

The Backwash Effect of TEM4 on Comprehensive English Teaching

Nanfei Xu

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology, Zibo 255000, China.

Abstract

TEM4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) is one of the important English proficiency tests for college English majors in China. It links and evaluates the status quo of the teaching and learning process, provides feedback and guide for teachers and students. The impact of testing on teaching is called the backwash effect, which includes both positive and negative aspects. This paper analyzes the positive and negative backwash effects TEM4 brings to the teaching and learning of Comprehensive English, one of the core courses for English majors, and discusses how to exert its positive effect and reduce the negative effect to promote teaching effectiveness, help students improve their language knowledge and skills to prepare for more effective examinations.

Keywords

TEM4, backwash effect, Comprehensive English.

1. Introduction

As a scale reference exam for the preliminary level undergraduates, TEM4 can effectively help schools objectively understand the quality of teaching and measure the language level of learners. Since 1990, it has received more and more attention from teachers and students and has undergone adjustment several times. For schools, the TEM4 score is an important indicator of the teaching quality and achievement of the English majors; for students, it is an important guarantee for employment, and is the standard used by employers to judge the level of their English professional ability. Therefore, TEM4 has a far-reaching influence on the school's concept of running English majors, bringing a series of changes to the teaching model, teaching material selection, teaching methods and teaching evaluation.

According to National Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities, Comprehensive English is a core course for English majors in China, which covers two academic years of study, with the focus on the instruction, training and improvement of the integrated basic language knowledge and language skills. The teaching of this course is directly reflected from the result of TEM4. Therefore, the analysis of the effects of TEM4 on Comprehensive English teaching helps promote the comprehensive implementation of the Syllabus and serves to improve the teaching quality of English majors in universities.

2. Backwash Effect of Language Testing

In foreign countries, the research on the backwash effect began in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, scholars Vernon and Wiseman believe that the test will negatively affect the teaching, which means that teachers only focus on the students' test preparation skills rather than language skills in the preparation of the test (Vernon, 1956; Wiseman, 1961). Since the 1980s, the backwash effect as a phenomenon in the education community has begun to be valued by scholars. For example, the British scholar, Hughes, expounds the backwash effect in his book *Testing Manual for Foreign Language Teachers* (1988). Hughes first introduced the concept of backwash effect in the field of applied linguistics in 1989: the backwash effect of

language testing refers to the impact of language testing on language teaching. "Backwash" refers to the effect or reaction of testing on teaching (including teaching and learning) in the field of education. There are both positive and negative aspects (Hughes, 1989). The "PPP" model proposed by Hughes in 1993 is to test the effect of backwash on the participants, processes, and products in teaching. This theoretical system provides a theoretical basis for future research on backwash effects in academia. There are two types of backwash effects: one is positive and the other is negative. Positive backwash can promote the development of teaching; while negative backwash may impact or even mislead teaching. The backwash effect has become an important factor in the evaluation of exams; that is, a good test question should have a positive backwash effect on teaching.

Language testing experts Alderson & Wall analyzed the status of backwash effect at that time in the theoretical article *Does Washback Exist?* in 1993. And called for empirical research to verify it. In the same year, they embarked on an empirical study of the backwash effect of the Sri Lankan level 0 test on classroom teaching. Since then, the backwash effect theory and empirical research of language testing have been continuously developed, and research results have appeared one after another.

In the authoritative foreign language journals in China, the research on the backwash effect of CET4 (College English Test Band 4), CET6 (College English Test Band 6), college entrance examination, language test design and other aspects is more prominent, and it involves the study of TEM4 and TEM8 as well. TEM4 has undergone revisions in recent years in order to improve the scientific nature of the exam, the standardization of propositions, the rationality of implementation, and the fairness of interpretation of scores, to make the test more effectively measure the language skills and knowledge level of candidates, and strengthen the positive backwash effect of the test on teaching. Some scholars have conducted relevant research on the impact and backwash effect on teaching, but more concentrated on the field of listening teaching, listening learning attitude, process and results, and from the perspective of learning motivation. This paper explores the positive and negative backwash effects of TEM4 on teaching and learning of Comprehensive English.

3. Backwash Effect of TEM4 on Comprehensive English

Language testing is one of the indispensable links in the process of Comprehensive English teaching. It plays an important role in guiding the improvement of teaching and the direction of the future teaching, and is an important way to improve the quality of Comprehensive teaching. The result of the TEM4 has an important reaction to teaching. There have been many related researches in China in recent years, but in general, they are still some new research fields. In particular, there are few researches on the special and empirical research on the backwash effect of TEM4, TEM8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8) and related issues. In this context, this paper has collected dozens of research papers on the subject of "Research on the Effect of TEM4 on Teaching" in core journals and dissertations, exploring the backwash effect of TEM4 on Comprehensive English teaching and achieve the purpose of improving Comprehensive English classroom teaching.

3.1. Positive Effect of TEM4 on Teachers' Teaching

3.1.1. Change the Teaching Mode

Comprehensive English aims to train and improve students' comprehensive ability to use English. Judged from the actual teaching situation, it should be based on the integrated training of language skills and the analysis of texts, so that students can gradually expand their vocabulary and familiarize themselves with common English sentence patterns, understand the

characteristics of various English writing styles, and improve discourse reading and comprehension ability, together with basic verbal and written skills.

In the traditional Comprehensive English teaching activities, teachers mainly use the PPP (presentation, practice, production) teaching method. The basic mode of teaching is that the teacher explains the meaning and usage of vocabulary by example, explains the key phrases, sentences, and grammatical phenomena in the text, and finally strengthens the relevant language points of the lesson through after-class exercises. Students are in a passive learning state throughout the teaching process and are always busy copying what the teacher explains. The outcome is that they remember nothing without referring to the notes. This leads to the loss of students' initiative and enthusiasm for learning, as well as the opportunity to improve their comprehensive English skills. The test results of TEM4 also reveals a lack of solid comprehensive English language skills, and low level of comprehensive ability to use English. In this case, the teachers need to reflect on the questions: Can the traditional teaching model really enable students to meet the standards of comprehensive English language ability and English professional knowledge? What kind of teaching mode can enable English majors with uneven English proficiency to meet the requirements of the syllabus? The task-based approach to authenticating language teaching and socializing the classroom is worth trying. Task-based teaching is centered on meaning, not on language points. Student-centered assessment of teaching is based on task completion. This teaching mode is suitable for Comprehensive English teaching, which can stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm for learning English, enable them to continuously adjust their learning methods in real communication, observation and comparison, and improve the learning effect. At the same time, their narrative abilities, their willingness to actively communicate in English and their language proficiency has improved significantly.

3.1.2. Improve Teaching Quality

TEM4 is an important means to monitor the effectiveness of teaching, and has an irreplaceable role in improving teaching and improving the quality of teaching. Today, multimedia and network technologies have become important classroom teaching aids. Without a certain amount of test pressure, the classroom is prone to entertainment. Some teachers may ignore teaching goals and content and use multimedia courseware at will. Although the atmosphere is active in the classroom, effective teaching can not be effectively implemented. Multimedia can assist teachers to implement effective teaching in the classroom, but it cannot replace the leading role of teachers. Teachers' organization and design of the classroom is the key to improving the quality of teaching. In order to achieve the expected test results of TEM4, teachers should study the textbooks and prepare lessons carefully, and provide targeted counseling to students. At the same time, the results of TEM4 are also a kind of information feedback to measure their teaching, helping teachers improve teaching methods, clarify teaching priorities, and improve teaching quality. In the teaching of Comprehensive English, teachers should pay attention to the basic language points involved in the passage, and explain the related cultural background of the passage. This is the first step in helping students to build their language foundation, but Comprehensive English, an important course for undergraduate English majors, does not and should not stop here. The mastery of language lies in the application of the language knowledge, which not only tests the form of language but also the content of language use. Some students have a good command of English grammar, but the content of spoken English and expression of writing are not satisfactory. Most of the cases occur because teachers pay more attention to the practice of language knowledge and ignore the probing into the content of the text. Students' comprehension ability is not improved, and their expression ability is naturally limited. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the curriculum setting and the different content of various articles, find shortcomings of students, and focus on the theory and practice, in order to stimulate students' interest and give them

proper pressure to take exams. In the classroom teaching, while ensuring the normal teaching progress, teachers should dig into the main points of the article from multiple angles, inspire students to think, improve students' dialectical thinking ability, and further tap the cultural connotation behind the language, so that students can really understand the language as a cultural carrier, and implement the teaching reform of Comprehensive English, till ultimately improve the teaching efficiency of the course.

TEM4 and TEM8 testing committee releases the analysis reports of TEM4 and TEM8 every year, including the analysis of test content, statistics and sampling analysis. Many test experts and scoring teachers make instructive suggestions for teaching reform based on the examination results, which will help improve teaching measures and improve teaching quality. This is an important source of information for teachers of Comprehensive English.

In actual situation, students' listening, speaking, reading writing and translating abilities need to be further strengthened. Comprehensive English textbook used by the author is *Contemporary College English* edited by Yang Limin, which is now the second edition. In the exercises and accompanying workbook of this textbook, there are exercises on the above-mentioned skills. Teachers should analyze it carefully. In each unit, there are separate speaking, reading and writing exercises. Take writing as an example, teachers can use the grading standards similar to the composition of TEM4 in their teaching, so that students can focus on writing and improve their writing skills. Only in this way can students' writing ability be truly improved.

3.1.3. Standardize Comprehensive English Teaching

TEM4 test plays an active role in standardizing the teaching goals of Comprehensive English. Teachers in different regions and different types of schools adjust the syllabus and teaching process according to the content of TEM4. They try to fully implement the requirements of the syllabus, more comprehensively and effectively check the professional standards of English majors, and improve teaching methods, enrich the teaching content, correct teaching attitude, and promote the study strategies of the students. At the same time, TEM4 test provides more levels of information feedback for the reform of English teaching in various schools. It comprehensively demonstrates its requirements for English teaching in many aspects such as listening, vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing, and promotes the reform of English major curriculum settings in various colleges and universities. TEM4 increases university investment in English majors. With the increasing status of the TEM4 exam, some schools have increased investment in English majors as key majors, focused on support and training, optimized the construction of teaching infrastructure, introduced diversified advanced teaching equipment, and created favorable teaching and learning environment for students and teachers. At the same time, they actively introduce knowledgeable talents from different colleges, strengthen the training of English teachers and the supervision and management of the quality of classroom teaching. These measures have undoubtedly created good conditions and environment for English teaching, and further improved the level of English teaching. At the same time, this measure also mobilizes the enthusiasm of teachers and students for teaching and learning.

3.1.4. Promote Exchange

TEM4 exam plays an important role in promoting mutual exchanges and learning from each other's experience in different regions. In order to be able to achieve good results in the exam, different schools conduct academic exchange activities to learn from other schools' strengths in the form of advanced studies or seminars. This measure helps teachers to learn from each other and make progress together, and can also deepen the understanding and mastery of TEM4 testing target.

3.2. Positive Effect of TEM4 on Students' Learning

3.2.1. Promote Awareness of Autonomous Learning

The ultimate goal of learning of Comprehensive English is not to obtain a TEM4 certificate, but to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. TEM4 sets a clear goal for English majors at the first two years of study, enabling them to have a positive attitude and learn proactively. Students have limited classroom study time and must make full use of their spare time for autonomous learning. In the process of preparing for exams, students can formulate a learning plan according to their actual situation, find out the learning method that suits them, and cultivate the ability of independent study. The author finds that TEM4 has a great promotion effect on students' autonomous learning. When preparing for the exam, students formulate a study plan and regularly check the learning effect. They consciously divide their spare time into several sections in accordance with the requirements of the examination, and conduct special training in listening, vocabulary and grammar, reading and writing. After the model tests, they have a better understanding of their strong points and weaknesses and adjust accordingly. It can be seen that TEM4 has a great impact on students' autonomous learning motivation, autonomous learning behavior and autonomous learning content. Therefore, teachers who are responsible for the teaching tasks of this course can use the backwash effect of TEM4 to guide students from language learning to test goals, provide students with self-learning materials, cultivate their self-learning ability, and urge them to maintain their self-learning habits after the exam.

3.2.2. Stimulate Students' Enthusiasm for English Learning

TEM4 stimulates students' enthusiasm for English learning, and cultivate students' autonomous learning consciousness and ability, especially when the college or university regards the ability to pass the TEM4 as one of the indicators to confer a degree on students upon graduation, or as an important indicator in the future graduate entrance examination and employment. Under the pressure of degrees, further studies and employment, they further clarify the learning goals for their majors and their future life plans, which stimulates their enthusiasm for test preparation and English learning. Most students have improved their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills during the period of preparing for TEM4, and their enthusiasm for English learning has also been greatly improved. At the same time, in the spare time, in order to prepare for the exam, a large number of individual training and model tests are conducted, consequently, the ability to learn independently is also cultivated, and the ability to plan time is further enhanced.

3.2.3. Enhance Learning Strategies

Because TEM4 results are a direct reflection of students' English proficiency, higher results naturally reflect students' stronger ability to learn English. Therefore, students will look for a variety of effective learning methods and revision methods, in order to achieve the effect of improving performance. At the same time, in this process, they have summarized the tips to certain question types, so that in their preparation process, they always conduct targeted revision. During the review process, students will deal with single exercises and comprehensive simulation exercises of various problem types. It is through single training and targeted exercises that they will recognize how many points they have lost on each problem type. Targeting weaknesses increases the amount of practice, and at the same time consolidates strengths, and eventually achieves the effect of solidifying the weak points in their knowledge chains. At the same time, students will gradually find learning methods and strategies that are suitable for them. By improving their learning methods and strategies, they will learn to focus on the weak points and make up for the shortcomings. At the same time, in the process of memorizing a large number of words, reading and writing, students' English literacy has also been greatly improved, their vocabulary has been expanded, their reading ability,

understanding ability and generalization ability have been greatly enhanced. Language proficiency has been further improved.

3.3. Negative Backwash Effect on Teachers' Teaching

It influences teaching content and increases the burden of preparing lessons. Because the percentage of passing TEM4 is linked to the evaluation of the teaching levels and the evaluation of teachers' teaching performance, most teachers conduct a large number of specialized trainings for students before the exam. In the course of classroom teaching, the teaching content of Comprehensive English provided by the syllabus is not involved. The preparation and revision for TEM4 is the key teaching content. The vocabulary, sentence pattern, grammar, etc. involved in TEM4 are organized to explain the teaching in detail. This measure undoubtedly plays a negative role in the normal development of teaching and the advancement of teaching progress. At the same time, if the teachers are relatively unfamiliar with the syllabus and test sites for second-year college students, they would lack professional knowledge on how to develop students' ability to prepare for TEM4 exams. When the teachers are collecting information and materials in their lesson plans, the workload has greatly increased, which might bring psychological stress to the teachers.

3.4. Negative Backwash Effect on Students' Learning

It increases the learning burden and reduces the enthusiasm for learning, as a large number of TEM4 preparation training and intensive exercises occupy students' classroom learning time, at the same time, teachers arrange a large number of practice questions after class. Compared with normal teaching content, this measure undoubtedly greatly increases their burden of study. The amount of tasks in the limited time has increased exponentially, putting great pressure on students. At the same time, during the test preparation period, students' lack of ability in some aspects can be highlighted, and they may also suffer from anxiety, which has a negative impact on students' mental health. As students are motivated by the desire to pass the exam during the preparation of TEM4, exam-based learning becomes the main body of their learning content, so students may have a higher enthusiasm for learning in a short period of time. However, after the TEM4 exam is over, the students' first-stage goals have been completed. As a result, students will have a sense of loss, and enthusiasm for learning will be greatly reduced, resulting in decreased class participation and completion of normal teaching tasks and the quality of students' work can not be guaranteed.

4. Suggestions for Comprehensive English Teaching

In order to take full advantage of the positive backwash effect of the exam on teaching, combined with the characteristics of TEM4 and Comprehensive English courses, the author proposes the following two points: Firstly, clarify the purpose of language learning. In order to cope with the examination, it is not possible to break the conventional teaching where students should be consciously taught learning strategies so that they can have a solid language foundation and a good self-learning ability. Secondly, use test feedback to adjust teaching priorities and strategies. The design of the TEM4 questions is scientific and reasonable. The simulated test of the candidates can reflect the how well they master the knowledge. The teachers can help students fill in the gaps of necessary knowledge based on the test results.

5. Conclusion

TEM4 has both positive and negative effect on teachers' teaching and students' learning of Comprehensive English. The overall situation is that its positive effect on teachers' teaching and students' learning is far greater than its negative effect. It plays a more active role in standardizing the construction of English subjects, testing the results of English teaching,

promoting the exchange of English teaching experiences in different regions, improving students' enthusiasm for learning, and improving students' learning methods. Therefore, we should give full play to the positive effects of TEM4 as a scientific testing on the development of teaching and learning.

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