



Concordia Working Papers
in Applied Linguistics

Concordia Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 4, 2013
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Washback of a high-stakes English test in China: Student and teacher perceptions

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Abstract

This report describes part of an ongoing study on one aspect of washback from the Beijing Matriculation English Test (BMET), a high-stakes test for prospective university applicants in Beijing. Washback is here defined as the influence of testing on teaching and learning. The aspect under investigation is students' and teachers' perceptions of the role of final-year secondary school English classes in (a) preparing for the BMET and (b) improving English skills. Results from questionnaire data from two groups of final-year secondary school students ($n = 70$) and interview data from three of the students and their teacher show that both the students and teacher perceive that a major role of the final-year English class is to prepare students for the BMET; students' improvement of English skills is of lesser importance. Implications for the successful implementation of pedagogical change through washback are discussed.

High-stakes tests are often used not only to select high performers but also to encourage desirable changes in teaching and learning, which is particularly the case in China (Qi, 2005). This phenomenon is referred to as washback: the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Bailey, 1996). Hughes (1993) conceived of washback as acting across three overlapping areas: participants, processes, and products. A test can affect

the perceptions and attitudes of participants such as teachers, learners, and administrators. These perceptions may then influence the work the participants do (processes), which in turn shape the learning outcomes (products). Although changes to high-stakes tests are meant to induce positive washback in some or all of these areas, the actual effects are not always the ones expected or desired (Qi, 2005). It is therefore important to empirically investigate washback as high-stakes tests evolve. This article is based on an ongoing washback study of the high-stakes Beijing Matriculation English Test (BMET) and reports participants' perceptions and attitudes about the influence of the BMET on language teaching and learning.

The BMET is modeled on the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), a national university entrance English exam for graduating secondary school students in China. Since 2002, all university applicants in Beijing have written the BMET, and their scores, along with other subject-matter scores, determine university admission. The BMET generally follows the same format and test syllabus as the two-part NMET. In the first part, listening, grammar and vocabulary, and reading are tested, while the second part assesses error correction and writing.

Traditionally, most assessment items in both the NMET and the BMET elicited testtakers' linguistic knowledge. Since the late 1990s, developers have made various changes to NMET format and content. Qi (2005) conducted a large-scale interview and questionnaire study which involved NMET test developers, secondary school teachers, and students in order to investigate washback effects of these changes. Qi reported that developers of the NMET sought to move the teaching and learning focus in secondary school English classes from only linguistic knowledge to more authentic communication practice. However, the subsequent observed changes to teaching and learning were not the ones desired by the test developers. An overarching reason was that the NMET was an extremely high-stakes test used to select students for university admission. Students and teachers widely reported the belief that the goal of final-year English classes was to prepare students to score high on the NMET. Therefore, teachers and students generally did not engage in activities which might be somewhat related to sections of the NMET (e.g., reading texts for meaning), but focussed on test-taking strategies and activities which mirrored NMET sections (e.g., answering multiple-choice questions on a reading text). Clearly, the beliefs and perceptions reported by the teachers and students about the NMET were linked to the value they gave particular activities in the classroom. The test developers'

hoped-for washback was not congruent with what teachers and students perceived to be effective test preparation.

Like the NMET, since 2010 the BMET has used several new question formats which prioritize language use, but the nature of the washback following these changes has not been explored. The washback could be positive (favourable), negative (unfavourable), or non-existent (test does not influence teaching and learning). This article therefore describes an ongoing study addressing the broad question: What is the nature of BMET washback in final-year secondary school English classrooms in Beijing? The specific aspect under exploration is students' and teachers' perceptions of BMET washback, with the particular research question: As perceived by students and teachers, what is the role of final-year secondary school English classes in (a) preparing for the BMET and (b) for improving English skills? Answering this question will help us understand the influence of high-stakes, large-scale tests on teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Beijing.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were L1 Mandarin students from two intact Senior III English classes (the final year in secondary school) in a city key school in Beijing, China. City key schools are given a larger share of the educational budget and better qualified teachers compared with ordinary schools. The two classes were taught by the same L1 Mandarin teacher of English, who had 10 years' experience, with three years at the Senior III level. This teacher had agreed to allow the authors access to her students. Questionnaire data from 70 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.8$) were collected and analyzed: 30 students from one class (14 females) and 40 students in the other class (22 females). Information about students' future academic plans is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Participants' Desired Future University

Educational institution	Responses
National key university	57 (81%)
Provincial key university	2 (3%)
Overseas university	10 (14%)
Ordinary university	1 (1%)

Materials and procedure

The washback questionnaire was adapted from that used by Qi (2005), who targeted the perceived washback of the NMET. Qi's questionnaire was modified to reflect the BMET, with some questionnaire items added and others removed, for a total of 78 items. The questionnaire was translated into Mandarin by the second author, an L1 Mandarin speaker. It was pilot-tested with five Senior III students from an ordinary school in Beijing, and then modified based on student feedback. The final questionnaire totaled 61 items. The questionnaire was administered to both classes in Mandarin by the second author on the last day of class, one week before the writing of the BMET. Students responded to each question by using a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) and were given 10 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

In order to collect further information about student and teacher beliefs, three randomly selected students from the second class (S1, S2, and S3) and the teacher were individually interviewed by the second author. The recorded interviews were conducted in Mandarin in a quiet classroom three weeks after the students had written the BMET. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes for each student and 1 hour for the teacher. The questions were based on selected items from the questionnaire and on comments made by interviewees about relevant areas.

Data analysis

Before questionnaire responses were tallied, the different questionnaire items were grouped into 10 variables (e.g., motivations for learning, in-class activities). Two of these variables are directly relevant to the research question addressed here, namely, the relation of English class to the BMET (four items), and the relation of English class to English skills improvement (two items). The first variable included more items than the second variable because the first variable targeted multiple ways through which English class could be related to the BMET. The six target items (translated into English) are listed in Table 2. All interviews were transcribed into Pinyin by the second author. Themes and sub-themes were then extracted from the interviews using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008), with the second author reviewing the transcripts repeatedly and grouping particular excerpts under increasingly developed categories. After all excerpts were coded, the second author translated all excerpts

into English. Another L1 Mandarin coder independently verified the translation and category coding.

RESULTS

Responses to the variable Relation of English class to BMET show clear agreement by students that a major role for both English classes and English teachers in secondary school is and should be to prepare students to succeed on the BMET ($M = 3.5$ out of 4). The mean scores for the 3rd item under this variable are particularly high, suggesting that these students believe the objectives in secondary school English education are closely linked to performance on the BMET. In response to the variable Relation of English class to English skills improvement, there is somewhat less agreement about the role of English classes in fostering students' development of English skills ($M = 2.8$ out of 4). The use of Senior III textbooks for improving English proficiency is generally not viewed positively ($M=2.5$). These textbooks are not designed as BMET practice materials, but do include materials and activities related to the BMET. A summary of student responses appears in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Questionnaire Responses

Variables and Items	M	SD
1. Relation of English Class to BMET		
Teaching to the test helps to raise test scores.	3.31	0.75
It is teachers' responsibility to help students raise scores.	3.38	0.77
The immediate goal of English learning at secondary schools is to obtain high scores in the BMET.	3.67	0.58
Senior III English teaching is directly affected by the BMET.	3.43	0.79
2. Relation of English Class to English Skills Improvement		
The Senior III English class should focus primarily on textbooks in order to improve students' English proficiency.	2.53	0.79
The long-term goal of English language learning at secondary schools is to develop the ability to use the language.	3.08	0.96

Note. Responses based on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree).

In the interview data, responses which related to the research question spanned many themes, such as attitudes towards the BMET and

differences between Senior III and lower-level classes. Because the students generally did not speak at length on any one theme, the excerpts from students' interviews shown below comprise, for each student, an aggregation of their relevant responses on different themes. All responses which did not relate to the research question were not included. The teacher's longer responses are presented thematically. The focus on BMET performance in English class was supported in the interview data by both the students and the teacher.

S2 says:

In Senior I and II we study the textbook, and there are some pair work and group activities, like conversation... However, in Senior III, it's all newspapers and exam papers... I think 80% is geared toward the BMET. We do BMET mock tests in class and we analyze the tests... I think these kinds of activities are specific for BMET practice. The teacher hopes that we progress fast and get higher scores.

S3 says about the influence of the BMET:

It changes the teaching content. The teachers emphasize more grammar, and we do a lot of mock exercises in class. There are few oral practice opportunities... Senior III classes are supposed to be like this, aiming at improving our scores in the BMET. However, I think my English level has not improved. We are just trained to do the test well.

S1's view:

[The Senior III class is] just for teaching to the test, one section after the other. What we practiced is what in the test... Students actually aren't in the mood for [other activities] because they are not related to the college entrance exam.

The teacher says English classes in Senior III are different from earlier levels in several ways, though not simply due to the BMET.

Teacher on textbooks and materials:

There are more materials for listening, speaking, writing and reading exercises... In the previous chapters, the texts are simplified, but in [the Senior III chapters], the texts are original, and longer than before. The listening materials are difficult for the Ss as well. The grammar explanations in the textbook are in English....These are for challenging the good students, and also provide students opportunities to see what it is like to use English in genuine and authentic communication... I use some materials unrelated to the BMET,

but only for extensive reading. In those lessons, I use authentic materials downloaded from English websites and I design my lesson according to students' needs.

On teaching activities:

The BMET matters little in Senior I and II, but it has a great influence on Senior III... In Senior III, students have to do lots of BMET mock exercises.

On positive washback of the BMET:

Students might be more motivated to learn English in senior III because they need to get high scores to go to good universities. Senior III maybe the only chance for them to train their English skills intensively. The revision of all the language knowledge students learned in Senior III is a good opportunity for them to have an overall idea of what they've learned. The preparation for the BMET helps them to get higher scores, and also improve their ability.

CONCLUSION

From the questionnaire and interview data, students and their teacher generally seem to believe that a major role of the Senior III English class is to prepare students for the BMET; students' improvement of English skills is of lesser importance. The teacher also believes that the preparation for the BMET is useful for students' review and learning of English; however, the teacher reports doing some non-BMET-related activities in class. It seems, then, that the nature of the BMET may strongly influence teaching activities in final-year secondary school English classrooms. These results from this part of the ongoing study suggest that if further changes were made to BMET format or content, final-year teachers (supported by students) would likely modify their teaching activities in response. However, as Shohamy (2001) notes, using changes to high-stakes tests in order to bring about pedagogical change is very often ineffective. Instead, curricular innovation and pre-service and in-service training would be more likely to result in the desired pedagogical changes and encourage positive washback. Future directions for our research in this area include: (1) observation of Senior III English classes before and after changes to the BMET to collect classroom-based evidence of washback and (2) interviews with BMET designers and test-writers in order to explore the relationship between the design of the BMET and its intended washback.

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