

A Study of the Washback Effect of Oral English Sampling Test on Primary School English Teaching

Yun Liu, Jing Chen*

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University

**Corresponding author. Email: jeanchan78@163.com*

ABSTRACT

The education authorities in Huzhou adopted oral English sampling test among the sixth graders in order to examine the students' oral English ability. Based on the washback theory, the present study explores the impact of oral English sampling test on primary school English teaching and learning by employing qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct this research. The study finds that the oral English sampling test has both positive and negative washback effects on teachers' teaching methods and students' learning behaviors.

Keywords: *oral English sampling test, washback, primary school English teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

The revised edition of the national curriculum (2017) exaggerates the importance of communicative teaching methods in primary school English teaching and emphasizes students' oral English competence. Like many other cities in China, the education authorities in Huzhou adopt the oral English test for students in sixth grade in order to examine student's oral English ability. As the number of students involved is so large, the education authorities employ the sampling test to save human and material resources and at the same time ensure validity and credibility of the results. About 15% of sixth graders will participate in the municipal oral English sampling test organized by the local education authorities. The results of the test may influence a school's reputation and may be used as a means to prove its education quality, and for students the oral English sampling test score may directly affect their admission to middle schools of various levels, so this test has triggered strong influence among teachers and students. However, the exact influence of this test on teacher's teaching and students' learning remains unproved.

In the language testing field, test results, especially the high-stakes ones can serve a variety of different functions, termed as "washback" in applied linguistics, within a language program. Washback refers to the impact that a test has on the teaching and learning done in preparation for it. The Washback Hypothesis seems to assume that teachers and learners do things they would

not necessarily otherwise do because of the test. Based on this definition, the present study used the term "washback" to explore the impact of oral English test on teaching and learning in Huzhou.

Two research questions are identified in the study: (1) How does the oral English sampling test influence teachers' teaching methods? (2) How does the oral English sampling test influence students' learning behaviors?

By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this study employs classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews with teachers and students to explore the influence brought about by the oral English sampling test. Based on the local context, this study is to clarify the changed teaching strategies caused by the implementation of the sampling test and to efficiently use the helpful strategies in future English learning.

2. WASHBACK

In the middle of the 20th century, language teaching researchers, e.g. Vernon (1956: 8) [1], states that examinations would distort the teaching and learning contexts by negative influence on language learning if they are poorly operated or interpreted, for the result users like schools, teachers or parents may over-exaggerate the test itself rather than language skills. Messick [2] conceptualizes it as "consequential validity" (1996: 241). Hughes [3] uses the term "backwash" to refer to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Alderson & Wall [4] simplify washback as a term

commonly occurs in the language teaching and testing literature; and they believe that tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in classrooms. In general, washback in language testing means the effect of testing on teaching and learning. It is a criterion that can be used to evaluate the results of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, washback is indeed much more complex than that and it still needs further explanation and investigation to improve its hypothesis.

Hughes [3] states that washback can be either beneficial or harmful. He believes that positive or negative washback is determined by the effect of examination on what we do in the classroom. The positive washback refers to the expected influence of the tests. It will enhance the educational goals held by learners. On the contrast, if a test hinders teaching and learning, it will produce negative or harmful washback. Person regards positive washback as a “lever for change” [5]. A good examination will not only improve the target foreign language learning but can also directly or indirectly prompt the improvement of the whole education system. In general, a positive washback will promote teaching and learning (Prodromou, 1995:13) [6]. However, negative washback is considered to have the following characteristics: reduced emphasis on skills that require complex thinking or problem solving; teaching or learning for the examinations.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was conducted in two time periods: the first period was from October 9th to October 27th in 2020 before the oral English sampling test; the second period was from March 8th to April 16th in 2021 after the oral English sampling test. The whole research included two parts: data collection and data analysis.

In the first phase, classroom observation, interviews and questionnaires were employed to collect the data needed. In the classroom observation part, 4 classes were observed; classroom activities, time allotment and student’s responses were recorded. To find the test’s influence on teacher’s teaching behavior, the frequency for practicing the test items was measured. At last, all the homework assigned is recorded and compared. The personal interviews between teachers were carried out on WeChat, and the useful information was transcribed. The anonymous questionnaires were written in Chinese to make students fully understand and were handed out during the class break. Before filling in the questionnaire, there was a brief introduction to the questionnaire to make students be honest when they are answering the questions. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: basic information, learning attitude, and learning behavior. The question types included multiple-choice, single choice and supplement information could be written down if needed. The data collected from the students could help to explain and manifest the washback

effect on their learning.

There are 3 teachers and 149 students in the study. One of the teachers teaches fifth grade and the other two are teachers from the sixth grade. Their classes are being observed in classroom observations. The two who teach sixth grade are interviewed to get some subjective information, since their students are going to receive the oral English sampling test in this semester, they may adopt some special methods to improve their students’ spoken English.

In the second phase, the data of the questionnaire, such as relative frequencies and mean of multiple-choice was analyzed with the help of the computer. Notes taken down during the class were categorized and summed up with the help of the computer.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1. The Washback Effect on Teacher’s Teaching

The two teachers being interviewed are all experienced teachers. When asked about their attitudes towards oral English sampling test, they agree that this test can bring positive effect on student’s English learning. They mention that at the time when the test is not adopted, the class is more teacher-oriented. But things are different at present: they now adopt a communicative teaching method to train students’ communicative ability, and their class is more student-oriented. The setting of the oral English sampling test can help both students and their parents to treat the learning of oral English seriously. Another teacher supplements that more students have taken part in after-school English learning courses on weekends, so their English proficiency has been improved. Teachers also point out when their classes are moving close to the sixth grade, they feel burdened. The school administrators highly stress the importance of the oral English sampling test. In some cases, it will drive the teacher to teach for the test, for instance they only do repetitive drilling about the content that will be tested. The teacher’s workload also increased. The education authorities in Huzhou demand each school to include the oral English test in every semester from third graders to sixth graders, using it as a means to make students prepare for the oral English sampling test. Besides, teachers of the sixth grade will design extra oral English tests at the end of each unit. This practice makes teachers spend additional time on designing the oral test to test their students.

The student questionnaire is involved with the recollection of 149 valid pieces. According to the questionnaire’s results, teachers adopt a variety of classroom activities, like doing listening practice, doing reading comprehension, role play and doing group work, etc. Only 69 students choose the item of doing reading

comprehension as their most frequently-do classroom activities, but more than 115 students choose the item of practicing conversation, doing group work and doing role-play. In a word, activities related to speaking and listening are all in the high place. It can be inferred that teacher’s teaching behavior has been affected. They design more activities to practice student’s oral English due to the oral English sampling test.

The findings of the questionnaire are further supported and validated by the classroom observation. Teachers all speak English during the whole teaching process. The average time teachers spend practicing listening and speaking is up to 30 minutes according to the classes being observed. In most classes, teachers will invite students to role read; then they will ask students to work in pairs to make up a conversation on their own. This kind of teaching behavior may due to the reason that these types of speaking exercises are included in the oral English sampling test. Besides, they will use more open questions than closed questions to make students speak more and be bold to express themselves. When teaching the vocabulary and phonetic symbols, they will invite students to read one by one and the mistakes will be corrected immediately. But after the sixth graders have passed the oral English sampling test, there is a subtle difference in the class. Teachers divert their attention to reading and grammar teaching. According to the observation, textbook remains the basic teaching material. Teachers rarely teach things that are not included in the textbook. The written work is finished at the end of the class and handed in when the class is over. The homework assigned every day requires students to practice oral English on Ding Ding (an online app) with specific content. After they have finished the spoken exercises on Ding Ding, the app will give the score automatically. Teachers can check the scores on their phones.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that there is a strong washback on teacher’s teaching attitudes and teaching methods. The teacher being interviewed all show supportive attitudes to the test. But it may have a weak negative washback on their psychology due to the anxiety and stress the test brings. According to the interview, before the implementation of the oral English sampling test, more attention is paid to reading, but now the focus is diverted to students’ spoken English. Teachers attach great attention to fostering students’ communicative competence. The most popular teaching activities in class are role play, group work and conversation practice, which are all designed to help students to improve their oral English. These activities also closely related to the items being tested in the Oral English Sampling Test. From this perspective, it has a positive washback on teacher’s teaching methods and teaching behaviors.

However, some teachers seem to have a pattern for

teaching English, the whole teaching process can be simply described as introduction—speaking practices—listening comprehension. They have a tendency towards test-oriented teaching because less effort is paid to training students’ communicative ability when students passed the oral English sampling test.

4.2. The Washback Effect on Students’ Learning

According to students’ questionnaire, 63% of students express their preference to the test, while 34.2% of them show neutral attitude, 4 students even say they don’t like the test. The totality of 96.6% of students chooses that more attention is paid to the oral English sampling test. It shows that students are willing to accept the test, their attitudes towards the test are positive. When deciding whether the oral English sampling test has impacts on them, 29.5% of students think it has great impacts on them, 32.2% of students think it has some impacts on them, but 17.4% of students believe that it has no impact at all. The test has increased students’ awareness of the importance of oral English. Besides the oral English homework assigned by teachers, 79.9% of students also do other activities to practice their oral English.

The items below show students’ attitudes towards the test. The 4-point scale represents different degrees; the value of 1 means strong disagreement while the value of 4 is the highest degree of agreement. The mean of Table 1 is 3.12 which reveals that most students agree that the oral English test can improve their spoken English and the overall English study. The result of Table 2 is positive for that 108 students (about 72.2% of students) agree that the oral English test can motivate their English learning.

Table 1. Question: the oral English test can improve the spoken English and the overall English study

Agreement	1	2	3	4	
Number of students	5	24	68	52	Mean: 3.12

Table 2. Question: the oral English test can motivate my English learning

Agreement	1	2	3	4	
Number of students	9	32	60	48	Mean: 3

Students usually spend 20 minutes every day practicing their oral English, 20.1% of them spend 30 minutes, and 16.1% of them spend even more. It can be estimated that 77.8% of students spend considerably more than two hours a week to improve their spoken English. When asking them whether the oral English

sampling test has increased their study task and learning difficulty, only 14.8% of students chose the item of yes. The learning materials used by students are also varied. Apart from the textbook and textbook-related video audio resources, 126 students will choose oral practice material from other resources, and 64 students will read extracurricular picture books. 14 students chose the items for “others”, the learning materials include online courses, after-school class textbook and homework, some online apps, and New Concept of English.

A large portion of them (about 70.5%) think that their motivation is to pass the oral English test. The reassuring result is that 54.4% of them believe that it is the liking for the feeling of speaking English that drives them to learn oral English. The reason accounted for their liking to speak English is that when they speak excellent English they will be praised by their teachers, and this will in turn become the motivation for students to work harder in practicing spoken English. The test has raised their awareness of the importance of oral English. Proofs can be found in their increased time in practicing the English and various kinds of learning materials. The test result provided by the teacher shows that students’ English proficiency is improved because only a few students get B on the final oral English sampling test. Only a small percentage of students say they are forced by their parents to learn it.

During the classroom observation period, the atmosphere of the class being observed is vivid: the students try to pronounce every word correctly and their classmates would point out the mistakes whenever there are slips of tongue and not self-correctible errors. During the time of group work, students are willing to cooperate with each other. After they have passed the oral English sampling test, the sixth graders’ enthusiasm to participate in the class does not wane after two months of the exam. But how long their learning motivation will last remains unclarified.

5. CONCLUSION

From the above findings, the oral English sampling test does influence teachers’ teaching methods and students’ learning behaviors. Noticeable changes can be seen in how they organize their class, the type of practice they choose is similar to the subject being tested in the oral English sampling test. However, the oral English sampling test may have negative effects on teachers’ psychology. A slight negative washback may be discovered in teachers’ teaching attitudes for they have the inclination of teaching to the test. Secondly, based on the data collected from students, the oral test is found to have a strong washback on students’ learning attitudes, behavior and motivation. Negative washback can be found in some of the students’ learning motivation; because their aims are merely to pass the test. According to the above conclusion, it can be inferred that it is

necessary to adopt the oral English sampling test; and it is a good attempt to help students practice English and to improve their oral English ability.

The following are some suggestions to make the English teaching and learning in primary school more effective: (1) It is suggested that teachers shall pay more attention to the analysis of oral test contents to help students practice more effectively. (2) Teachers should not overstress the importance of the test for it may lead to students learn for the test. (3) Teachers may not always follow the teaching routine. Try to create new teaching activities in the teaching process. (4) Students shall treat the oral test designed by their schools seriously. They can find their weakness through the simulation tests and improve them.

Although oral test is not a new arrival in English testing, the washback study is limited in this field. In the recent washback studies, most of them are concerned with the high-stake tests such as CET test, few studies are about the testing in primary schools. Although this washback study has some limitations, it still has merits since it has filled the vacancy of washback studies in primary school period. It proves the oral English sampling test has a washback effect on primary school’s teaching and learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by Ministry of Education Research of Social Sciences Youth funded projects, China (Grant No.17YJC740009).

REFERENCES

- [1] Vernon, P. *The Measurement of Abilities*. London: University of London Press, 1956.
- [2] Messick, S. *Validity and Washback in Language Testing*. *Language Testing*, 1996, 13(3): 241-256.
- [3] Hughes, A. *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- [4] Alderson, C & D. Wall. *Does Washback Exist?* *Applied Linguistics*, 1993, 14(2): 115-129.
- [5] Person, I. *Tests as Levers for Change. ESP in the classroom: Practice and Evaluation*. London: *Modern English*, 1988, 98-107.
- [6] Prodromou, L. *The backwash effect: From testing to teaching*. *ELT Journal*, 1995, 49(1):13-25.