



Investigating the Washback Effects of TOEFL iBT on the Preparation Courses of the Training Institutions in Shanghai

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Abstract: This research probes into the washback effects of TOEFL iBT (the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test) and how teachers in the training institutions instruct preparation course in Shanghai. The findings in this article show that teachers are supposed to transform the general language skills into teachable materials and need to be more aware of cross-cultural learning problems. The study points out that the TOEFL iBT has an influence both on course materials and teaching methodology. However, the effects can be intervened by using appropriate TOEFL iBT preparation materials.

Key words: washback effect; TOEFL iBT; preparation courses; training institutions

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

It is generally considered that washback is a comparatively new concept in the realm of testing and assessment, which means the impact of testing on learning and teaching. Buck described washback as "a natural tendency for both students and teachers to tailor the classroom activities according to the demands of the test, especially when the test is particularly important for test takers" (2001). As Stobart clarified in his research "testing is never a neutral process and always has consequences"(2003, p. 140). Cheng et al. (2015) proposed that understanding how the testing agencies work in washback will enable teachers to seek targeted and specific resources to shape washback effects in a positive direction.

1.2 TOEFL iBT in Shanghai

TOEFL iBT, which was introduced in Shanghai in 2006, stresses the importance of learning English as an effective means of communication in an academic context because language is identified as the medium of teaching and learning. Educational Testing Service (ETS) indicated "the innovations in the TOEFL iBT test and the emphasis on communicative competence are hoped to have positive impact on English teaching in preparation courses, in which activities should be closer to communication-oriented pedagogy" (2008).

1.3 Literature review

The washback effects have been studied in many fields before, Alderson investigated the washback phenomenon, which served as an activator for future studies in language testing (Alderson, 2009). He used classroom observation and interviews to explore the washback of O-level tests, a national language exam in Sri Lanka. The results showed that there was a washback phenomenon in course materials, rather than teaching methods.

Nevertheless, washback studies in this area are still insufficient. Wall and Horak have carried out five-year research (2006; 2008; 2011) to explore the impact of the TOEFL iBT on teaching practice in center and east part of Europe, which has made a great contribution to a clearer understanding of the washback of this test. In 2008, Wall and Horak pointed out that negativity couldn't be found in instructing the TOEFL (Computer-based) as argued by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons. They investigated the influences of the previous TOEFL on teaching and learning in America. However, the dependence on preparation materials can be found in both of them.

1.4 Research questions

To explore the washback effects of the new TOEFL and achieve the goal of the study, I devised two research questions as follow:

- (1) What are the washback effects of the TOEFL iBT on course materials of the training institutions in Shanghai?
- (2) What are the washback effects of the TOEFL iBT on teaching methodology of the training institutions in Shanghai?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The subjects of this research were comprised of 96 TOEFL iBT students and 10 TOEFL iBT teachers from New Oriental English School in Pudong district, Shanghai. The 96 students took part in the questionnaire investigation, while 10 iBT preparation teachers participated in the interviews.

2.2 Instrumentation

The instruments used in this research contained the questionnaire survey of students participating in the courses of TOEFL iBT and the teachers' interview which includes a battery of questions concerning teaching practices under the impact of the new tests.

2.3 Design

In the research, the questionnaires for students, the interviews for teachers and the observations for classroom activities were carried out by a mixed methods research. Mixed methodology is a useful way to conduct research integrating the quantitative research and qualitative research together. This research method could be employed because it can give us a better understanding of the research subject.

2.4 Procedure

2.4.1 Questionnaires for students

At the beginning of the research, a pilot study was made with 20 TOEFL iBT students and 5 teachers because some items of the questionnaires needed to be modified or deleted. Then all participants of the research were required to finish it. As far as the following development concerned, the content validity could be guaranteed by qualitative input. Factor analysis would be adopted to make sure the construct validity of the questionnaire, while Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the reliability of them.

2.4.2 Interviews for teachers

The next step was to conduct the interview for 10 TOEFL teachers from the New Oriental to investigate their attitudes towards the tests. Afterwards, the teachers were told about the objective of the research. They were required to answer the

questions in a careful and patient way. It seemed that they were cooperative and showed their interests in the interview about the TOEFL iBT. All interviews were made in English and written down on the paper.

2.4.3 Observations for classroom activities

The 10 teachers from the New Oriental School would be observed in an iBT class and then observed in a general English language class fifty minutes to three hours for each class, which served as a comparison since the TOEFL iBT has already begun for over ten years. Seven of them would be observed again, an iBT class and a general English course, the other three teachers would be observed in an iBT course at both the New Oriental School and a college.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

By analyzing course materials and pedagogy, the research indicates the inhomogeneity of washback and the impact of TOEFL iBT on course materials and teaching methodology.

3.1.1 The influence of TOEFL iBT on course materials

The research showed that teachers strongly relied on TOEFL iBT-oriented course materials in teaching practices. The three classes in the New Oriental School used a series of textbooks or a copy of pages from TOEFL iBT preparation courses. The textbooks and photocopied materials employed by all classes in the New Oriental School were mainly selected from iBT commercial textbooks from 2019 to 2022. It is necessary to notice that none of these books were from ETS, the qualified institution of the iBT, but from other publishing agencies.

3.1.2 The influence of the TOEFL iBT on teaching methodology

The analysis illustrates that those commercial textbooks, which try to reflect the design of test questions, play a significant role in teaching materials. All teachers in the iBT classes did their utmost to improve the students' oral competence. In terms of general teaching methods, the 10 teachers in the New Oriental School all claimed that they had shifted from grammar-based teaching to communication-oriented teaching. One of them commented that the changes in the TOEFL test had greater impacts on course materials or content than teaching methods.

3.2 Discussion

The results of this study vividly testified the existence of washback, despite the fact that the degree varied according to different situations. It is coincident with many washback studies which demonstrate that the TOEFL iBT have more influence on teaching materials than on teaching methods and practice. Even though most teachers had rich experience in teaching English, they lacked the professional knowledge of TOEFL. Consequently, they absolutely depended on commercial preparation books.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Wall and Horak concluded that TOEFL iBT commercial textbooks were "at the heart of each teacher's lesson" and the study gave us useful information and data on how the course materials could be used in the training institutions. The research illuminated how the TOEFL iBT influenced the course materials and teaching methodology in the training institutions of Shanghai, an international city different from other places in China. But it was short of perspectives and attitudes from student and teacher about teaching and learning, which could provide a better understanding of the impact of the TOEFL iBT and more information about the essence of learning, a field that could be further studied in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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