Report 16 – The Washback Effect of TEA

The aim of this report is to assess the washback effect of the Test of English for Aviation on both candidates and those responsible for preparing candidates to take the test.

Different authors use somewhat different definitions of washback, but in this report we shall consider it to mean "the effect of testing on teaching and learning". There are two questions to be considered: firstly, what is the effect of TEA on language instructors and potential TEA candidates in terms of test preparation? Secondly, to what extent is this effect positive or negative?

Washback from Document 9835

TEA clearly relates its content to the lexical domains and language functions outlined in the appendices to ICAO Document *9835* [see ***Report 06 – Content Analysis: Language Functions & Language Elicited in TEA*** and ***Report 08 – Item Development & Version Content*** for further information].

Shawcross states "The systematic, accurately targeted coverage in proficiency tests of the relevant lexis, structure and functions will tend to drive training programs to address the required areas of aviation language expertise". In this context, the washback effect of TEA, and the LPRs in general, should broadly be positive if it encourages widening vocabulary in the lexical domains, and practising command of the language structures and functions identified in 9835.

Nevertheless, the rather broad and qualitative nature of the language described in 9835 makes it difficult to provide a clear checklist of objectives for instructors and candidates to meet. The high-stakes nature of the test ensures that passing it is seen as an end in itself, and the potential for negative washback – classroom practice dedicated to strategies on how to pass TEA rather than practice the language described in 9835 – is clear.

The extent to which TEA is robust enough to anticipate these issues, react to them, and continue to ascertain true language proficiency in spite of them, is a measure of its construct validity.

The nature of TEA

TEA is an oral proficiency test with a listening component in three parts. The first part takes the form of an interview on work-related topics, with examiners directed to remain on script. The second part is labelled as "interactive comprehension" in which the candidate is expected to respond to a number of recorded prompts. The third part involves more free-form discussion around a topic identified from the priority lexical domains. Test items and prompts are designed to elicit particular language functions, and interlocutors are trained to be aware of these, and encourage candidates to display them Assessment focuses on matching candidate performance in each of the parts to the descriptors laid out in *9835* [see ***Report 11 - Examiner Training & Assessment Using TEA***.].

How test construct affects washback

Hughes (1989, p45) suggests that in order to foster beneficial washback, tests should:

1) Test the abilities whose development is desirable, rather than those which are easiest or more practical to test.
2) Sample widely and unpredictably.
3) Use direct testing, to incentivise students to practice the desired skills.
4) Make testing criterion-referenced.
5) Ensure test is known and understood by students and teachers.

Let us consider each of these points in turn.

1) TEA is designed specifically to assess the language requirements defined in *9835* [see ***Report 01 – Description of Test Purpose, Specifications &*** Construction]. It does not attempt to assess standard phraseology, and is not an adaptation of a test which had this objective. Therefore, any preparation for TEA must of necessity involve practising the desired language functions and domains.

2) The population of test items available to examiners in the handbooks ensures that any of the lexical domains and a wide range of language functions can be tested throughout the test. This means it is not possible to prepare for TEA by concentrating on one or two areas of vocabulary or structure. Examiners are encouraged to use the full range of test items available, and this is monitored [see ***Report 08 – Item Development & Version Content*** and ***Report 14 – TEA Security and Administration*** for more details].

3) TEA directly assesses the ability of candidates to explain, compare, describe, suggest, seek clarification, and use any number of other language functions described in *9835*. That is to say, the ability of candidates to perform these functions is not inferred from unrelated test items. Preparation for the test must include practising these skills, as long as candidates are aware that they will be tested on them.

4) The criteria for assessing TEA come directly from *9835*. If candidates know and understand the descriptors for level 4 and above, then they know what they must demonstrate in the test.

5) Descriptions of the TEA tasks, simplified descriptor statements for candidates, and a general outline of TEA and assessment are all available from the website (see ***Report 15 - Preparing for TEA*** for more details) as is a sample TEA test with rationale for scoring. All of this is to encourage course providers and candidates to consider what is (and what is not) being assessed in TEA, and to focus candidates on improving the relevant language skills that are being assessed.

Muñoz and Álvarez, in their report on the washback from oral proficiency tests again make clear that washback is positive when learners are aware of the assessment criteria, and where teachers are able to link educational goals to this assessment (2010, p46).

By attempting to make explicit the assessment criteria, and drawing teachers attention towards effective methods of preparing candidates to meet these criteria, it is to be hoped that TEA creates conditions under which positive washback can occur.

Anticipated areas of negative backwash

Given the nature of the test, it is to be expected that candidates will attempt to find ways to circumvent a long term commitment to improving their general English in the areas that TEA assesses, in favour of "quick fixes".

The points of vulnerability would seem to be Part One, where questions are rather formulaic and can – at least to a certain extent – be anticipated and prepared for, and Part 2, where candidates may try to find "strategies" of how to answer in a vague way, without comprehension, in order to give what they perceive to be "correct" answers.

To counter this, interlocutors are trained to interrupt answers in Part One which are felt to be prepared, and ask a different question. In the instructions to Part Two, interlocutors clearly state that "*all the information is important*". Parts 2b and 2c are rated with reference to the appropriateness of candidate responses to the situation.

Observable classroom Washback Effects of TEA

Observations were made of teachers helping candidates to prepare for TEA over three 4-week (100-hour) courses at Mayflower College. The teachers were not necessarily also TEA examiners, but all had knowledge of the test construct.

The course was designed in order to review (or, if necessary, teach) basic structures, with a focus on functional language, interaction between candidates, and the vocabulary areas implied by the priority lexical domains.

Of particular interest during observations were mentions of TEA by both teacher and learners, but also of note were lesson content and student participation and engagement.

The students were mostly working pilots or air traffic controllers, with a number of trainee pilots and ATCOs.

It was noted during observation, and confirmed by teacher and student interview, that student attention was focussed with more intensity, whenever the teacher directly invoked the test as a purpose for studying or practising an item in class. This is perhaps why the test was mentioned by either teachers or students, usually both, in 100% of classes.

Teachers frequently related the overall topic of the lessons to the test, with comments such as "Today we will be talking about animals and aviation, which is a topic which may come up during your test". Certain task types in class were justified or introduced with comments such as "you'll need to do something like this in your test".

Student questions tended to refer to test procedure, with students seeking repeated clarifications of what was required of them to perform well on the different task types. Teacher reactions to such questions tended to be of a general nature, for example "keep talking, and show that you know some of this vocabulary" or "you need to show the examiner that you understand, so read back as much as possible".

At the end of the course, and after the TEA, students were asked to comment on which classroom activities they found most useful during the course, and what was felt to be lacking. 25 of 37 reported finding self-assessment to be a useful exercise, in which students recorded themselves describing pictures and discussing topics related to the lexical domains covered in class. Teachers provided simplified descriptors for appropriate language areas such as fluency and vocabulary, and asked students to rate their own performance. 18 of 37 reported finding learner training in the storing of vocabulary to be helpful.

30 of 37 stated that they felt there were insufficient listening practice materials. Classroom activities focussed mainly on bottom up sub-skill work, analysing features of connected speech and idiosyncratic pronunciation of known lexical items by speakers with accents unfamiliar to the students. The students reported appreciating the depth of the analysis, but requested greater breadth and exposure to more non-native pronunciation. Top-down listening activities, and analysis of longer texts (more than 2 – 3 minutes duration) was noticeable by its absence.

Broadly, the observations showed that the classroom washback effect from TEA was very large. However, by providing students with a variety of tasks to simulate the sub-skills tested in TEA, and opportunities for self-assessment, the majority of this washback was felt to be positive. Teachers reported that their own familiarity with the test construct, and an understanding of the language which was to be assessed, was of great help to them in preparing relevant and interesting lessons for students, without becoming "bogged down" in rehearsing answers to typical questions.

These findings seem to bear out the observations of Hughes above, and reiterate the importance of making available to teachers broadly worded advice on preparing candidates for TEA.

References

Hughes A (1989). *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.

Muñoz and Álvarez (2010). *Washback of an oral assessment system in the EFL classroom*. Language Testing. 27(1) 33–49

Shawcross P: *What do we mean by the 'washback effect' of testing?* Retrieved 25/5/11 http://www.icao.int/icao/en/anb/meetings/ials2/Docs/15.Shawcross.pdf