CET Band-4 reading test will influence time allotment of teaching.
- (6) CET Band-4 reading test will influence time allotment of learning.
- (7) CET Band-4 reading test will influence teaching content.
- (8) CET Band-4 reading test will influence learning content.
- (9) CET Band-4 reading test will influence teaching material selection.
- (10) CET Band-4 reading test will influence learning material selection.
- (11) CET Band-4 reading test will influence teaching method.

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(12) CET Band-4 reading test will influence learning method.

Questionnaires are to produce a series of statistical figures regarding how the new CET Band-4 reading test influences English teaching and learning. Questionnaires are designed for CE teachers and students respectively in this research. The questionnaires are in Chinese in order to make the participants read easier.

The teacher's questionnaire is composed of 3 parts with 21 questions, 9 of which are multiple-choice questions and the rest are scaled questions.

The first part consists of 3 questions. At the beginning, the author has depicted definitions of wash back, positive wash back and negative wash back on the questionnaire paper. CE teachers are required to show their general perceptions on positive and negative CET Band-4 reading wash back effects in their teaching.

The second part is composed of 6 questions, addressing the following issues: teachers' attitude towards teaching reading (question 4-6), their teaching objectives (question 7) and the time allotted during the fourth term (question 8-9).

The last part is to investigate CE teacher's different opinions on teaching attitudes, teaching content, material selection and teaching methods. It is made up of 12 questions, this scaled questions range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (i.e. strongly agree=1, almost agree=2, no view=3, almost disagree=4, strongly disagree=5).

The questionnaire to students is designed in a similar way, with modification of some items to make them more appropriate from students' perspectives. It's also made up of 3 parts.

The first part also requires students to give their general perceptions on positive and negative wash back effects produced by the test in their learning processes.

The second part involves 8 questions, which are intended to investigate students' standpoint on learning attitude, objective, CE teachers' teaching objective and time allotment.

The third part comprises 12 scaled questions, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (i.e. strongly agree=1, almost agree=2, no view=3, almost disagree=4, strongly disagree=5).

IV. Findings

The investigation shows that the new CET Band-4 reading test has produced positive and negative effects on CE teaching and learning. But on the whole, positive wash back is superior to negative wash back. According to data, a majority of CE teachers and learners acknowledge that the test has yielded much more positive wash back than negative wash back on teaching and learning. The positive wash back of the new CET Band-4 reading test

mainly lies in the following two aspects:

First, students are more motivated by the test to learning reading. Their attitudes towards reading learning are serious due to the test. Second, most of the teachers and students confess that owing to the new CET Band-4 reading test, time allotted to teach and learn reading is increasing. Interest in reading and increase in time allotment jointly promote CE reading learning for CE learners and enhance overall improvement of non-English majors' reading abilities to a great extent.

The negative wash back effects are listed as follows:

First, the new CET Band-4 reading test causes slight deviation from College English Syllabus. A few students have taken passing the test as their learning objective, which is deviated from the College English Syllabus. Second, owing to high pressure from the test, a great many CE learners just use test-related papers as the main reading material. Some good English articles at home and abroad are seldom chosen as their reading materials. Hence, it can be concluded that the new CET Band-4 reading test has confined range of CE learners' reading materials to some extent. Third, a number of students' learning methods are mainly "learning to the test".

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Biodata

My name is Song Hua. I was born on May 6th 1979. I am Korean minority coming from Jilin Province, China. I was a teacher of English College at Yanbian University before my coming here. I began to teach English as a full-time instructor from 2001 at Yanbian University. From 2004 to 2007, I was a postgraduate student and gained the Art Master's Degree in 2007. Now I am in Ph. D. Program of English Education Department, Education College, Chonnam National University.