

A Washback Study: Preparation for Listening in the TOEFL iBT of Chinese Students in Japan -- A Pilot Study

Jing Zhang
Sophia University

The current study is an attempt to investigate washback effect of the TOEFL iBT on test-takers' preparation for listening, with a particular focus on how test preparation practice operates under washback mechanism which was proposed by Anthony Green in 2007. Teaching listening is a difficult issue in many language teachers' teaching career, and also a large number of students complain that listening is an insurmountable language skill whenever they learn English. Many Chinese students come to Japan with the dream of not learning English any more. However, only after they arrive in Japan, do they find that TOEFL or TOEIC L&R (hereinafter abbreviated as TOEIC) score is an indispensable admission requirement of many universities and graduate schools, so that they have to prepare for these examinations. Thus, conducting research on test-driven strategies of preparing for listening in the test from learners' perspective is undoubtedly necessary in the field of language teaching.

Serving as a preparatory stage of the future research, this study aims to examine not only how the test-takers perceive the TOEFL iBT and the listening tasks in it, but also what kind of preparation strategies that test-takers tend to use. A qualitative research method is adopted in the current study, employing a semi-structured interview to collect data from ten Chinese students who are preparing for entering in universities or graduate schools in Japan. Five participants are TOEFL test-takers, while the other five are TOEIC test-takers. Through comparison between two groups of test-takers, the result shows that both positive and negative evidence of washback effect of the TOEFL iBT are found, for instance, the TOEFL iBT is a high-stake examination for Chinese students in Japan aiming to enroll in a university or a graduate school so that it may cause a kind of beneficial anxiety that pushes students to actively prepare for the examination, and in the TOEFL iBT, listening is the most difficult, as well as the most intractable task to prepare for, thus calling for teachers to explore an effective way of helping students to deal with listening. Based on qualitative data analysis of the interview, the author formed three hypotheses and two models concerning TOEFL's washback on test-takers' test-driven preparation strategies that will be further investigated in her future research.

The present study is divided into three parts. The first part is an introduction of washback, as well as the TOEFL iBT, and the research questions are also stated. In the second part, research design including methods, participants, data collection procedure and data analysis are addressed. The third part discusses the results and pedagogical implications of the study.