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Abstract

This study investigates washback effects of IELTS test on university teachers' adoption of teaching materials in the classroom in China and see how a high-stake language exam affects their teaching practices and how they and their students perceive the effectiveness of the pedagogic adjustments. To this end, individual interview to five teacher participants was carried out and a questionnaire was administered to over 100 students. The results show a positive washback effect as, influenced by IELTS test and students' needs to achieve high scores in IELTS test, teachers sought to focus more on IELTS-related content in the textbooks and adopt extra IELTS-related teaching materials to help improve students' test performance. Also, students recognized teachers' arrangements on class practices and believed such practices were useful in enhancing their IELTS scores. Moreover, teachers' choices and modifications of teaching materials were not determined by washback effects of IELTS tests only but rather a result of coaction between various factors including the state's educational policies, personal research areas, teaching rationale and abilities to modify teaching materials.

Introduction

Washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. A concept of measurement-driven instruction was brought about to indicate that tests or examinations play a significant role in teaching and learning (Popham, 1987). Despite the controversial issue of whether tests have a positive or negative effect on teaching and learning, it is suggested that "looking at the complex causes of such a phenomenon in teaching and learning" (Cheng and Curtis, 2008, p11) may be of benefit in washback research. It has been found that the intention of innovation or curriculum change may not be fully comprehended by the teachers who implement the change in the classroom (Andrews, 1994, 1995; Markee, 1997).

The use of teaching materials, as an important component of language teaching, may also be affected by the washback effects of language tests. However, a case within Hong Kong educational context reveals that it is possible that newly produced materials for a new examination will not be employed in a desirable way as the innovators anticipated (see Andrews, 1995; Cheng, 1998). Just as English (1992) stated, when nobody is observing the classroom, teachers can select any material and teach any curriculum they think appropriate or necessary for

their students, regardless innovations and tests. Hence, it is worth paying attention to and studying the practices of using teaching materials in real classrooms to maximize the teaching effect, that is, students not only get good grades but also improve their language abilities.

However, in spite of some research in studying the appropriateness of some textbooks to a test (see Saville and Hawkey, 2008), there is little research in investigating teachers' adoption of teaching materials influenced by language tests from both teachers' and students' perspectives. This research aims to investigate the influence of washback effects on language teachers' adoption of textbooks and other teaching materials and teaching practices in their classrooms and how teachers and students perceive the effectiveness of these to improve students' language efficiency.

Literature Review

Various studies have been implemented to find out whether and how assessment influences teachers, learners, and classroom practices in either helpful or harmful way. When a high-stakes test emerges, teachers undoubtedly expect their students to perform well and tend to introduce a certain number of skills, knowledge and classroom activities to achieve this goal, no matter it is for their self-esteem or students' well-being (Popham, 1987). It is highly probable that teachers and learners may adopt teaching and learning materials targeting a specific test or fostering certain language skills for test preparation.

In the past few decades, supports, critics and concerns have never stopped in the washback studies of high-stakes tests. Opponents of high-stakes tests believe that negative washback is said to result in a narrowing of the curriculum in the classroom so that teachers and learners focus solely on the areas to be tested (Hoque, 2016). Lam (1994) proposes two terms "textbook slaves" and "exam slaves" to criticize teachers who rely too much on materials for test preparation in their pedagogy. "Textbook slaves" indicate teachers' dependence on the textbook manuals while the term "exam slaves" refers to teachers focusing on using past exam papers in classes. As a result, teachers may become less capable of using appropriate methods and interesting materials to teach content as they focus too much on standardized examinations (Smith, 1991).

While some research observed the highly dependence of teachers on test preparation coursebooks and past exam papers (Watanabe, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 1998), more recent studies concluded teachers would adopt additional materials, including authentic and test-oriented ones, as well as make modifications in certain sections of textbooks, proving they are neither "textbook slaves" nor "exam slaves", and capable of making adjustments of their pedagogy based on their judgements on what is best for students in either improving their communicative competencies or increasing test scores. For instance, Sadighi et al (2018) found out certain modifications were made by teachers such as grammar and vocabulary with extra explanation and practices, as these were tested in the University Entrance Exam in Iran but not presented in the English textbook in an easy-to-understand manner. Besides, additional materials include grammar-related publications (Nikolov, 1999; Wall, 1999), materials targeting specific language skills and authentic materials from the press, TV, radio, and the Internet (Hawkey, 2006) are provided as supplements to textbooks. They can be a useful complementary solution to different

instructional difficulties, ranging from dilemmas between communicative teaching goals and the learning goal of passing an exam, adding content that is missing in the textbook yet required in the exam, to motivating learners by a mix of commercial (test-oriented) and authentic materials. Many proponents claimed good tests can not only be used to direct teaching-learning resources and activities (Pearson, 1988), but also guide what students ought to master and what educators should instruct (Heyneman, 1987).

Furthermore, washback of high-stakes test also has a significant impact on learners. The selection and introduction of exam-related teaching and learning materials, no matter preparation coursebooks or supplementary materials, are usually in the teachers' or institutions' hands. These textbooks/materials tend to include exercises that follow the exam format (Lam, 1993; Wang, 1997, cited in Sadighi et al, 2018). According to Wall and Horak (2006), TOFEL preparation courses teachers used the exam book as textbook to navigate their teaching content and sequence because they were convinced that this method could most satisfy students' learning needs.

Other than coursebooks, past exam papers are also used as complements of the textbook because they are a major source for teachers and learners to get familiar with, and prepared for the exams (Watanabe, 1996). Since students have limited power in this decision-making process yet are highly affected, they may gain high scores by practicing on test-taking skills but are less likely to obtain comprehensive understanding of the content (Noble and Smith, 1994). Hamp-Lyons (1998) in her study on TOFEL-related textbooks indicates that discrete chunks of grammar and vocabulary items were taught and learnt without the involvement of context or even co-text, and concerns that students may not acquire language skills necessary for communicative purposes but rather master a set of test-taking skills.

Despite investigations on the practices of teachers and their choices of teaching materials, research on learners and their perspectives is limited. A few studies address concerns from students' perspectives, including whether teaching and learning materials foster autonomous learning (Hamp-Lyons, 1998) and whether teachers' choice of instructional materials satisfy students' learning needs (Cheng & Curtis, 2008), but little research so far has studied students' perspectives on whether teachers' choice of teaching materials would have positive effects on students' language proficiency.

Methods

This study investigates washback effects of IELTS tests on teachers' adoption of teaching materials and practices in the classroom and how teachers and students perceive the effectiveness of the adjustments to improve students' language efficiency. The research addresses the following questions:

- 1) How does the washback effect of IELTS tests influence IELTS teachers' adoption of teaching materials in the classroom?
- 2) To what extent do teachers and students perceive the effectiveness of teaching materials used in the IELTS preparation course and pedagogic adjustments?

This research was conducted in a private university in Beijing and the students participated were enrolled in a

Sino-Foreign joint bachelor program where they receive three-year education in China and a fourth-year education in the cooperated foreign universities. Therefore, students have to take IELTS courses throughout the first three years. The average IELTS score students usually get in the IELTS mock test arranged by the university at the beginning of the first year was between 2.5 to 3.5, indicating they are basic English users, according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). To successfully study abroad in their fourth year, they have to achieve at least 5.5, expected 6.5, in an official IELTS test by the end of the third year. There were five IELTS teachers and 105 students participated in the research, including Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 students. Research data involve interviews from teacher participants, student participants and questionnaires from student participants.

The textbooks used in the first two years are designed for EFL learners for academic purposes and partly related to IELTS and published by Cambridge University Press and Collins, while in the third year the adopted teaching materials mainly serve for test-oriented purposes, including official exam papers published by Cambridge University Press and IELTS-targeted textbooks published by New Oriental, a famous English training company in China (see Table 1).

Table 1. Textbooks used in the Three-year IELTS Courses

	Textbooks/Materials	Publisher	Teacher
Year 1	Unlock 2: Reading and Writing (1 st ed.);	Cambridge University	Lu; Liu;
	Unlock 2: Listening and Speaking (1 st ed.)	Press	Cheng
	Unlock 3 Reading and Writing (1 st ed.);	Cambridge University	
	Unlock 3 Listening and Speaking (1 st ed.)	Press	
Year 2	Unlock 4 Reading and Writing (1 st ed.);	Cambridge University	Cheng; Guo;
	Unlock 4 Listening and Speaking (1 st ed.)	Press	Si
	IELTS for Reading/ Listening/ Writing/ Speaking	Collins	
Year 3	IELTS Reading/ Listening/ Writing/ Speaking (pinyin: Yasi Yuedu/ Tingli/ Xiezu/ Kouyu);	New Oriental Press (pinyin: Xin Dongfang)	Lu; Liu; Cheng; Guo; Si
	IELTS Academic 7 with Answers; IELTS Academic 8 with Answers; IELTS Academic 9 with Answers; IELTS Academic 10 with Answers;	Cambridge University Press	

A mixed method approach was used to explore the complexity of washback effects on the IELTS materials. An online questionnaire concerning students' background information such as age, gender, times of taking IELTS test, IELTS scores, and their perceptions of the teaching materials and teachers' teaching methods, was distributed to students. Individual interviews to 3 students respectively was conducted online with semi-structured questions to discover students' perception in depth. Each interview lasted for around 30 minutes.

Five IELTS teachers (see Table 2) who teach different language skills – listening, reading or writing – from the university were invited to join in an online semi-structured interview individually. All teacher participants have a no-fewer-than-3-year working experience in IELTS teaching and at least two years' teaching experience in these programs. In order to avoid ambiguity of expression, the interviews were carried out in Chinese so that each participant would feel relaxed to express their opinions. Useful information was selected and translated for further analysis.

Table 2. Teaching Background of the Five Teacher Participants

	Guo	Cheng	Lu	Liu	Si
Teaching subject	IELTS Reading	IELTS Listening	IELTS Listening	IELTS Reading	IELTS Writing
English teaching experience	Over 10 years, 6 years in IELTS	3 years	9 years	7 years	11 years
Qualification in English and/or IELTS teaching	TEFL teaching certification	Master degree in TESOL	Master degree in TESOL; Trainings in both English and IELTS teaching	Master degree in TESOL; Training in IELTS reading and writing workshop	Training in IELTS reading and writing workshop

Data Analysis

The influence of IELTS washback effects on teaching materials practices is analysed in two aspects: usage of textbooks and adoption of other materials.

Usage of Textbooks and the IELTS Washback Effect

This section concerns teachers' pedagogical use of the content of textbooks and the rationale behind their decisions, and students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the use of textbooks. It has been found that a prior consideration was given to contents related to IELTS test in the teaching practice, focusing on training students' test-taking skills or improving students' language skills according to IELTS requirements, no matter what kind of teaching materials teachers were using or what level of students they were teaching. Four out of five teachers interviewed noted that they would ensure certain proportion of IELTS-related content in lessons, either included in the textbooks or added from other teaching materials. This receives positive acknowledgement from students in that about 70% students participated agree that the use of IELTS-related teaching materials, from either the textbooks or other materials, is effective to improve their IELTS score. However, the pedagogical practices of textbook and materials usage vary from person to person.

First, the proportion of the use of textbooks is different among the interviewed teachers. Teacher Cheng and Lu

claimed that textbooks accounted for 60% of the total teaching content of their lessons, and other teaching materials took up 40%. Similarly, Liu gave an equal proportion of 50% to both the textbooks and other teaching materials. However, Guo showed more dependence on textbooks. She said 90% of her teaching content came from the textbooks. Besides, courses with low utilization of textbooks have also been found in Si's lessons.

Different proportions in the use of textbooks are related to the types and difficulties of textbooks and the language level as well as learning needs of students. Both Cheng and Lu agreed that the textbooks they used contained IELTS test-related exercises and topics, which helped improve students' English language proficiency. Also, the colourful pictures and layouts in the textbooks can be motivating factors to stimulate students' learning interest. However, Lu, Cheng and Liu believed the content from the textbooks were insufficient to support their teaching practice: the content is not directly related to IELTS test. The textbooks *Unlock Series (1st Edition)* Lu and Cheng used are designed to “develop students' ability to think critically in an academic context” and to “foster the skills and strategies students need to tackle academic tasks” (Cambridge English, n.d.). Lu and Liu said the textbooks were not sufficient to sharpen students' test-taking skills because some can be either too difficult or too easy. As a result, Lu made the listening exercise less difficult for Year 1 students to follow by cutting off part of an audio from the textbooks, as some audios last for 7-8 minutes, longer than an average IELTS listening audio (5-6 minutes). Liu deleted some content unrelated to IELTS test.

Interestingly, besides the requirement of IELTS test, some teachers evaluate the textbooks with other criteria. For example, some topics and content in the textbook are not in line with the students' cultural background. Cheng also said she needed more interesting materials that are closer to students' cultural background and personal interests to motivate them. So she replaced some content with materials related to China and made sure the materials are in line with the unit topics. She also checked the level of difficulty (CEFR level) of vocabulary used on the Cambridge Dictionary website to guarantee the vocabulary is appropriate for target students. Si did a similar practice by introducing China-related authentic materials in her classroom in terms of her academic research interest in pedagogy. She adjusted the appropriateness of the materials by giving more explanations in class for linguistic purposes yet mentioned she did little on the evaluation of the relevance between the materials and IELTS test per se.

However, there are also teachers like Guo who rely more on the content of the textbook, claiming that the textbooks have given enough content for the IELTS test, including classroom activities, exercises, IELTS test preparation skills and IELTS topic vocabulary, and the level of difficulty is also suitable for the language level of the students taught. The textbooks she uses entirely focus on IELTS test preparation skills and provide relevant strategies and exercises, which explains why she finds them useful. However, it does not mean she does not make any modifications on the textbooks. Guo sometimes replaces questions easier than real IELTS ones with those from authentic exam papers to ensure students comprehend the actual difficulty level of IELTS test.

Besides, Si tends to use less of textbooks, claiming that the content of the textbook, which is from *Unlock Series*, is too simple for her Year 2 students according to their high accuracy of exercise completion. She believes the textbook is insufficient to prepare for IELTS test. Moreover, despite the small proportion of the content being

used from the textbook, Si adjusts the order of units in the textbook to make the content more in line with the curriculum and course assessment arrangements, according to which students shall complete the learning of the content related to Task 1 and Task 2 in IELTS writing so as to take the mid-term IELTS mock test. She mentioned that the content of the IELTS test was also considers in the adjustment of the unit order, that is, the units that contain test-taking strategies are focused first, followed by the units that stress other language abilities.

It is also found that teachers' perception of the difficulty of the textbooks conforms to students' perception on their textbooks as only about 60% of students from the survey said that the content of textbooks matched their language proficiency, which means that quite a number of students noted the mismatch between their English level and textbooks, and thus teachers' adjustments become necessary.

Usage of Other Teaching Materials and the IELTS Washback Effect

Exam Papers

All the teacher participants mentioned the adoption of exam papers in their teaching practice but with different proportions. These adopted exam papers are from books called *IELTS Academic with Answers (Authentic Practice Tests)* published by Cambridge University Press. Teachers trust the reliability of the exam papers and widely use them as in-class teaching materials, homework and a source of assessment. Students are also encouraged to buy them as self-learning materials.

One limitation is that the books only contain IELTS-alike questions and keys without any complementary exercises. However, according to the interviews, most teachers showed no attempts to alter forms of the questions to any kind, which relates to their belief that authentic exam materials can better train students' test-taking abilities. Only one teacher (Cheng) mentioned changing the forms of exercise from teaching materials, such as changing a fill-in-the-blank exercise into a quick-answer activities or translation exercise, changing an individual writing task into a group project, and changing passage reading into group reading puzzles. Teacher Cheng said that during her postgraduate study she had learned some methods of adapting the teaching tasks in a textbook, and she claimed her modifications of the exercises not only ensure students have a deeper understand the content of the exercises rather than take a wide guess by using test-taking strategies, but also make the classroom activities more flexible and interesting.

Other IELTS-Related Teaching Materials

Except for exam papers, teacher participants claimed using other teaching materials to better train students' language skills and test-taking skills because to improve the four language skills more practice is necessary to stimulate students' potentials to gain a better IELTS score. These materials focus on IELTS-oriented strategies and skills, analysis and explanations of IELTS exam papers, vocabulary and grammar. These books are used as supplementary materials because they concentrate on the specific weaknesses of Chinese IELTS test-takers, contain detailed information and abundant exercises. They target different weaknesses ranging from lack of vocabulary and collocations, difficulty in comprehending English grammar, common grammatical errors,

incoherent writing, and limited knowledge of IELTS common topics. Thus, the teachers use these IELTS-related teaching materials to help students consolidate their language foundation, expand the knowledge of various topics and improve their test-taking skills.

These teaching materials mainly target learners with short preparation time, usually less than a year. According to an unofficial interview with IELTS teachers from New Oriental, which has run IELTS-training business for over 20 years, these books can be better used for Year 3 students who have less than a year to fight for IELTS test. This is why these books are mainly used as complementary materials rather than the primary one in a school environment because in schools and universities, students usually take two-to-three-year IELTS courses and need consistency in content.

Non-IELTS-Related Teaching Materials

In addition to the need to improve in IELTS, teachers take other considerations when it comes to pedagogy. Cheng, Lu and Liu expected that by adding interesting learning materials in the classroom, students' concentration can be improved and more teacher-student interactions can be generated so as to increase students' language ability, IELTS-learning motivation and intention to study abroad. It has been observed that not all students enter the program with strong desire take IELTS test to study abroad: some take the course only because it is required by the university; some hope it could improve their resume. This eventually results in low motivation and distractions in the classroom setting. With such understanding of the students, the teachers have to pay attention to optimizing educational tools and methods in the teaching process, including preparing audios, videos as well as reading materials from the original English magazines, and also design corresponding interesting teaching activities. All of these measures are taken for the purpose of enhancing students' English language proficiency so that they could gain higher confidence to take IELTS test and study abroad.

Moreover, Cheng and Si give some thoughts on the content selection of teaching materials. They tend to incorporate Chinese culture into their teaching content as the state now advocates teachers to integrate local culture and Chinese traditions with subject learning in the teaching process to enhance the younger generation's sense of national and cultural identity. Therefore, they try to respond to this national education policy by using carefully selected Chinese-culture-related materials in their lessons. This attempt, or experiment, has also become one of their research areas and cost them a significant amount of time on class preparation and practice. A positive observation is that Cheng evaluated the appropriateness of the materials in terms of students' IELTS levels by using CEFR measurement while Si adopted materials that reflect real Chinese culture from authentic reading sources, which is coincident with sources of IELTS reading passages (Test Format, n.d.).

According to the results of the student survey (Figure 1), more than half of the student participants believed that teachers' adjustments to teaching materials could better help them prepare for the IELTS test. 62% noticed teachers' adjustments of question types. 70% of the participants found that their teachers added other learning materials to the textbook, and 69% of the participants mentioned that the added content refers to some knowledge points excluded from the textbook, such as vocabulary, grammatical points and test-taking strategies. These

findings are consistent with the teachers' instructional planning.

In summary, teacher participants put significant considerations on the adoption and adaption of teaching materials to ensure students with different language levels can improve in both language proficiency and IELTS test. Such efforts are also observed by their students.

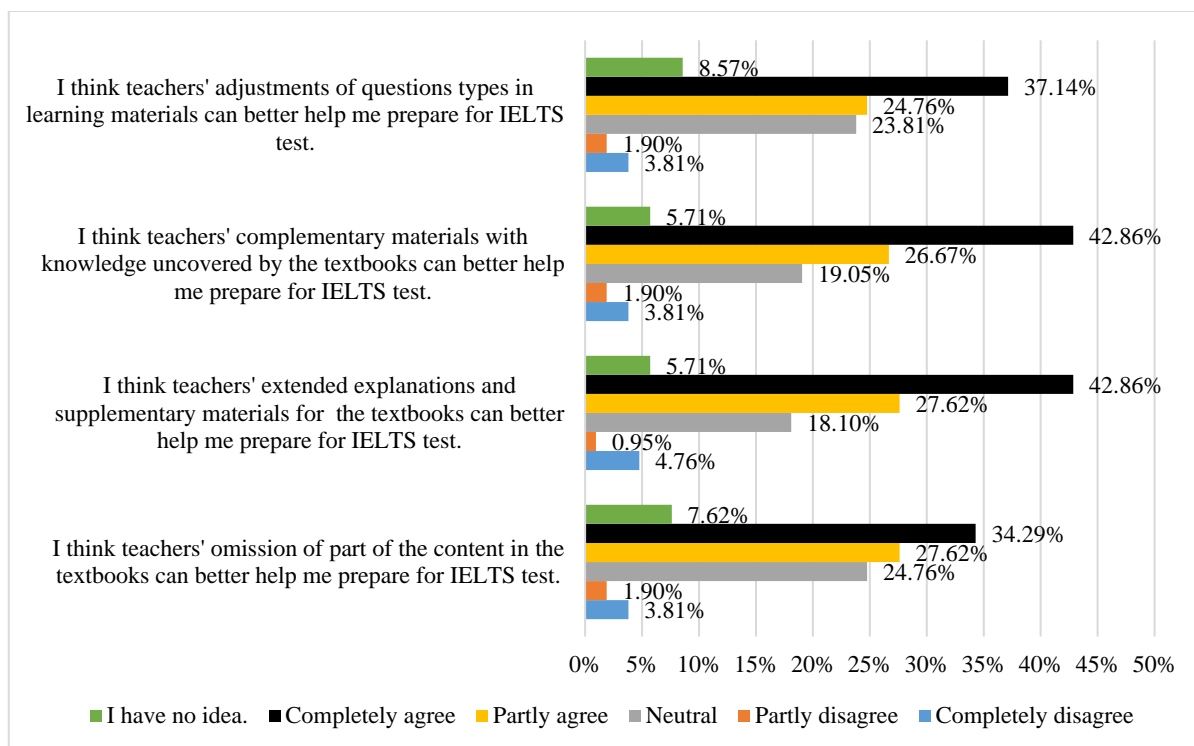


Figure 1. Students' Attitudes towards Teachers' Adaption of Teaching Materials

Discussion and Conclusion

The above results showed certain degrees of washback effects on teachers' adaption and adoption of teaching materials, their teaching practice and learners' attitude towards it.

It seems that whatever proportion of adjustments to textbooks or introduction of supplementary materials in different courses, teachers interviewed make sure IELTS-related content has to be contained. This finding eliminated Lam's (1994) concerns about teachers becoming "textbook slaves". Teachers did not heavily rely on past exam papers yet they applied textbooks and authentic teaching materials in their pedagogy in the first two years, although during the third year of the program the teaching objective becomes solely on training the students to get a higher IELTS score and authentic exam papers are heavily used. Data showed little on teachers' attitudes or behaviours to develop learners' other abilities but test-taking strategies and skills.

A positive washback effect of IELTS test on teaching materials is found when the teachers use IELTS test as a benchmark to evaluate the appropriateness of teaching materials, including the textbooks and other teaching materials, in terms of targeting language proficiency, language use and content. The teachers observed in the

classroom settings that the students tend to be better motivated and perform when there is a mixture of IELTS-related materials and other interesting materials from either the textbooks or other sources so the students can not only improve both their language proficiency and test-taking abilities but also enjoy the class at the same time. It is particularly evident for Year 1 students and Year 2 students who do not have an urgent need to achieve high IELTS score within a short time. This partly proves that the teachers make efforts to achieve both communicative teaching goals and the students' learning goal of getting satisfied scores in IELTS test. Such efforts were also perceived by almost two thirds of the students, who claimed the teachers' efforts were effective to prepare them for IELTS tests.

It is surprising to note that IELTS test is not the only factor for teachers to choose teaching materials. It has been found that teachers' choices of different teaching materials are influenced by the state's educational policy, individual research areas, teaching rationale, ability to make modifications on teaching materials and so forth. It is the interplay of these factors, including IELTS test, that eventually determines the adoption of various teaching materials. Teachers, therefore, struggle to make a balance between their personal teaching needs and students' learning needs.

To summarise, the washback effect of IELTS test tend to have a positive effect on teachers' choice of teaching materials, though some negative influences have been found during the third year of the program. Also, despite the fact that the teachers hoped to help the students to get a satisfactory IELTS result, they adopted and adapted various teaching materials including textbooks for more complicated reasons. For further research, classroom observation and data of students' test results after the courses are necessary to see if there is a link between teachers' modifications of teaching materials with students' test performance.

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