

## Do tests promote changes in listening and reading skills?: Evidence from a Taiwanese EFL context

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Most test washback studies focus on stakeholder opinions of test consequences without evaluating actual test score changes (Ross, 2005; Wall & Horak, 2006). In response to that criticism, this study compares how the listening and reading test scores of two groups of students changed over a nine month period. A control group of 140 Taiwanese university students at a school without any English proficiency certificate graduation requirement was compared with a contrast group of 136 similar students at a school requiring students to pass an English certification test in order to graduate. An independent sample t-test showed no statistically significant scoregain differences between these two groups.

Both Ross (2005, p. 462) and Wall and Horak (2006, p. 3) claim that washback research generally focuses on teacher and learner attitudes or instructional content/methodology rather than student learning effects as measured by examination scoregains. This paper seeks to evaluate a policy that has been adopted by many universities in Taiwan as well as some tertiary institutions elsewhere of requiring students to achieve a specified level of English proficiency as measured by an approved set of exams to graduate. This particular study aims to ascertain whether English certification exit requirements have significantly impacted the listening and reading scores of the most common test of EFL proficiency in Taiwan, the Elementary Level General English Proficiency Test (Roever & Pan, 2008).

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## Literature Review

Studies on scoregain washback have elicited mixed results. Whereas some suggest that test-driven instruction can promote language learning, others indicate it has no significant impact, and still others imply that certain language skills may be amenable to test-driven instruction, but not others.

### Studies Supporting Test-Driven Instruction

Hughes (1988) reported how a Turkish university adopted an EFL proficiency exam to determine which students should continue their studies. This policy required ongoing students to achieve an unspecified exam score by the end of the first year. Before this test requirement was implemented, less than 50% of students attained the target cutoff score. However, after it was introduced 72% of the students reached that target, and with the addition of a summer school session, the figure rose to 83%. This illustrates how testing policies, under the right conditions, do appear to promote positive washback.

### Studies Suggesting Test-Driven Instruction Has Mixed Results

Green (2007a, 2007b) investigated whether test preparation classes significantly impacted IELTS writing scores. He found test prep courses offered “no clear advantage” (2007b, p. 75) in terms of IELTS grammar/vocabulary test performance among different groups over a 4-14 week period. However, scoregains were found primarily among two learner groups: those who planned to take the test again and those with low initial writing test scores. Although regression to the mean (Smith & Smith, 2005) might account for the later finding, the results still suggest test-driven instruction does not necessarily raise students’ scores. It also points out how student motivation may play a key role in test score improvements.

Moreover, Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) as well as Lai (2008) found that students who took a one-or-two-semester TOEIC test preparation course scored significantly higher on the post-test reading section, but not the listening section. Conversely, Elder and O’Loughlin (2003) examined the relationship between intensive test-driven English language study and IELTS scoregains after 10-12 weeks of instruction with 130 students in New Zealand. They found significant gains in listening, but not reading. A range of factors seemed linked to test score improvements such as personality, motivation, confidence, and exposure. The fact that there was a test preparation course did not appear to be influential.

### Studies Suggesting Test-Driven Instruction is Ineffective

Andrews et al. (2002) compared the scores of three groups of university students on an oral EFL exam in Hong Kong from 1993 to 1995. The first and third groups had test-driven instruction during their first and second years respectively. The second group received no test-preparation instruction. The scores of the first and third groups tended to increase compared to the second group, but not to statistically significant levels. Though the first and third groups exhibited some “familiarization with the exam format, [and] the rote-learning of exam-specific strategies and formulaic phrases” (p. 220) there was no evidence that their language skills had significantly improved more than their control group peers.

In the same vein, Bachman et al. (1995), Hayes and Watt (1998), and Celestine and Ming (1999), found that test-preparation did not lead to significant scoregains. For example, Celestine and Ming discovered that after a two-month test preparation course, 398 Malaysian university students did not improve their listening scores significantly.

Based on the foregoing discussion, we see that test washback studies on learning outcomes have tended to focus on short-term test-preparation English classes, and very few have used two-semester time frames as employed in this study.

## Methodology

### Respondents

This quasi-experimental study contrasted 136 first-year students from a tertiary school in Taiwan with EFL proficiency exit requirements (hereafter referred to as an exit school) with 140 from a school without such requirements (a non-exit school). All respondents were Taiwanese nationals in their first year at public colleges in Taiwan.

The effect sizes of the mean English pre-test score differences between the two groups were small at  $d = 0.07$  ( $t = .656$ ,  $df = 274$ ) for listening and  $d = 0.29$  ( $t = 2.375$ ,  $df = 274$ ) for reading. This suggests that the two groups represent different samples from the same general population. Though students in each group attended different institutions, in most other respects they were similar.

### Instruments

To investigate washback on learning outcomes, the most common test in Taiwan for university EFL learners was used. Known as the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), since 2002 this test has existed at four different levels. The Elementary Level is thought to correspond to the Council of Europe's A2 Waystage level (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004).

In this research project, two authorized GEPT Elementary Level, First-Stage Tests - which reputedly measure listening and reading skills - were used. Only the First-Stage test was administered because there was no access to trained raters to assess the writing and speaking sections of that test. The reported standard error of measurement for the First Stage Elementary Level GEPT Test is  $\pm 8$  points (LTTC Elementary GEPT Statistics Report, 2009).

In addition to the pre-test / post-test, a 36-item questionnaire in Chinese was used after the post-test. That questionnaire asked about basic demographic information, motivation for English study, test preparation methods, and how much time students reputedly allotted to English study.

### Administrative Procedures

A pre-test/post design was employed in this study: both groups took two authorized versions of the GEPT test. There was a nine-month period between the administration of the first test and the second one. This time span was chosen because it provided a chance to reflect on the impact of nearly two semesters of formal English instruction (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2003, 2004; Green, 2007a).

The 276 respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire when they handed in their post-tests in June 2008. If more than 3 questionnaire items were not answered, the questionnaires were not counted. 31 did not complete their questionnaires adequately, resulting in a response rate of 89%: 126 students from an exit school and 119 from a non-exit school. A demographic summary of those 245 individuals appears in Table 1.

**Table 1***A demographic profile of the respondents*

<b>Gender</b>	Male	(n= 66)	26.9%
	Female	(n = 179)	73.1%
<b>Major</b>	Business/Management	(n = 196)	80.0%
	Engineering	(n = 7)	2.9%
	Humanities and Social Sciences	(n = 14)	5.7%
	Agriculture	(n = 28)	11.4%
<b>Exit requirements?</b>	Yes	(n=126)	51.4%
	No	(n=119)	48.6%

**Data Analysis**

For the pre- and post-tests descriptive statistics were calculated as well as independent t-tests to see if a larger scoregain was found among the exit students, and whether this was statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

For the questionnaires, a Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine the variables that exhibited a statistically significant difference at  $p < .05$ , along with standard descriptive statistics. Moreover, a chi-square was run to investigate whether statistically significant differences existed between the time the two groups reputedly studied English and their opinions regarding requirement policy.

**Results**

Table 2 indicates that both groups improved in listening, but there was clearly no difference between the groups gains. Table 3 indicates that the non-exit group improved more than the exit group in reading, and the difference was close to statistical significance.

Table 2: Results of listening test

	<b>Listening: pre</b>	<b>Listening: Post</b>	<b>gain</b>
Exit (n = 136)	73.41 (19.34)	80.72 (21.59)	7.31(13.25)
Non-exit ( n = 140)	74.94 (19.41)	80.69 (22.53)	5.75 (15.07)

$t = .912$ ,  $df = 274$ ,  $p = .36$  (ns)

Table 3: Results of reading test

	<b>Reading: pre</b>	<b>Reading: post</b>	<b>gain</b>
Exit (n = 136)	67.82 (26.11)	69.69 (26.09)	1.87 (15.36)
Non-exit (n = 140)	75.5 (14.6)	80.66 (18.2)	5.16 (15.52)

$t = 1.77$ ,  $df = 274$ ,  $p = .08$

The avowed purpose for establishing the tertiary English certification exit requirements was to enhance students' English proficiency. However, the minimal difference in scoregains between the two groups suggests that this policy has had minimal effect in bolstering student proficiency.

## Student Questionnaires

Now let us turn our attention to the questionnaire results (see Appendix A). The Cronbach alpha reliability for the 38 items with a 5-point Likert response format was 0.88. Let us consider each issue the survey explored.

### 1. *Motivation for English study*

The questionnaire mentioned 10 possible motivations for studying English. The highest ranking for both groups was "To have better opportunities in the future". Both also ranked "To prepare for English certification tests and earn certificates" at mid point.

### 2. *Methods of English study*

Respondents were asked about their preferred study activities. Both groups appeared to favor traditional methods of studying English such as reading textbooks, taking notes and memorizing vocabulary. Though students at the exit school claimed to listen to English broadcasts, go to language schools, and do practice tests more than their peers, the effect sizes were only small or moderate. By contrast, non-exit students reported devoting marginally more time on English after class.

### 3. *Methods of English test preparation*

Respondents were asked how they prepared for tests. Both groups favored traditional methods such as reading textbooks, practicing text exercises and grammar rules, memorizing vocabulary and doing mock exams. Although exit students claimed to engage in activities such as listening to English audio texts more than their non-exit peers, the effect sizes were small.

### 4. *Time allocation for English study*

The survey also explored how much time students allegedly dedicated to English study. No statistically significant difference was found in the amount of time either group claimed to devote to this. Both groups spent a rather meager amount of time studying English outside of class.

### 5. *The necessity of establishing exit requirements*

The final survey question explored student attitudes toward the English proficiency graduation requirement itself. A higher percentage (37.2%) of students at the exit school said they supported the policy than their counterparts (25.2%). The difference was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion and Implications

The major result of this study is that requiring an examination in English did not have any effect on achievement in English. Students in an institution without this requirement did just as well as those in an institution with this requirement on a test of listening, and tended to do better on a test of reading. In addition, the presence of a required examination did not significantly affect student motivation, methods of study, or methods of test preparation, nor did it result in any more time devoted to English study.

This result calls into question the rationale behind the exit examination policy. Purported as a way of inciting EFL students to study harder and bolstering their foreign language skills, the policy appears to have had minimal impact. To raise English proficiency levels, it appears that something other than a government-mandated language testing policy is needed.

## Conclusion

Given the insignificant scoregain difference between the two groups examined in this study, we are faced with the question of how language proficiency levels can actually be improved. This paper has presented clear evidence that this test-driven policy, by itself, failed to yield any significant gain in listening ability as measured by the GEPT Elementary Test. Moreover, the non-exit group tended to do better than the exit group on the reading test, suggesting that an exam requirement may have a negative effect.

These results, of course, need to be confirmed with additional tests, and with different groups of students, but they clearly suggest that current EFL proficiency test graduation requirement policy plays a minimal role in improving student proficiency. This study has provided evidence that requiring this population to pass an EFL proficiency exam before graduation does not affect their learning behaviors or the acquisition of listening and reading skills to any large extent.

We need to look for other ways to increase English language proficiency. The students' response to our questionnaire provides an obvious direction: Students from both the exit and non-exit institution said that they mostly used traditional methods of study. The growing evidence for the superiority of comprehension-based approaches, such as extensive reading (eg Lee, 2007; Lee and Hsu, 2009, Smith, 2011), clearly suggest ways in which English education can be improved.

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## APPENDIX A –

**NOTE:** “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses were truncated to “Agree” (A) and “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses were truncated to “Disagree” (D). “Unsure” (U) responses were not truncated.

### (1) What motivates you to study English now?

Item	Students at the Exit school						Students at non-Exit school					
	<i>n</i>	M	SD	A(%)	U(%)	D(%)	<i>n</i>	M	SD	A(%)	U(%)	D(%)
1. To have better opportunities in the future	126	4.48	0.72	94.4	4.0	1.6	116	4.51	0.64	95.7	2.6	1.7
2. To meet expectation of job markets	126	4.32	0.77	91.2	6.3	2.4	118	4.37	0.65	94.1	4.2	1.7
3. To learn daily use of English	126	4.32	0.77	92.9	4.0	3.2	118	4.26	0.67	92.3	5.1	2.5
4. To be able to communicate with foreigners when traveling overseas	125	4.22	0.82	86.4	10.4	3.2	117	4.32	0.70	89.8	8.5	1.7
5. To prepare for English proficiency tests and earn certificates	126	4.20	0.77	91.2	4.8	4.0	118	4.12	0.83	85.6	8.5	5.9
6. To be able to watch English movies and listen to English programs	125	3.98	0.97	76	16.0	8.0	117	4.11	0.80	83.8	11.1	5.1
7. to enhance English proficiency to continue on to higher education	126	3.83	0.99	67.5	23.0	9.5	118	3.78	0.90	69.5	20.3	10.2
8. to pass the test to graduate	126	3.75	1.10	74.6	7.1	18.3	118	3.56	0.97	66.1	12.7	21.1
9. To understand professional knowledge written in English	126	3.71	1.01	66.9	25.0	12.7	118	3.92	0.90	75.5	14.4	10.2
10. To fulfill parents' expectations	125	3.60	0.96	60.6	23.2	16.0	118	3.63	0.97	62.7	21.2	16.1

**NOTE:** “Always” and “Usually” responses were truncated to “Frequently” (F) and “Seldom” and “Never” responses were truncated to “Rarely” (R). “Sometimes” (S) responses were not truncated.

### (2) How often do you do the following to learn English?



Item	Exit school students						non-Exit school students					
	<i>n</i>	M	SD	F (%)	S (%)	R (%)	<i>n</i>	M	SD	F (%)	S (%)	R (%)
1. Learning vocabulary	126	3.54	0.94	51.6	34.1	14.3	119	3.44	0.92	48.8	35.3	16.0
2. Reading textbooks	126	3.25	0.98	44.4	30.2	25.4	119	3.34	0.96	47.9	31.9	20.2
3. Taking notes	126	3.19	0.95	37.3	39.7	23.0	119	3.36	1.02	49.6	28.6	21.8
4. Watching movies, and TV programs	126	3.10	1.12	38.1	27.8	34.1	119	3.03	0.98	32	39.5	28.6
5. Listening to radio programs	126	2.80	1.01	26.2	30.2	43.7	118	2.48	0.92	12.7	29.7	57.6
6. Learning grammar	124	2.81	0.99	21.0	34.7	44.4	119	2.76	0.87	19.4	37.0	43.7
7. ☉-☉*Doing practice tests on the school's website	125	2.64	1.07	17.6	44.0	38.4	119	1.60	0.87	3.3	12.6	84.0
8. ☉*Going to language cram schools	126	2.33	1.06	13.5	27.8	58.7	119	2.01	0.89	4.2	21.8	73.9
9. Reading magazines	126	2.33	1.02	11.9	23.0	65.1	119	2.45	1.00	13.4	26.1	60.5
10. Reading online information	126	2.41	0.92	11.1	31.0	57.9	119	2.34	1.07	19.3	18.5	62.2
11. Practicing orally with teachers	126	1.99	0.73	4.8	11.9	83.3	119	1.84	0.78	3.3	10.9	85.7
12. Practicing orally with classmates	126	1.96	0.71	2.4	15.9	81.7	117	1.82	0.83	2.6	13.7	83.8
13. Practicing writing	126	1.65	0.89	5.6	11.1	83.3	117	1.60	0.74	2.6	7.7	89.7
14. chatting on line in English	125	1.58	0.79	4.0	6.4	89.6	119	1.64	0.83	2.5	12.6	84.9
15. Joining English clubs	126	1.56	0.79	3.2	8.7	88.1	118	1.50	0.86	4.2	5.9	89.8
16. Writing emails in English	126	1.44	0.71	1.6	7.9	90.5	119	1.39	0.61	0.8	4.2	95.0

\*: Mann-Whitney U-test, statistically significant difference between the two groups of schools at  $p < .05$

☉: small effect size ( $d \leq 0.3$ ) ☉: moderate effect size ( $d = 0.5$ )

☉-☉: small –moderate effect size ( $0.3 > d < 0.5$ )

(3) How often do you do the following to prepare for English tests?

Item	Students at the exit school						Students at the non-Exit school					
	<i>n</i>	M	SD	F (%)	S (%)	R (%)	<i>n</i>	M	SD	F (%)	S (%)	R (%)
1. Reading textbooks	126	3.88	0.98	73	15.9	11.1	118	3.85	0.96	69.5	23.7	6.8
2. Taking notes	126	3.56	1.05	60.4	22.2	17.5	118	3.61	0.99	62.7	22.0	15.3
3. Practicing exercises in the text	126	3.73	0.96	65.1	22.2	12.7	119	3.58	0.94	58	28.6	13.4
4. Practicing past or mock exams	126	3.33	1.10	48.4	25.4	26.2	119	3.05	1.09	38.7	27.7	33.6
5. Practicing sentence making and short-essay writing	126	2.83	1.13	30.1	25.4	44.4	118	2.90	1.12	31.3	30.5	38.1
6. Memorizing vocabulary and phrases	124	3.98	1.03	71	16.9	12.1	119	3.90	0.93	68.1	26.1	5.9
7. practicing grammatical rules	125	3.17	1.09	37.6	29.6	32.8	119	3.21	1.06	42.0	30.3	27.7
8. ⊙*Listening to audio versions of the text or radio programs	123	2.66	1.07	19.5	30.9	49.6	119	2.34	1.04	14.3	25.2	60.5
9. Taking extra lessons at cram schools	124	2.19	1.09	12.1	19.4	68.5	118	2.00	0.96	6.7	17.8	75.4
10. ⊙*Practicing online test-related questions provided by schools	126	2.06	1.11	21.5	37.3	41.3	117	1.62	0.92	5.2	12.0	82.9
11. Practicing oral skills with teachers	126	1.91	0.79	4.8	10.3	84.9	118	1.81	0.89	5.0	8.5	86.4
12. ⊙*Practicing oral skills with classmates	126	1.91	0.79	3.2	18.3	78.6	119	1.76	0.86	5.1	7.6	87.4

\*: Mann-Whitney U-test, statistically significant difference between the two groups of schools at  $p < .05$

⊙: small effect size ( $d \leq 0.3$ )

(4) Approximately how many hours per week do you normally spend on studying English when school is in session?

Student Group	< 1 hr	1-3 hours	> 3 hrs	only before tests
<b>Exit</b> (n=126)	31 (12.7%)	52 (21.2%)	12 (4.9%)	31 (12.7%)
<b>non-exit</b> (n=119)	26 (10.6%)	40 (16.3%)	8 (3.3%)	45 (18.4%)
<b>Combined</b> (n=245)	57 (23.3%)	92 (37.6%)	20 (8.2%)	76 (31.0%)

$$\chi^2 = 5.208; df=3, p=.159$$

(5) What do you think of the necessity of setting an English certification exit requirement?

	necessary	not urgent	unsure	quite unnecessary	total
<b>Exit</b>	90 (37.2%)	29 (12.0%)	3 (1.2%)	1 (0.4%)	123 (50.8%)
<b>Non-Exit</b>	61 (25.2%)	33 (13.6%)	19 (7.9%)	6 (2.5%)	119 (49.2%)
<b>Combined</b>	151 (62.4 %)	62 (25.6%)	22(9.1%)	7 (2.9%)	242 (100%)

$$\chi^2=22.732; df=3, p<.05$$

## DPS World Languages

Denver Public School World Language Department has recorded many of their teachers who use the method, "Teaching with Comprehensible Input" (TCI).

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<http://www.newsinslowspanish.com/>

<http://www.senorwooly.com/>

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