

THE WASHBACK OF THE INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING  
SYSTEM (IELTS) ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Guanyuan Hu". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

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By

Xiaoling Chen (Sally)

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Abstract

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Xiaoling Chen

Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

This paper reviews the literature on the issue of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) washback, exploring the washback of IELTS on English language teachers and test takers in general, and IELTS washback in the Chinese context in particular. This seminar paper seeks to answer two general questions: 1) Does IELTS have washback on English language teaching and learning in China? 2) What does the washback of IELTS look like in China? Overall, the literature indicates that IELTS related research in the Chinese context is still very limited, and much more research is desperately needed if the impact of IELTS washback on English language teaching and learning is to be fully determined.

Keywords: washback, IELTS washback, English language teaching and learning, Chinese context.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, with the development of the theories and practices in the field of language testing, significant attention is being paid to the assessment of test-takers' real communicative competence. Along with it, there has been a growing awareness that international language tests, especially those large-scale high-stakes tests like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), have both direct and indirect impact on language teaching and learning throughout the world including China.

IELTS, an internationally recognized language test for those needing to study or be trained in the medium of English, has been developed and co-managed by three partners, namely the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, the British Council and IDP: Education Australia. The past two decades have seen the development of this international testing system in terms of assessment criteria, rating scales, test format, and task design. The background information and synchronized reports on the test revision projects conducted constantly ever since the inception of the testing system are available in Research Notes series and via the IELTS official website: [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org).

IELTS has recently become popular in many countries as an alternative to TOEFL. More and more countries, the European countries especially, as well as the United States recently, have started to accept or even adopt IELTS as their assessment of non-native speakers' English proficiency. Meanwhile, a growing number of people throughout the world are choosing to sit the IELTS to prove their English proficiency for different purposes. IELTS Annual Review 2009 reveals its great achievements: over 1.4 million candidates took the IELTS test worldwide in 2009 and more than 6,000 institutions across 130 countries and over 6,000 institutions including

the Ivy League schools in the United States recognize IELTS, making it the leading test of its kind.

The successful development of IELTS lends itself to explain the fact that in the following areas, it has set a “professional” example for large-scale standardized tests all over the world: planning and management, production of examiner training materials, retraining and standardizing examiners, feedback from IELTS trainers and examiners, and the three partners’ constant professional input, logistical expertise and financial support, so on and so forth. Along with it, issues relating to the washback of IELTS in the international context have become the focus of the language testing field.

In fact, the past decade has witnessed growing interest in the impact of IELTS on English language teaching and learning throughout the world. China is no exception. Along with the ever-increasing use of IELTS around the globe, Chinese traditional language learning styles, teaching paradigms, educational systems, testing systems and so on, may have been challenged profoundly and influenced significantly, implicitly and explicitly.

The College English Test (CET), launched in 1987 and used to measure college graduates’ English language proficiency since then, is a criterion-related, norm-referenced, large-scale standardized national test in China (Yang & Weir, 2001). The purpose of the CET, administered on behalf of the Ministry of Education of China, is to assess the English proficiency of college non-English major students, and meanwhile to provide feedback information for college English teachers to improve their classroom teaching (Yang, 2003). The CET test, consisting primarily of multiple choices, matching, sentence completion, and translation, focusing mainly on discrete point grammar and decontextualized vocabulary items, has been widely criticized as an invalid measure of students’ English proficiency, as the CET test per se hardly allows for a valid

assessment of communicative competence.

Having witnessed the success of IELTS, English language teachers, educators and experts in China have started placing blame on the CET for encouraging test-oriented rather than competency-based teaching and learning throughout the whole nation and calling for a fundamental reform in the language teaching field. Such criticisms have initiated and sustained a movement toward authentic assessments in a wide variety of learning domains.

The IELTS testing system was introduced to China 20 years ago because the IELTS test per se is more content-based, task-oriented and authentic than local language tests throughout the nation. It is increasingly recognized that as a successful and internationally recognized English language testing system, IELTS has a profound impact on the current practice of English language teaching and learning in China. This paper introduces the discussion of different understandings of washback found in the current literature and presents a thorough analysis of the overall washback of IELTS on English language teaching and learning, with a focus on the Chinese context.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The present paper aims to explore the washback of IELTS on English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context. As the bulk of the IELTS test takers in China, according to related research, are students, Non-English majors in particular, it would be a significant undertaking to investigate the washback of this international test to the English language teaching and learning at the college level in China. The problems to be addressed in this paper are as follows: Does IELTS have washback on English language teaching and learning in China? What does the washback of IELTS look like in China?

### **Definition of Terms**

IELTS: The International English Language Testing System is a test of English for academic and vocational purposes managed jointly by three partners: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia. It is recognized widely as a language requirement for entry to courses in further and higher education, and is accepted by more than 6000 organizations worldwide including universities, immigration departments, government agencies, professional bodies and multinational companies.

(<http://www.ielts.org>)

Washback: The term carries only technical meanings in definitions given by dictionaries and only very recently, washback has gained in currency and is now generally accepted in the applied linguistics literature. According to Green's (2007) summary, washback is broadly defined, in applied linguistics, as the effect of a test on teaching (Davies et al., 1999; Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992) as well as on learning (Hughes 2003; Shohamy 1993), which has been variously associated with effects on teachers, learners, parents, administrators, textbook writers, instruction, the classroom, classroom practice, educational practices and beliefs, and curricula. There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom is referred to as washback by language testers (Buck, 1988).

CET: The College English Test was designed and launched by College English Testing Committee under the Education Ministry of the People's Republic of China in 1987.

### **Delimitations of Research**

The review of literature was mainly conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the

University of Wisconsin-Platteville, the USA, as well as the library at Wuhan University of Science and Technology, China, over ninety (90) days. Primary search was conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google Scholar. Key search topics included “IELTS,” “washback,” “English language teaching,” “English language learning,” and “English language teaching in China.”

### **Method of Approach**

The present paper explores the nature of washback through a review of the literature revolving around the concept of washback; it discusses washback phenomenon in general and IELTS washback in particular; it mainly focuses on IELTS washback in the Chinese context. A comprehensive review of the literature on the washback of IELTS on English language teaching and learning in China was carried out. The findings are summarized, and recommendations are made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The past decade has witnessed a shift in research focus from test reliability and validity to test washback, as it has been acknowledged that high-stakes tests, defined by Madaus (1988) as those tests whose results are “seen— rightly or wrongly— by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public, as being used to make important decisions that immediately affect them” (p. 87), exert washback on language teaching and learning. The term washback is now being addressed widely and frequently in academic research, publications and reports throughout the world. At present, significant attention is being paid to promoting the positive washback of tests on teaching and learning in the hope that language tests may help improve the quality of classroom teaching and eventually, the communicative language competence of learners.

In fact, the research into the issue of IELTS washback, focusing on teaching methodology and student learning strategies in particular, is just at its primary stage; in other words, assertions about IELTS washback are still based on subjective observations or assumptions rather than on empirical evidence. Empirical studies offering evidence or analysis are very limited in general, not to mention the research on IELTS washback in the Chinese educational context.

In view of this, the purpose of this paper is to provide a relatively comprehensive summary of the current state of knowledge in the area of IELTS washback based on the accessible literature. While there is a general lack of firsthand information about Chinese language test-taking (i.e., studies directly about Chinese language teachers as well as students and their reactions to the IELTS test), the data gathered from other countries available in the literature providing insight into the washback phenomenon can be applied to the Chinese context to some extent.

## **The Concept of Washback**

Since washback is the central subject of this paper, a good way to begin the discussion is to clarify the definition or notion of the term “washback.” Thus, this part of the seminar paper is devoted to a discussion of different understandings of washback in the literature in order to come to a clear, more descriptive definition.

A glance at the literature may well reveal how complicated washback is as various authors have portrayed it quite differently. This is manifestly apparent to most observers of the phenomenon, so much so that a handful of synonymous expressions can be easily found in the published research and literature on language testing such as “test impact,” “test influence,” “consequential validity,” “systemic validity,” “measurement-driven instruction” or “curricular alignment” (Green, 2007, p. 2). The divergence among these terms is negligible.

The literature shows that over the past several decades, a large body of research has been done and related articles, research papers and preliminary reports on language testing have contributed to a greater understanding of the washback phenomenon. Research into the effects of tests on teaching and learning process, recently termed as “washback,” dates back several decades.

There is a general belief that the paper entitled “Does Washback Exist?” is the virtual beginning of “Washback research.” The paper, presented by Alderson and Wall (1993), in which the classic fifteen possible washback hypotheses, known as Alderson and Wall’s (AW93) washback model, were initially posited, has significantly influenced and constantly guided all major recent research and literature review in the area of washback in language testing (Tsagari, 2007). AW93’s complex and influential model, with its profound implications on the test-taking process, has been widely applied to illustrate the washback mechanism in different contexts

throughout the world.

In fact, as soon as AW93's Washback Hypotheses were put forward, the ideas became a breeding ground for various new models of washback. For instance, Hughes (1993) introduced a model offering a new way of categorizing the types of effects (washback) that might occur. A couple of years later, Bailey (1996) put forth a modified model of washback based on an interpretation and understanding of the previous models and related literature.

According to Bailey's (1996) research, definitions of washback vary depending upon the researcher who is writing about it. Bailey provides a chronological list of some influential definitions from the researcher's own perspective and summarizes briefly that although washback is widely accepted to exist, "there are some discrepancies in how it has been defined (and even in what it is called)" (p. 278).

Wall (1997), in an acclaimed paper regarding language testing, distinguishes "washback" and "impact," two interchangeable terms used widely in the language testing field suggesting that the former is "used to refer to the effects of tests on teaching and learning," whereas the latter refers to "any of the effects that tests may have on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system, or society as a whole" (p. 291). This view considering washback as one dimension or a form of "impact," or within the scope of "impact," has been very suggestive and influential.

Some ten years later, Spratt (2005) interprets the term "washback" as one used in the literature with various meanings, which reveal differences in scope, action and intentionality. Green (2007) notes as well that in the applied linguistics literature the ways in which test format affects language teaching and learning are termed washback although other terms—such as "impact," "influence," "effect," and "consequence"—are interchangeable jargon commonly and

widely used with this sense in general education.

It is safe to conclude that scholars define “washback” variously from different perspectives, and definitions of washback range from simple and straight-forward, focusing on teachers and learners in classroom settings, to very complex definitions including references to tests’ influence on society, educational systems and individuals, and the belief that test impact operates at both micro and macro levels. It is also safe to state that washback is a broad, complex phenomenon, due to the fact, as Spratt (2005) states, that it does not simply automatically exist, but is rather one that can be brought into existence through teachers, students or others involved in the test-taking process.

Zheng’s (2007) summary of washback based on a thorough review of related literature contributes to the conceptualization and understanding of washback: washback on teaching and learning takes multiple forms; washback has been found both positive and negative; washback can vary in strength in different areas of teaching and learning.

To sum up, the past two decades witnessed a dynamic process which narrows “impact” down to a more specific concept of “washback.” It can be safely concluded that after several decades’ initial discussions and follow-up debates, the term “washback” has recently gained its well-acknowledged but broadly-defined general definition: the way in which a test impacts teaching and learning. The term “IELTS washback” is, therefore, used in this seminar paper with a more precise, specific definition: to refer to the effects of the IELTS test on English language teaching and learning.

### **The Function of Washback**

On the basis of the literature reviewed, Tsigari (2007) has provided a comparatively comprehensive yet compendious “version” of the function of washback categorized under

common themes: In terms of its nature and extent, washback is seen as a consequence of high-stakes exams, as the link between testing, teaching and learning, or as a potential instrument for educational reform; washback can have an influence on teaching and learning, or can make teachers and learners perform in ways they would not necessarily otherwise do in regards to the test. In terms of its direction, washback is seen as being potentially positive (beneficial), negative (harmful), or neutral; washback can be intended and unintended, and there exists a direct and linear correlation between the stakes of a test and the strength of washback: the higher the stakes, the stronger the washback.

A majority of washback studies focus on the positive or negative impact of tests on different aspects of the curriculum. Historically, washback has, in most circumstances, been naturally associated with potential negative rather than positive effects of a particular test on teaching and learning. AW93 summarizes some negative effects by stating that the curriculum could be narrowed or distorted, and the skills requiring complex thinking or problem-solving could be ignored. In fact, Vernon (1956) presented several decades earlier the same view when the researcher stressed that “examinations distort the curriculum for teachers tended to ignore subjects and activities which did not contributed directly to passing the exam” (p. 115).

Zheng (2007) summarizes a five-point list of negative washback based on the accessible literature:

- distorting or narrowing the curriculum
- causing pressure and anxiety to teachers and students
- reducing the time for instruction
- reducing emphasis on student’s critical thinking
- increasing test scores without an accompanying rise in ability

Messick (1996) argues, however, that washback contributes greatly to curriculum innovation, which could be done in the hope that teachers may change or align their instructional practices to correspond to the test materials and methodology. In regard to curriculum innovation, Cheng's (1997) research paper, mainly focusing on the situation within the Hong Kong education context, has been cited frequently as her results are based on empirical research data rather than assumptions. Cheng summarizes the function of washback in terms of teaching (attitudes of participants involved), learning (actions taken by the participants), and innovation (curriculum change and policy reform). It is, in Cheng's view, never easy to investigate whether or not washback can be a facilitator of language policy reform as there are so many variables and all the factors involved undoubtedly interacted with each other.

To sum up, with the development of the theories and practices in the field of language testing, there is a tendency for researchers to pay particular attention to facilitating positive washback. Indeed, recent literature abounds with studies concerning the nature of washback and a growing number of studies are conducted worldwide to explore the possibility of promoting positive washback in the language testing field, attempting to find out empirical evidence linking test, functioning and administering differently, and their immediate teaching and learning outcomes.

The literature, somewhat contradictory or controversial though, suggests that washback has a multifaceted nature and is a double-edged sword. Washback should, theoretically, encompass how teachers, together with their students, accommodate learning skills, content, and strategies to a foreign language test, as well as how the teaching and learning processes could be dynamically guided to the greatest extent, ideally and accordingly. Indeed, this profound interpretation of the function and mechanism of washback has recently brought up a number of

practical issues regarding how washback may be best observed and measured. It is acknowledged that “washback research may have connotations for educational administration, textbook development, teacher training and resourcing as much as for test development and revision” (Green, 2007, p. 30).

### **The Development of IELTS**

According to its official website ([www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)), the IELTS testing system first became operational in 1989, jointly managed by the British Council, IELTS Australia and Cambridge ESOL. The IELTS test, reflecting the concept of communicative language teaching, was initially designed to assess whether nonnative candidates are ready to study or be trained in the medium of English. As one of the pioneers taking into account the communicative movement, IELTS is probably the first standardized communicative language test administered over a large scale throughout the world (Geranpayeh, 1994). Drawing on a variety of sources to guide them, IELTS R&D and revision team has made the unknown test the most popular language testing system worldwide over the past two decades.

In keeping with the history of innovation, the IELTS partners continue to be committed to the ongoing development of the test:

1. The IELTS reading, writing and listening were revised in April 1995 (Charge and Taylor, 1997).
2. A revision project for the Speaking Test was launched in 1998 and the revised IELTS Speaking Test was introduced in July 2001 (Taylor, 2001).
3. The New assessment criteria for the Writing Test were operational from January 2005 (Bridges and Shaw, 2004).

Compared to its earlier versions, IELTS has been changed substantially in both its structure

and delivery format. The development of the IELTS testing system per se reveals a fact that in order to develop or formulate a more reliable, valid, authentic and interactive language proficiency test in accordance with the communicative language teaching worldwide, IELTS has undergone a constant evolution guided by the results from continuing programs of research. The results taking the form of assertions, research papers, or reports have offered a guideline for making revolutionized changes in the framework and the content of IELTS to meet the principles of designing a successful test and laying the groundwork for its professional development.

Since its inception, IELTS has seen an impressive growth both in recognition and candidature all over the world. It is now commonplace to acknowledge IELTS as a reliable and valid English language proficiency test, offering clear and comprehensive scores acquiring an international level of recognition by higher education institutions as well as professional and academic bodies throughout the world. IELTS is recognized as a language requirement for entry to courses in further and higher education, and is accepted by more than 6,000 organizations worldwide including universities, immigration departments, government agencies, professional bodies and multinational companies ([www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)).

The existing literature shows that there has been an increase of scholarly interest in IELTS in general and IELTS washback in particular due to the fact that IELTS has been gaining global attention recently. In general terms, however, research on IELTS has been addressed through a very small number of empirical research studies, let alone the issue of IELTS washback, throughout the world. The research studies available are too limited to provide a clear picture of the effects of IELTS on English language teaching and learning in different contexts.

### **Current Research on the Issue of IELTS Washback**

In the available literature, research studies can be broadly divided into two categories,

namely, studies conducted within and studies conducted outside the IELTS circle. To illustrate, internal studies are those conducted or commissioned by IELTS developers, whereas external research is carried out by scholars all over the world. Internal and external research will be reviewed as follows in turn.

Since 1995, the three partners of IELTS have made sixteen rounds of annual grant funding for IELTS-related projects to be conducted. Over the past two decades, external studies together with the internal validation and research studies conducted or commissioned by these three partners have contributed significantly to the ongoing development of IELTS as an international testing system. All the funded studies have been reported in its periodically published volumes, *the IELTS Research Reports*. Among the sixteen rounds of the joint-funded research program, studies exploring issues of washback have contributed greatly to the current research of IELTS washback, among which the following three are influential studies worth mentioning.

The first one is Hawkey's study, "Impact Theory and Practice: Studies of the IELTS Test and Progetto Lingue 2000." The study compared two recent case studies. One analyzes the impact of IELTS, whereas the other looks at the Progetto Lingue 2000 (Year 2000 Languages Project), a state-school foreign-language education improvement program undertaken by the Ministry of Education in Italy. The study investigated the washback in specific educational contexts and offered an all-sided discussion of washback issues in regard to language teaching reform and language testing through detailed and actual case study examples.

Another representative study is, "Washback to learning outcomes: a comparative study of IELTS preparation and university pre-sectional language courses," conducted by Green (2007). The aim of the observational study, focusing on IELTS writing, conducted in the context of IELTS preparation in the UK with a sample of 663 students, was to investigate whether test

preparation classes helped in improving learners' writing test scores. The study found that "relatively narrow test preparation is no more effective in boosting test scores than teaching the targeted skills" (p. 94). The researcher stressed that "further research is also needed into IELTS preparation programs in countries other than the UK and into the impact of the Reading, Listening and Speaking subtests to explore whether test preparation is more effective in these contexts" (p. 94).

The last but by no means the least important study is, "IELTS speaking test preparation in the People's Republic of China: Communicative approaches and rote-memorization" conducted by Bialy (2003). Although this is an unpublished MA thesis, Bialy's research shows that a communicative approach to IELTS Speaking Test preparation is more effective than training by means of rote memorization, a typical, traditional, and still prevalent way of learning in China. Bialy's study is the first IELTS study of its kind in the Chinese context: it is unique and valuable in that it involves Chinese subjects and presents the philosophy of Chinese education and culture from a foreigner's perspective.

In relation to external research, there has been a growing body of literature on IELTS presented globally by classroom teachers, language experts, and researchers in the language testing field, and the related literature can be roughly divided into two categories in terms of the language used, that is, research papers written in English and papers written in Chinese, for ease of reference.

In the present research conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, sixty-two papers on washback in general, available in database ERIC by entering "washback" as a keyword, have been found; however, only few of them directly involve IELTS. Among forty-two papers, available in database ERIC by entering "IELTS" as a keyword,

on IELTS in general, only one is found directly addressing IELTS washback. The table found in Appendix A presents a list of main papers falling into four categories: language testing (8), IELTS in general (10), washback in general (10) and washback in different contexts (5).

The aforementioned thirty-three papers plus one website document have presented a panorama of research on IELTS overseas. Overall, a limited number of empirical washback studies have been carried out in a variety of settings by researchers over the past two decades. The 1990s witnessed obvious progress made in defining the notion of washback as a linguistic term, a growing awareness of the importance of factors other than test design in determining whether a test would generate intended or desired impact, and an exploration of whether washback could be predicted, controlled, or facilitated.

It is obvious, though, that investigation or studies related to IELTS are limited to individual cases of test-directed training courses and the size of samples is relatively too small due to the fact that IELTS preparation courses are often provided by small, private institutions and always involve a small number of learners. Hence, the research into the issue of IELTS washback tends to be rather superficial, based on assumptions rather than empirical evidence, and lacking in depth or thoroughness. In fact, quite a few researchers (Bialy 2003; Green 2007; Issitt 2008) share the same concern. However, given the short history of washback research, only several decades since 1950s, it is quite understandable that there have been few theoretical or empirical studies related to washback, let alone IELTS washback.

It is also worth mentioning that since the studies listed above are in different contexts, they together have helped fill the gap in the literature in respect to IELTS washback. In addition, the studies have covered various aspects: the working mechanism of washback; the nature of washback, that is, positive or negative; and strategies for promoting positive washback and

limiting negative washback. Finally, various empirical methodologies are reflected in these studies including questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations and so on.

To sum up, studies on washback all over the world have been conducted within the following three main categories: the working mechanisms of washback; the nature of washback; and strategies for fostering positive or beneficial washback and inhibiting negative or harmful washback (Liu, 2007).

So far, the present paper has looked at the current research on the issue of IELTS washback in a very broad way. It is well acknowledged that there exists a set of interrelationships, intended and/or unintended, beneficial and/or harmful, among language testing, teaching and learning. Tests can have influence at the micro level on classroom practice and activity. The following section will explore the same issue more specifically in terms of the washback of IELTS on teachers, on text materials, and on learning respectively based on the accessible literature.

**Washback of IELTS on Language Teachers.** Among all the IELTS test stakeholders, language teachers are the most visible participants. As Bailey (1999) states, taking essential roles in language programs, teachers are the “front-line” conduits for the washback processes related to instruction (p. 17). In brief, the washback literature reveals that although there has been an intricate web of different yet related factors that could affect teaching, teachers always have a crucial and active role to play in deciding whether and to what degree washback occurs. Increasingly, recent research supports the belief that teachers play an important role in fostering different types of washback.

Since washback can be either negative or positive (Buck, 1988), teachers may not have enough power to directly influence examinations at the national or international level; they, however, do have enough power to lead their students to learn, and to teach their students how to

work with tests and results (Bailey, 2005). Spratt (2005) stresses that teachers can actually become agents for promoting positive washback or hinder negative washback since they virtually determine the types, strength, even occurrence of washback. Spratt makes this claim because washback cannot be considered an automatic or direct effect of exams.

To sum up, empirical studies of washback on teaching generally aim to provide teachers with a clearer idea of the roles they can play and the decisions they can make concerning washback. Due to the fact that teachers play a crucial role in determining types and intensity of washback, they can be expected to become qualified agents for promoting positive washback. An awareness of washback should influence not only teaching practices passively but also help teachers think more deeply and actively about their roles when carrying out their responsibilities. For teachers, washback could be effectively used as a powerful means to encourage preferred patterns of learning style among their students.

It is true that the type and amount of washback on teaching methods are dynamic, unpredictable, and hard to measure as different teachers in different contexts would choose to instruct quite differently. The thought-provoking findings of the empirical research, however, contribute greatly to our further understanding of how tests influence teaching. Although some findings are, to some extent, contradictory, confusing or controversial, and therefore need disambiguating, the proposed hypotheses and models, attempting to identify and illustrate the working mechanism of washback impact, have helped make clear the strength of the efforts of present day researchers.

**Washback of IELTS on Text Materials.** Apart from teaching, text materials for test preparation are another key factor in relation to IELTS washback. With the marked expansion of higher education opportunities for international students, the IELTS candidature has grown

significantly; thus, accordingly, IELTS textbooks, materials and other resources have multiplied in recent years.

In fact, as IELTS is now widely accepted by university admissions offices throughout the world as evidence of English language ability, its high-stakes nature coupled with its rapid growth has virtually attracted a burgeoning international industry in IELTS preparation courses, IELTS preparation material and IELTS study material. According to Green (2007), there are three common types of IELTS preparation courses: test preparation programs focusing specifically on the IELTS test; preparation courses in English for Academic Purposes, known as EAP; and courses combining features of both IELTS as well as EAP.

The popularity of IELTS has been accompanied by a rapid expansion in IELTS preparation courses in different kinds, as well as the burgeoning IELTS materials. Hawkey's study (2006) revealed that apart from test-related materials used for the preparation of IELTS, instructors used supplementary materials targeting specific language skills and components from a variety of sources, for example, the press, the Internet, or teachers' own materials.

Primary searches conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host along with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google Scholar resulted in two-hundred thirty-seven books involving IELTS. Table 2.1 provides some general information about those books.

In general terms, the released IELTS materials can be roughly divided into two categories: language skills development and test technique development. The division between these two types of test is due to the fact that IELTS is acknowledged as a test assessing test-takers' linguistic and strategic competence across all four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing. More specifically, some IELTS books provide advice, tips, and guides focusing on exam techniques and skills development; some others are self study books providing

a good link between skills development and exam tasks; still others provide thorough preparation in the language and skills required for the IELTS test as well as complete practice tests.

Table 2.1

*IELTS Books Published Outside China*

Categories	Number of Books
IELTS Listening	46
IELTS Speaking	39
IELTS Reading	50
IELTS Writing	45
IELTS Vocabulary	15
IELTS Grammar	19
IELTS test preparation	19
IELTS in general	4

To sum up, there have been a limited number of books with limited information directly addressing how IELTS students could be prepared, not only about how to take the test itself, but also to be prepared for their journeys into international education and employment. The issue of IELTS washback on text materials has not been addressed through any empirical research studies, and therefore no findings directly related to the washback of IELTS have been found.

**Washback of IELTS on Language Learners.** The existing literature shows that in general, the impact of an individual test on learners' performance has been widely explored in the field of general education, but there has been little research comprehensively examining the washback of IELTS on language learners in different contexts. Obviously, it is still true that one gap emerging in the washback literature reviewed is that little research has examined the washback of tests on learning, in contrast to the attention paid to the washback on teaching (Wall, 2000; Watanabe, 2004).

Theoretically, since the ultimate goal of language teaching and testing is to improve

students' learning, washback on learners certainly should be given the highest priority in the impact study literature in the field of language testing. However, the accessible literature shows that there has been no preliminary research addressing the issue of IELTS washback on language learners. This paper thus appeals to basic research on this germane and timely topic.

### **Summary**

The literature reviewed suggests that pertinent data of IELTS washback research is referential for the research and reform of large-scale tests throughout the world. In fact, IELTS has been exerting a profound far-reaching impact on every aspect of English language teaching worldwide from concepts of teaching and learning to classroom practice, and on the lives of test-takers as well as other stakeholders, implicitly and explicitly.

Up to now, the paper has presented a comparatively comprehensive review. Due to the fact that high-stakes tests have been recently employed to engineer curriculum innovation, to encourage pedagogical change, and to achieve intended washback in language education, the paper holds that the IELTS test, a highly recommended, globally recognized and already high-stakes test throughout China, may provide some significant washback on language teaching and learning in the Chinese context. The following chapter will thus move to the topic of IELTS washback on English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context.

## CHAPTER 3

### IELTS WASHBACK IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

The main reason for the popularity of the IELTS test is both practical and theoretical. With the development of Chinese economy and education, deepening reform and policy of openness, English has been restored as a compulsory subject in primary and high school curriculums and soon in the college entrance exam; this has been a trend at least since the early 1980s. English has since then gradually gained in prestige and popularity across China.

In fact, throughout China, primary school pupils have to learn English well enough to pass the provincial entrance examination to the most prestigious middle schools; high school students need to learn English well enough to pass the national entrance examination to universities; university students are required to learn English, not only as an academic requirement, but also to find gainful employment and enhance their social status. In addition, the globalization of education, the increased opportunity for ordinary Chinese people to study abroad, and the pervasive influence of the Internet and the media have all given rise to the enthusiasm for English language learning.

The importance of acquiring virtual language competence coincided with the developments in the communicative language teaching approach have implicitly helped IELTS stand out and to become more marketable. The available literature shows Chinese researchers tend to agree strongly that IELTS is a use-oriented proficiency test representing the concept of communicative language teaching, being more content based, task oriented and authentic while current language tests designed and administered in China have been generally as well as harshly criticized as usage-oriented and inefficient.

Recently, significant concerns over the national testing system have triggered fundamental

and wide-ranging reform in almost every aspect of English language teaching. The most frequently mentioned problems existing in English language teaching in contemporary China are summarized by Jin (2008) as follows: imperfect education management system, unscientific assessment system, unscientific teaching objectives, and insufficient attention and input to English language teaching. This intense impetus comes from enlightened teaching practices within and outside China, and the movement is reinforced by various innovative language teaching methods developed and used in the world. Likewise, the new direction in language testing is particularly driven by the emergence of the communicative language teaching approach. There has been a parallel increasing awareness among classroom teachers that tests influence teaching and learning.

Increasingly, English language teachers in China are realizing the importance of assessment in shaping the current teaching and learning situation, and these educators have begun to articulate their concerns about test washback as an important dimension of educational system that to this day has been overlooked throughout the nation. In a country where the debate on the importance of learning English as a second language is still far from over, the issue of IELTS washback is a little too premature to apply to a national rather than an international scene.

In fact, Chinese scholars are currently focusing solely on the washback of language tests developed by their own country, such as the NMET (the National Matriculation English test, the university entrance test used to evaluate the English language ability of candidates), the TEM (the Test for English Majors, a criterion-referenced test battery consisting of two levels: TEM-4 and TEM-8), the CET (the College English Test, a large-scale standardized test battery comprising of the CET Band 4, the CET Band 6, and the CET-Spoken English Test measuring the English proficiency of non-English majors). Since Chinese scholars are so focused

specifically on Chinese students taking national English language tests, the washback of international tests, such as the washback of IELTS, have not yet to be addressed in China.

Every attempt has been made to obtain materials involving the IELTS test, almost no preliminary research projects, however, have been found in terms of washback from IELTS test in the Chinese context. In view of this, the current section attempts to compile, classify, and examine related research, as long as it is in the area of IELTS, conducted in the last two decades, in the hope of presenting some revealing findings with regards to the influence of IELTS on English language teaching and learning in China.

Fifty papers on washback in general were found through the library at Wuhan University of Science and Technology, China, but only a handful of them directly involve IELTS. Forty-three papers provide scant empirical evidence on washback in general, among which twenty-eight are IELTS-related. Appendix B presents a complete list of those papers obtained. This careful survey of papers concerning IELTS published in academic journals throughout China since the IELTS test was introduced to the country two decades ago provides a snapshot of the status quo and document the future trends in IELTS research within China.

### **Washback of IELTS on Language Teachers**

The findings from the studies about the effect of washback on teaching content suggests that an intricate web of different yet related factors could interfere with a test's effects on teaching concepts in general, and on teaching content from teacher to teacher. Due to the fact that hitherto, there has been little research on how washback operates for teachers in the Chinese context, the author of this seminar paper presents her own thoughts as follows.

Teachers generally believe that the most effective and efficient way to prepare their students for any exam is by doing as many practice versions of that exam as possible. However,

individual teachers use exam-oriented materials to different degrees. This is why teachers usually rely heavily on exam-oriented materials so as to fulfill their own and their students' expectations. In many cases, teachers overwhelmingly provide so called test-taking strategies through making greater use of exam-like materials, rather than emphasize language skill drawing upon a wider range of more authentic texts and materials from real life.

### **Washback of IELTS on Textbooks**

A general assumption in the field of language testing has been that high-stakes tests have a direct impact on the content of teaching materials. In recent years, textbooks consisting of previous test papers and materials have been regularly published by the Cambridge Press, which have been regarded as "IELTS Bible" among the test-takers as well as IELTS instructors. Table 3.1 provides some background information on the textbooks available in China.

Table 3.1

#### *IELTS Textbooks Available in China*

Categories	Number of Textbooks
IELTS Listening	19
IELTS Speaking	19
IELTS Reading	17
IELTS Writing	22
IELTS Vocabulary	19
IELTS Grammar	2
IELTS in general	3
IELTS Mock Exam Questions	9

Wang (1997) analyzed sample units of two IELTS exam-preparation textbooks and noted that the IELTS test had an influence on the content as well as the format of the preparation textbooks. The analysis stressed that the extent to which the IELTS test influenced the content of preparation textbooks varied from book to book and from aspect to aspect. Wang's analysis is to

a certain extent confirmed by classroom practices. Teachers, especially those English native speakers tended to use additional materials from a variety of sources beyond the textbook, for example, cut-out photographs, self-designed spidergrams, information-gap hand-outs, audio-cassettes, and wall charts.

In general, most of the textbooks used in different kinds of preparation courses of IELTS throughout China are merely exam manuals that teach to the test with a number of exercises exactly following the exam format published by IELTS official organizations (Cambridge Press, for example). The textbooks can be roughly divided into two categories, i.e., official resources and unofficial resources. The former provides readers with an opportunity to familiarize them with the IELTS test format, strategic tactics using authentic test material, and to master language structures, vocabulary, as well as discourse semantics observed on previous IELTS test. Those materials are generally published by Cambridge ESOL as well as the British Council. The latter provides imitations of authentic IELTS questions, focusing on improving and expanding test-takers' overall English language proficiency, or focusing on particular area where test-takers are lacking, in order to improve their chances of scoring high on the demanding test. This type of resources is usually published by various publishing companies.

### **Washback of IELTS on Test Takers**

It is well acknowledged that washback to the learner is still an area that has been under-investigated in the literature (Green, 2007). The literature reviewed suggests that there has been a lack of research focusing directly on the washback of IELTS on its test takers in different contexts, let alone in China, since the notion of washback has been discussed for approximately three decades but no more, and most preliminary research studies are works-in-progress rather than final studies. Due to the fact that hitherto, there has been little research on how washback

operates for learners in the Chinese context, the author of this seminar paper presents her own thoughts as follows.

First and foremost, washback may guide student approaches to study through providing them with appropriate feedback on their performance or their language ability. As a dynamic indicator, washback could ultimately, both neutrally and honestly, indicate an overall impact or potent effects of assessment requirements on student study habits that the processes and tasks of a test have. In short, washback may directly, negatively or positively, contribute to the way students approach their study, and therefore indirectly, accordingly yet powerfully, contribute to the quality of their learning.

### **Summary**

There have been various assertions about washback since its inception, but few systematic empirical studies have been conducted in China. Overall, there is a paucity of research and preliminary findings based on practical classroom observations, participant interviews, teacher discussions, questionnaires or surveys on the effects of washback.

There are some ubiquitous problems existing in almost all the papers reviewed. To begin with, although there has been a steady increase in the number of the IELTS-related papers published, virtually touching on a relatively wide range of topics, most of the researchers assert potential washback rather than provide evidential grounds for their claims. Another problematic issue is that the findings from washback studies focusing on teaching and learning are simply too general, mixed and repetitive, or too disparate, experience-based and specific-context-dependent to provide any definite or referential conclusion. Indeed, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted into the nature (negative or positive), or existence of washback.

What is more, almost all the papers are written by teachers who have taught IELTS, and

their studies are naturally and mainly based on their individual teaching experiences. A solid theoretical foundation and new insights to future inquiry on IELTS washback as well as many more studies especially empirical ones are desperately needed in the future research, before claiming that the nature and mechanisms of washback is scholarly understood and academically interpreted.

In general terms, washback and impact of IELTS in the Chinese context is a fairly new concept in China; therefore, much systematic research remains under-explored and many basic questions are open for investigation. It is a great pity that although the IELTS test has been successfully operating since it was introduced to China twenty years ago, and it is now the most popular international English proficiency test throughout the nation, very little research has been conducted on the washback of IELTS in the Chinese context. Hopefully, global research into the issue of washback from different perspectives in general could provide some useful directions for Chinese scholars, educators, and teachers who are interested in identifying washback of IELTS on English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context. Alderson and Wall's well-known washback hypotheses, for instance, could be used to guide related research on contents, methods, pace and attitudes towards teaching.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past decade, scholars and educators, language testing specialists in particular, have called for performance assessment, aiming to encourage more effective and efficient teaching and learning in foreign/English language teaching contexts throughout the world. Along with this, the researchers in language instruction field have started showing their concern on empirical inquiry into washback.

In the field of language teaching, the impact of testing on teaching and learning has become a hot topic in recent years throughout China. Teachers, language educators, as well as policy-makers have all realized that it is high time to reflect on the inefficient English language teaching in China and to borrow concepts from successful foreign testing systems from all over the world. IELTS would be an ideal model both theoretically and practically, since IELTS candidates' knowledge and control of language systems such as grammar and vocabulary are tested through receptive and productive communicative tasks in all parts of the test, which is the ideal goal that Chinese national English tests have been pursuing.

In China, the importance of washback, that is, the washback of IELTS on language teaching and learning has not been well established in the literature, and there is very little practical and empirical research touching on IELTS washback in any degree of detail. Although not much is known about how IELTS washback operates for teachers or on textbooks, nor how it affects learners, an important feature of all the studies listed is the idea that washback merits specific consideration to determine its academic value: promoting an essential shift of research from basically introducing, reviewing and discussing papers written by overseas researchers, to studying, questioning, and exploring related theoretical underpinnings; from focusing only on

national Chinese tests, to comparing, taking in, and applying the findings from those international testing systems; from enthusiastically summarizing washback phenomenon in other cultures, to actively attempting to reflect on English language teaching in the Chinese context.

On the whole several points emerge from the reviewed studies. To begin with, since washback hypothesis is still so conjectural, and related washback models vary from one to another, therefore, there has been limited systematic work on washback in different contexts. IELTS washback in the Chinese context does exist, although a lot of conjectural words have been used when the issue is addressed. Related research is not based on sound theoretical precept, thus has not been empirically verified.

In addition, due to the fact that IELTS washback per se is not easily assessed, the studies are in many ways inconclusive, and there is a paucity of research and preliminary findings. There seem to be a general agreement, however, that compared with Chinese national exams, like the CET, IELTS is theoretically considered to be a most effective and reliable test that encourages candidates to study the English language in greater breadth and depth. The IELTS test itself has been highly valued in Chinese; however, its washback, that is, how IELTS influences what teachers teach, how teachers teach, the degree and depth of teaching, and attitudes toward the content and methods of teaching, as well as how IELTS influences what students learn, how students learn, and their attitudes about the methods of teaching, was seldom taken into account in the reviewed studies. Thus, there is not only a timely need for, but also significant value in a systematic investigation of IELTS washback in the Chinese context.

The author has been working at Wuhan University of Science and Technology as a language teacher. Since 2001, the author has been teaching IELTS and witnessed the development of IELTS from an unknown English test to an international testing system of proven credibility and

effectiveness. The following suggestions are given on the basis of the belief that IELTS, as the most successful international language testing system, has been exerting, both implicitly and explicitly, a profound impact on English language education in China.

Research into the issue of IELTS washback on learning should be given priority as Bailey (1999) suggests: sorting out the students from the other stakeholders is worthwhile as the washback inserts direct influence on their learning (or non-learning), while the influences on other stakeholders will only affect efforts to promote language learning. It would be very beneficial if fruitful investigation related to the washback of IELTS could be conducted to work out in what way and/or to what extent the IELTS test influences its takers' motivation to learn English and to improve their English language competency.

Meanwhile, as it is assumed and acknowledged that teachers play a crucial role in determining types and intensity of washback, preliminary research based on what actually happens in classes, particularly in IELTS preparation classes, is desperately needed to explore and prove how and to what extent this is the case, and to what extent the IELTS test, a prestigious, international testing system, may influence teachers' attitudes towards competency-based tests, their philosophy of education, and their performance of teaching.

In China, as the bulk of the IELTS test-takers, according to related research, are students, college students in particular, it would be a significant undertaking to investigate the washback of this international test to the English language teaching and learning of this particular group. The overall performance of Chinese IELTS test-takers should certainly provide valuable insights into status quo of English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context, and the findings of related research should shed light on today's College English teaching and learning in China.

Last but not the least, Chinese policy makers could borrow successful experience from IELTS, one of the most internationally recognized high-stakes tests, to improve the effectiveness of its own national testing system. The IELTS language testing system, still undergoing a series of evolutionary stages to guarantee its validity and reliability, may provide some valuable enlightenment to domestic English tests, such as the CET, in China. As the most successful English language testing system, IELTS may also provide some valuable feedback on the Chinese current practice of English language teaching and learning from a different global perspective.

In sum, the past two decades have witnessed the popularity of the IELTS test as well as its wide and profound influence reaching across various areas of educational contexts, English language education in the Chinese context in particular, implicitly and explicitly. An investigation of such a wide and profound influence that is IELTS washback thus has significant value. This current paper focuses on how the IELTS test has been impacting English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context in the hope that it can make some contributions to the literature of washback in the field of language testing.

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## APPENDIX A

### A List of Papers on Washback in the ERIC Database

Author	Published	Title
Alderson J. Charles	1991	Language testing in the 1990: How far have we come? How much further have we to go?
Dianne Wall & Alderson, J. Charles	1992	Examining washback: the Sri Lankan impact study
Alderson, J. Charles & Wall Dianne	1992	Does washback exists?
Geranpayeh Ardeshir	1994	Are score comparisons across language proficiency test batteries justified?: An IELTS- TOEFL comparability study
Liyong Cheng	1995	How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong
Samuel Messick	1996	Validity and washback in language testing
Craig Wallace	1997	IELTS: global implications of curriculum and materials design
Nick Charge & Lynda B. Taylor	1997	Recent developments in IELTS
Liyong Cheng	2000	Washback or backwash: A review of the impact of testing on teaching and learning
Jwsus Garcia Laborda, etc	2000	Anticipating washback in a computer based university entrance examination: Key issues

Lih-Mei Chen	2002	Washback of a public exam on English teaching
Morgan Terry	2003	IELTS preparation materials
Robert Ayres	2003	IELTS online writing –a team approach to developing an online course
Mary Spratt	2005	Washback and the classroom: the implications for teaching and learning of studies of washback from exams
Luxia Qi	2005	Stakeholders’ conflicting aims undermine the washback function of a high-stakes test
Carolyn E. Turner	2006	Professionalism and High-stakes tests: Teachers’ perspectives when dealing with educational change introduced through provincial exams
Bonnie Adair-Hauck etc.	2006	The integrated performance assessment (IPA): Connecting assessment to instruction and learning
Shahrzad Saif	2006	Aiming for positive washback: a case study of international teaching assistants
Anthony Green	2007	Washback to learning outcomes: A comparative study of IELTS preparation and university pre-sessional language courses
Luxia Qi	2007	Is testing an efficient agent for pedagogical change? Examining the intended washback of the writing task in a high-stake English test in China
Shih Chih-Min	2007	A new washback model of students’ learning

David D. Qian	2007	Assessing university students: Searching for an English language exit test
Dina Tsagari	2007	Review of washback in language testing: How has been done? What more needs doing?
Steve Issitt	2007	Improving scores on the IELTS speaking test
Shaw Stuart & Falvey Peter	2008	The IELTS writing assessment revision project: towards a revised rating scale
Patricia Dooley	2008	Language testing and technology: problems of transition to a new era
Kanchana Prapphal	2008	Issues and trends in language testing and assessment in Thailand
www.ielts.com	2009	IELTS- frequently asked questions from researchers
Graham Hall	2009	International English language testing: a critical response
Hacer Hande Uysal	2009	A critical review of the IELTS writing test
Iman Rasti	2009	Iranian candidates' attitudes towards IELTS
Stephen Stoyloff	2009	Recent development in language assessment and the case of four large-scale tests of ESOL ability
Chih-Min Shih	2009	How tests change teaching: A model for reference
Judith Wilson	2010	Recent IELTS materials

APPENDIX B

A List of Papers in Chinese on IELTS

Author	Published	Title
Jing Zhang	2010	On backwash effect of IELTS test on English language teaching in international joint program
Jingjing Wang	2010	On the reform of college English listening testing from the perspective of authenticity in IELTS
Hui huang & Haoping Yue	2010	On theoretical construction and feasibility research of mimetic mode for IELTS listening
Baolong Liu	2010	On the improvement of vocational school students' IELTS Scores with the design of English after-class activities—taking the training of international personnel majoring in nursing as an example
Ying Xu	2010	Guidance of list of headings of IELTS on college English teaching
Xin Li & Xudong Xiu	2009	A comparative study of question types in reading tests of IELTS and NMET
Dazhi Zhu	2009	Design and principle of an IELTS listening
Weiping Zhang, Tao Qu & Xiaolan Wang	2008	The application of “strategy-training” teaching model in IELTS and TOEFL listening

Xiaoming Wang & Chunguo Meng	2007	Reflections on curriculum development and implementation of intensive IELTS course
Yi Ai & Fu Yang	2007	Process-genre approach in the teaching of IELTS writing
Yurong Zheng	2007	To improve listening and speaking –analyze authentic material using the theory of context
Zhouping Wei	2007	The enlightenment to improve college English reading teaching from the forms of the reading examination of IELTS
Jie Wang	2007	Research on the trend of large-scale English tests reform
Rongjian Zhang & Wenwu Zeng	2007	A critical analysis of English language testing
Ying Zheng & Xinhua Xue	2007	The application of the words for coherence in IELTS writing
Xinhua Xue & Wei Yin	2007	The application of intonation and phonetics in IELTS
Li Wang	2007	Comparing the listening components of three large-scale standardized EFL tests on text-related, task-related and speaker-related conditions
Heping Wu	2007	The shift from TOEFL model to IELTS model of

		language testing
Xiaofang Feng	2007	Enlightenments upon listening teaching of college English from listening part in IELTS
Yan Jin	2006	On the improvement of test validity and test washback—the CET washback study
Julan Wang	2006	Application of parsing in IELTS listening test
Tao Sun	2006	Preparing for the IELTS: the current situation
Haoran Mao	2006	Report on redesigning NMET
Wenzhen Fang & Yumei Wang	2003	IELTS and colleges English teaching
Ruohong Sun	2003	Implications of IELTS listening test for the teaching of English listening
Xiaoming Cui	2002	IELTS and development of ETS in China
Kali Feng	2002	Text structure “S-P-S-E” and writing in IELTS test
Huan Wang	2001	Testing feature of the listening part in IELTS