

# The application of the backwash effect of language testing in college English teaching

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**Abstract:** Language testing is an important evaluation method in teaching evaluation. It can not only measure students' mastery of knowledge during the learning process, but also improve teaching methods and enhance teachers' teaching level. This article briefly analyzes the application of language testing in English teaching.

**Key words:** language testing; backwash effect; English teaching

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## 1 Introduction

Language testing is a branch of applied linguistics that has developed into an independent discipline with its own research fields and methods. Chomsky once said that language testing accompanies language teaching [1]. Therefore, language testing is also a language teaching service [2]. Language testing is a scientific testing tool that can objectively, accurately, and fairly evaluate students' language abilities, reflect the advantages and disadvantages of teaching, and improve teaching quality.

Language testing, as an important means of measuring and evaluating language teaching, is increasingly being valued by foreign language educators. Bachmann stated that providing important information for teaching evaluation is the fundamental purpose of language testing in educational programs [3]. Through testing, teachers can examine what students have learned and provide guidance and assistance for future teaching. At the same time, testing can also serve as a standard for implementing teaching syllabi and teaching tasks. Unscientific exams cannot serve as a baton, but sometimes they can mislead teaching and lead students and teachers in the wrong direction. Therefore, we advocate scientific exams that comply with educational principles. Such tests will have a positive reaction on teaching. A set of relatively scientifically designed tests is usually considered, which have four characteristics, namely effectiveness, reliability, practicality, and good backwash effect.

Therefore, this article takes language testing as the main research object and provides a detailed and specific analysis of its backwash effect in college English teaching. It provides a detailed overview and relationship between language testing and backwash effect and summarizes the ways to effectively achieve backwash effect.

## 2 What are language testing and backwash effects

### 2.1 Language testing

Language testing (mainly referred to foreign language testing) has gone through decades of development. Especially in the last two or three decades, it has developed a rich theoretical foundation and scientific basis, which acquires scientific content from linguistics, language teaching methods, learning theories and scientific methods from psychometrics. It is a

combination of various disciplines. With the development of its related disciplines, the testing system, theory, and methods are also improving. Language testing has developed into a mature interdisciplinary comprehensive discipline. Language testing is accompanied by the emergence of language teaching and develops with the development of language teaching. It has mainly experienced three stages, which correspond to each other and overlap with the reform of language teaching methods.

People used language testing in the 1940s as a pre-scientific language test. During this period, due to a lack of scientific understanding of language, people believed that language was a knowledge, mainly including grammar knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and phonetic knowledge. Foreign language teaching also taught language as knowledge. Basically, teaching was based on experience and tradition, and the grammar-translation approach was used. Based on the grammar translation method, the language tests were generated to check the learners' grasp of the three aspects of knowledge. They were generally divided into written examinations, oral examinations and hearing tests. In general, the language teaching and testing at this stage were completely determined by the experience and subjective judgment of teachers.

Psychological measurement-structuralism language testing is based on structural linguistics and behavioral psychology theory, using the psychometric field of measurement as a scientific method. Psychological measurement-structuralism language testing dominated foreign language testing in the 1950s and 1960s and remained mainstream until the 1980s and early 1990s. At this stage, people had a more objective and scientific analysis and understanding of language for the first time. They believed that language was a set of symbolic systems. It was a tool and a means. Language could be broken down into language skills and language components. Language skills mainly included listening, speaking, reading and writing. The language components mainly included language, grammar and vocabulary. Learning a language was to acquire the skill of operating the symbol system, i.e. training a set of language habits responding to stimuli. What has been learned and what was being examined were the operation of this form of skills, i.e. language competence, which was to say that the language test should be applied to testing the language, not just the language concerned. Foreign language teaching at this stage mainly used direct method, audio-visual method and cognitive method. Due to the influence of foreign language teaching methods at this stage, especially the method of listening and speaking, language testing has undergone tremendous changes, and a detached test has emerged. Detached testing usually divides the language testing into listening, speaking, reading, and other language skills, and tests them separately.

In the mid-1960s, the famous linguist Chomsky created conversion grammar based on a complete negation of the theory of behavioral language, and two different language abilities and language expression concepts were proposed. However, his language skills are only abstract language skills. Since people only have abstract language skills when communicating, it is not enough to consider context only. The use of language is a dynamic communication process. This model considers communicative competence to include grammar ability, social language ability, discourse ability and communication strategy ability. In the 90s, Bachman proposed a new concept of language communicative competence model. The model sees communicative competence as the ability to combine language knowledge with the characteristics of the language used to create and interpret meaning. It consists of three parts: linguistic competence, strategic competence and the psychophysiological mechanism [4]. This model fully absorbs the latest research achievements in the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics in recent years, and has a more objective, comprehensive, and profound understanding of communicative competence. It points out that communicative competence is not a simple parallel relationship, but an interactive relationship. The process of language use is a dynamic one, involving various knowledge, skills, and psychological processes. The Bachman communicative language model has a profound impact on language testing, which

means that when testing a language, various factors involving communicative competence must be tested as a whole, resulting in integrative competence testing. This could be a milestone in the history of testing.

## 2.2 Backwash effect

Testing is an essential assessment method in language teaching and provides important information for teaching. The impact of research exams is an important topic in the field of testing. It is called backwash. The "backwash effect" is understood in the narrow sense as the influence of language testing on teaching and learning [5]. There are various individuals who are directly and indirectly affected by exams, with candidates and teachers being the most direct ones. Bachman & Palmer believe that the impact of the test on candidates is mainly reflected in three aspects: The first one is the experience of taking exams or preparing for exams; the second one is the feedback provided by the test results; the third is the decision made based on the test results. The greatest impact on the theoretical construction of the backwash of teaching and learning is the hypothesis of the PPP model of Hughes [6] [7]. Hughes believes that testing will affect participants, processes and products in teaching and learning. The "participants" include students, teachers, administrators, textbook developers and publishers. "Process" refers to any behaviors that the participants take to facilitate learning, such as the development of textbooks, outlines, changes in teaching methods, and the adoption of learning and exam strategies. "Products" refer to the knowledge and skills learned and the quality of learning. In this model, the first to be affected is the participants' understanding of teaching and learning tasks and learning outcomes.

Alderson & Wall established the earliest and most comprehensive research model of backwash effect, and proposed 15 hypotheses of backwash effect, which sketched the outline of backwash effect research in language testing. 1) Tests affect teaching; 2) Tests affect learning; 3) Tests affect teachers' teaching content; 4) Tests have impact on teachers' teaching methods; 5) Tests make a difference to students' learning content; 6) Tests have an effect on students' learning methods; 7) Tests affect the order and speed of teaching; 8) Tests affect the order and speed of learning; 9) Test sessions influence the degree and depth of teaching; 10) The test will affect the degree and depth of learning; 11) The test will have impact on the teaching and learning attitude; 12) The important test will make a difference to a backwash effect; 13) Unimportant tests have no backwash effect; 14) The test will have a backwash effect on all students and teachers; 15) The test will only have a backwash effect on teachers and students and will not affect other people. Although the two models have different perspectives, they can see the same point of view. They all believe that the test has a backwash effect on students and teachers and testing affects teaching and learning attitudes, content, strategies, and results.

The definition of backwash effect intends to inform us that the backwash effect in fact can be either positive or negative. And for Prodromou, he sorts backwash effects into overt backwash effect and covert backwash effect [8]. It makes us a further understanding on backwash effect and classifies it. What's more, we can propose efficient ways of promoting positive backwash effect.

## 3 The impact of language testing on college English teaching

Before studying the relationship between language testing and college English teaching, it is necessary to begin with a detailed analysis of the two closely related things themselves. Secondly, it is also necessary to consider the different results generated by the interaction between language testing, college English teaching, and the overall environment of the school. After conducting a certain exam, there have also been some changes in teaching, which may be caused by the test itself or other factors related to the test, such as the attitude and practices of the teaching department towards teaching and exams, the teaching level and work attitude of teachers, whether the teachers have received relevant knowledge training, or whether they understand and master the nature, content, and methods of the test, the attitudes and practices of textbook

writers, etc. Only by comprehensively considering these relevant factors can we have a full understanding of the backwash effect of testing on teaching, and analyze the positive impact and negative impact to make correct judgments.

### 3.1 The positive impact of language testing on teaching

Testing arises with teaching and serves teaching. The function of serving teaching has become the foundation of language testing. Therefore, it must play a certain guiding, diagnostic or promoting role in teaching. Firstly, language testing sets a goal for students, the main body of learning. This goal undoubtedly becomes the motivation for students to work hard and develop comprehensively, and this learning motivation is an important factor to affect the learning effectiveness of foreign language learners. Therefore, language testing can become a powerful driving force for learners to strive for learning. Its role is to significantly improve learners' learning awareness and accelerate the entire learning process. Secondly, language testing also puts forward a new target level for teaching. It can effectively encourage teachers to pay attention to adjusting their teaching methods and key teaching difficulties in college English teaching and strive to help students approach the target level specified in the test more quickly. Thirdly, language testing can make teaching materials and curriculum design more standardized and scientific. If language testing has a more scientific theoretical basis and emphasizes the assessment of learners' real language abilities, textbook and course designers will also make appropriate adjustments to their textbooks and course arrangements, making it easier for students to meet the standards required by the test after learning the textbook.

### 3.2 The negative impact of language testing on teaching

When language testing is inconsistent with teaching objectives, the negative impact of testing can occur. Society requires teaching institutions and teachers to provide an easily identifiable and quantified result of students' language abilities, which is often the result of exams. This to some extent forces teachers and students to prioritize exams, and the entire teaching process revolves around the exam syllabus to enable students to achieve good results in exams or top the competition. However, this approach puts the relationship between language testing and foreign language teaching upside down, shifting from testing to testing. On the one hand, although testing is an important external motivation for students, if overemphasized, it can affect their learning emotions; on the other hand, inappropriate language testing has a significant impact on teaching. Since classroom teaching is an important language input method for language learners in the process of college English teaching, its content and form play a crucial role for students. If the teaching process is constantly influenced by testing, and the testing itself has significant deficiencies in content and form, it will undoubtedly bring various negative impacts to teaching, and even play a certain obstructive role.

## 4 Conclusion

Language testing can be considered as the most used method in Chinese universities to test learners' language proficiency in the teaching process. However, in general, we cannot make direct and correct judgments about learners' language proficiency and the overall quality of teachers' college English teaching solely based on the final test score, so we need to effectively improve the positive backwash effect of language testing, and more importantly, we should fully leverage its positive effect while containing its negative impact. When inappropriate language testing hinders normal teaching or has a negative impact on teaching, language testing should be fully subject to teaching. On the contrary, when there are many shortcomings in the content or form of teaching, language testing should fully exert its positive backwash effect, thereby actively guiding teaching towards the correct track.

In a word, the ideal cooperative relationship between language testing and college English teaching should be that language testing is a strong support for reasonable teaching. However, when there is a deviation in the content or form of teaching, language testing will give full play to its guiding role. Only in this way can the interactive relationship between

language testing and college English teaching truly become a virtuous cycle conducive to foreign language teaching. Therefore, in the teaching process, only by emphasizing the backwash effect of language testing on college English teaching can we comprehensively promote favorable changes in various aspects of teaching and ensure the smooth progress of college English teaching reform.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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