

WASHBACK OF AN ENGLISH ACHIEVEMENT TEST ON TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT: Assessment, including tests, has increasingly attracted educational stakeholders all over the world for its significant role in the certification of one's capacity for a certain purpose. Tertiary education in Vietnam has paid more attention to the teaching of English for undergraduates; nonetheless, their English ability reflected from tests is limited. Teachers are said to be in the front to bring about improvements in undergraduates' English ability. In order to make the change, English teachers' interest in professional development is accounted as a key motive. This paper presents the findings from the research on teachers' perceptions of their professional development under the washback of an English achievement test at a Vietnamese university. The article was part of a dissertation. An interview was conducted among four teachers in two rounds. The research shows the teachers' positive self-reflection of their teaching and their needs of extended professional community. The findings are beneficial for the teachers who participated in the research, the teachers who had the same interests and the policy makers as well.

Keywords: washback, achievement test, perception, professional development.

TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA BÀI THI TIẾNG ANH HẾT HỌC PHẦN TỐI NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁNG VIÊN VỀ VIỆC PHÁT TRIỂN CHUYÊN MÔN: NGHIÊN CỨU TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

TÓM TẮT: Kiểm tra đánh giá trên thế giới ngày càng thu hút sự quan tâm của nhiều bên liên quan vì quá trình quan trọng này giúp xác định năng lực của một cá nhân tương thích cho một mục đích cụ thể. Giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam ngày nay tập trung nhiều hơn tới việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho sinh viên. Tuy nhiên, năng lực tiếng Anh của sinh viên thể hiện qua kết quả đánh giá còn có nhiều hạn chế. Chúng ta mong đợi giảng viên sẽ ở vị trí tiên tuyến để cải thiện năng lực tiếng Anh cho sinh viên. Để tạo ra sự thay đổi, mối quan tâm của giảng viên tiếng Anh tới sự phát triển chuyên môn được coi là một động cơ chủ đạo. Bài báo này trình bày kết quả nghiên cứu về nhận thức của giáo viên về việc phát triển chuyên môn dưới tác động của một bài thi tiếng Anh hết khóa của sinh viên tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Bài báo là một phần nội dung của một luận án tiến sĩ. Kết quả chỉ ra giảng viên nhận thức rất tích cực về bản thân trong quá trình giảng dạy và bày tỏ nhu cầu tham gia vào một cộng đồng chuyên môn rộng. Kết quả nghiên cứu có ích cho chính các giảng viên tham gia nghiên cứu, các giảng viên có cùng mối quan tâm và các nhà hoạch định chính sách phát triển chuyên môn đội ngũ.

Từ khóa: tác động đội ngược, bài kiểm tra cuối khóa, nhận thức, phát triển chuyên môn

INTRODUCTION

Washbach research has become a compelling topic in the testing and assessment of the English language since the latter half of the twentieth century (Brown, 2013), which helps point out the benefits of the test on teaching to promote and the shortcomings to limit. While many areas concerning washback of an English tests have been investigated, research gaps can still be found. First, washback research has reached teachers and students in terms of their teaching and learning methods (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004), whereas washback on teachers' professional development has rarely been investigated. Second, language tests in washback research mainly focuses on high-stake tests like a university entrance exam or a university exit exam; however, an achievement test which can help teachers to make immediate reflection and improvement on their teaching draws little attraction. In addition, there is more research on washback of teachers' practices than of perceptions. Perceptions/beliefs are argued to have a driving force to practices (Onaiba, 2013; Wang, 2010). Therefore, washback on teachers' perceptions of their professional development under the influence of an English test promises to generate considerable results which can serve to improve the teaching of English.

At the researched site, the English achievement test which is an instrument in this research is a new test and has a marked role because it mirrors the English test as a condition for undergraduates to exit university. Research on the new test is significant since the findings promise to provide all the stakeholders an insight

into the situation to make positive changes. Research on teachers' perceptions of their professional development under the influence of that test deserves to be conducted for the research findings can help the teachers reflect themselves and the policy makers to decide on supporting their teachers. These post-research actions promise to improve the undergraduates' English ability at the university.

A research question is formulated as followed:

How does the English achievement test impact on the teachers' perception of their professional development at a university in Vietnam?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the key concepts related to the research topics, which include washback, achievement test and teachers' perceptions of their professional development.

1. Washback

The first fundamental concept of washback will be elaborated beside its very similar term of impact.

Washback and impact are often two interrelated concepts in language testing and assessment. The former affects teaching and learning within the training context, and the latter operates beyond the classroom scale (society) and relates to all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policy-makers) (Bachman, 1990; Cheng et al., 2015; McNamara, 2000). Impact, on its micro level of the classroom context, is called *washback* (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Hughes (2003, p. 53) defines washback as "a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on educational

systems in general, and on society at large”. From another perspective, washback operates in both the narrow and the wide context (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001, 2002; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Manjarrés, 2004). Alderson and Wall (1993) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) distinguish washback from impact but still assert that washback does not limit its effect on teaching and learning but is a very complicated phenomenon which spreads its impact beyond the school context.

In short, washback in this research means the influence of the test on the teachers’ perceptions which may affect their teaching.

2. Achievement tests

Achievement tests are among the most familiar test types to teachers and students. They play a central role in assessing students’ accomplishment by the end of a unit or a programme (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; McNamara, 2000). Its principal purpose is to announce the standard achievement for all stake-holders like students, teachers, authorities, or parents from which appropriate decisions pertaining to learning and teaching reforms or mastery certification are made (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Hughes, 2003). By definition, achievement tests evaluate the fulfilled amount of course contents pertaining to the course objectives (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Brown, 2013; Hughes, 2003; McNamara, 2000). Hughes (2003) classifies achievement tests into two types: *final and progress ones* in terms of the administration time.

The achievement test in the current research is characterised as the second type that intends to gauge the sum of

knowledge and skills that non-English majored freshmen have attained in English course 2 in the second semester.

3. Teachers’ perceptions of their professional development

Teachers’ perceptions and their perceptions of professional development will be discussed herein.

Perceptions are defined variously. With regards Cambridge Dictionary, *perception* is defined as “a belief or an opinion” or “an understanding”. Perceptions in the current research can be understood through the definitions of beliefs. Pajares (1992, p. 316) defines beliefs as an “individual’s judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do”. Richardson (1996, p. 102) names beliefs “a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person’s actions”. Perceptions belong to these constructs. Borg (2003, 2006) states teachers’ beliefs are the cognitive and systemic nature of beliefs: what teachers think, know or believe.

Regarding professional development, Taqizadeh and Birjandi (2015, p. 41) suggest exploring teachers’ perceptions of professionalism through teaching characters, necessary changes in teaching profession, necessary training, other necessary professional development activities, school support, teaching rewards, and teacher evaluation. This can be extended to an investigation of the washback effects of a test to teachers’ professional development aspects including their desire of training to improve

their teaching under the test requirements, their professional development activities and their professional benefit from the test.

Teachers' professional development under washback are voiced a little by Antineskul and Sheveleva (2015), Liauh (2011), Thuy Nhan (2013) and Wall and Horák (2006). According to Liauh (2011, p. 179), the teachers believe in their ability to evaluate their own teaching effectiveness and can boost up their teaching methodology as well as enrich their teaching materials. Antineskul and Sheveleva (2015, p. 12) report teachers' collaboration. By exchanging knowledge, skill and materials in teaching, the teachers can reflect on themselves and make innovation in the future. Thuy Nhan (2013) shows teachers' devotion in their profession due to the test. She links teachers' professional reputation to the rate of successful/failed students in the exam. A majority of teachers are under pressure when they lack professional training opportunities of the test but they are assigned to teach how their students can achieve a target score. Wall and Horák (2006) are in accordance with her.

The current study expects to enrich the documentation of washback research on teachers' perceptions of teaching under an English test influence.

METHOD

The research followed a qualitative single case study research design as suggested by researchers like Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) and Creswell (2003). The qualitative research approach matches the "how" question in the research. The question "how" could increase participants' deep engagement

in constructing knowledge. They could express their voices broadly in interactions with the researcher or with other participants. Four female English teachers aged from 30 to 45 at a university in Vietnam were selected as the participants for the study. The participants included one novice teacher and three senior teachers. One teacher had an administrative role. They all have the masters' degree. For reader-friendliness and teacher privacy respect, I used the specific pseudo-names to label them. Lam was the Head of the Division of English for Specific Purposes where course English 2 in the current research was designed and implemented. She had 6 years of taking charge of the leadership post and 12 years of teaching experience. She is in her 30s. Mai had been working as an English teacher in the Division for 15 years. It is noted that she joined the board of test designers as the secretary. The third teacher was Trang of 18 year-working experience. Lan was a novice teacher in the Division with two years of teaching English in the Division. The teacher was interviewed one by one in two rounds. The first round took place at the beginning of the course and the second round occurred at the week after the mid-course test which was in the format of the final English achievement test.

RESULTS

Through the analysis of the collected interview data, two categories emerged were the teachers' positive self-reflection and the need of more professional socialization.

1. Positive self-reflection

The teachers' positive self-reflection was shown when they were asked about

the influence of the English achievement test on their perceptions of the present teaching, general methods, and their future professional innovation.

All the teachers thought that the test did not challenge their professional knowledge because it only tested B1 level (Lam, Int1, p. 8, Int2, p. 13-15; Mai, Int1, p.10; Int2, p. 19; Trang, Int1, p.8, Int2, p. 14; Lan, Int1, p. 11). The first interview took place at the beginning of the course. All the teachers thought this course would help them reflect on their teaching, basing on which they would make their course better. As seen from Lam's report (Lam, Int1, p. 8), the content of the course had just been renewed; therefore, it was a little bit early to predict the reflection but this process would surely be a necessary stage in their teaching. The university as well as the teachers needed it.

The second interview happened at the nearly end of the course which showed all the teachers were pleased with their teaching. Trang said, "I feel I am doing the course well because it is the course we decided ourselves" (Int2, p. 14). In her second interview, she said her level was much higher than the test level; therefore, she taught the course in the free-anxiety environment (Int1, p. 14). She remained her positive attitude towards the teaching content and the test content of the updated course English 2.

I feel this course has a positive impact on us because this time we have a consistence among us between the taught contents and the test contents. It is different from the previous courses. We felt it hard to teach because we taught this way but the test was that way. [...] I like it. I feel comfortable

and easy to follow the textbook, to guide the students to the test easily [...] I think I don't need any further improvement in my teaching. (Int2, p. 15)

The same ideas were heard from Lam (Int2, p. 15), Mai (Int2, p. 19), and Lan (p. 11) Lam believed she was completing the objective on the right track although she still needed to reflect and improve her teaching (Int2, p. 14). As for Mai, she said she was rather pleased with her teaching. She added that her full pleasure only came when her students had good results in the exam and they could use English in the future (Int2, p. 19). She expected to have more time to understand the lesson, understand the PET assessment criteria, diversify her teaching activities and applied modern teaching methods (Int2, p. 20-21). That kind of reflection for future work was seen in Lam's (Int 1, p. 14) and Lan's (Int1, p. 17). Lan agreed that she had spent more time caring her students than making them active, and that she would have to shift more classwork to the students (Int1, p. 17). According to Lam (Int1, p. 15), the PET-oriented test was first implemented, therefore, its new features attracted her and demanded her certain effort to approach the students appropriately. Furthermore, she mentioned the test as a transition to the PET, which required relatively careful preparation (Int2, p.13). The new course and the new test enabled her to evaluate what the teachers were doing for their students.

When asked to compare their professional development innovation in the course with the English achievement test and in other courses, two thought patterns emerged. Lam (Int2, p. 15) said the previous tests took her more time than the English

achievement test to prepare for the format and the contents because those ones did not have such clear test factors as the English achievement test. Other three teachers, Mai (Int2, p. 20), Trang (Int2, p. 14) and Lan (Int2, p. 20) thought they any courses needed the same teachers' preparation.

Two thought patterns rose from the data. Lam, Mai and Lan were more interested in the self- professional development while Trang was more pleased with her current teaching. It is noted that Lam was in her administrative role and Lan was a novice teacher. By comparison, Trang was the oldest teacher among all.

2. The need of more professional socialization

Beside self-reflection, the professional development in their institutional community and beyond that context under the washback of the English achievement test was investigated. The first interview released the collaboration amongst the teachers under the guidance of the leader, while the second interview reported the teachers' need in further collaboration.

All the teachers reported the meetings in their division to select the test, the textbook and design the syllabus (Lam, Int1, p.10, Int2, p. 15; Mai, Int1, p.9; Int2, p. 20, Trang, Int1, p.12; Int2, p. 14, Lan, Int1, p.12; Int2, p. 18). Seen in this way, washback evidence is obvious. The teachers appreciated the course leader's transparent instruction. They agreed that the meetings allowed them to implement the programme in the same approach. They felt clear about what they were doing in their classes. However, Lam did not mention further teacher support from the division and the university in terms

of the sources and the physical learning environment, larger rooms, projectors, for example; although it was the first time the programme had been used at the university while the interviews released the teachers' need of such aids (Trang, Int2, p. 22, Mai, Int2, p. 21).

Trang added her concern about in-division collaboration:

While I am pleased with the clear guidance of the leader, I still feel sad. Indeed, we still sit together, do peer-observation, give constructive comments, etc. I am still sad about the final test design. Sometimes we agree that we will take this part as the test contents, but when the exam comes, it can be another one, making the students sit still. I still feel sad about that [...] I hope that it won't repeat. (Int2, p. 14, 15)

In her pure teacher role, Trang expected the consistency between what is tested and what is taught. Her idea is quite reasonable for an achievement test. The teachers all preferred deep onsite cooperation at the target university.

Apart from those experienced teachers who reported their professional development from the division meetings and the break time chats, the novice teacher revealed her experience collected through miming the past teachers and observing other experienced teachers (Lan, Int1, p. 18).

About beyond-institution cooperation, no collaboration or training under the impact of the PET / English achievement test was mentioned. When asked, the head teacher expected to have a network of teaching English towards the MoET's requirements of undergraduates' English outcomes (Int1, p. 15). Mai (Int1, p. 18)

and Lan (Int1, p. 19) shared the point but Trang (Int2, p. 15) thought it impossible due to different programmes at different universities. Lan hoped to be invited to professional development events (Int2, p. 21). Mai said she would join professional development when her teaching hours at the university reduced.

In short, the teachers appreciated the onsite collaboration and wished a wider community; however, they did not show their activeness in finding that one.

Three teachers (Lam, Mai and Lan) cared about their professional development more than Trang did. They perceived self-reflection as an important activity to support the students better in the coming lessons. Liauh (2011) reports that when teachers believe in their ability to evaluate their own teaching effectiveness, there is likelihood that they can boost up their teaching methodology as well as enrich their teaching materials. Antineskul and Sheveleva (2015) prove that when teachers were preparing for the BEC, they considered it a career development opportunity because they could develop their Business English vocabulary systematically. Similarly, teachers in this study regarded the test preparation in the course as an opportunity for them to self-reflect on their teaching, and improve their teaching. They have shown their development in understanding about the students and the test.

CONCLUSION

The present washback research has investigated the washback of an English achievement test to the teachers at a university to Vietnam. It is found that there was positive washback of

the English achievement test to the teachers' perceptions of their professional development. The teachers felt pleased with their teaching and the development of the course and the test. Onsite collaboration in the course development was appreciated. Nonetheless, beyond-site collaboration was not much of the teachers' needs. Research findings can provide useful information for the stakeholders to make necessary changes. Further research can be conducted on more aspects in a larger number of participants.

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