

Do High-Stakes English Proficiency Tests Motivate Taiwanese University Students to Learn English?

Jon Nichols*

Arts Department, Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

*Corresponding author: Tomballtxs66@yahoo.com

Abstract Taiwan's Ministry of Education has encouraged all Taiwanese institutions of higher learning to utilize English proficiency tests as a graduation requirement. Many educators and administrators feel that these tests are a good way to objectively measure the effectiveness of students' learning stratagems as well as teacher and program efficacy. These are high stake tests which have a great deal of impact on students, teachers and entire universities. Nevertheless, considerable research, from Taiwan and abroad, indicates that these tests are not effective as tools for promoting learning or increasing student motivation.

Keywords: Taiwanese EFL education, high-stakes testing, motivation

Cite This Article: Jon Nichols, "Do High-Stakes English Proficiency Tests Motivate Taiwanese University Students to Learn English?" *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 4, no. 13 (2016): 927-930. doi: 10.12691/education-4-13-2.

1. Introduction

For more than ten years Taiwan's Ministry of Education has encouraged institutions of higher learning to utilize standardized English proficiency tests as a graduation requirement. These standardized tests include, the College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT), the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) with TOEIC being by far, the most widely used test. As of 2015, 133 or (79%) of Taiwan's 169 institutions of higher education have complied with this directive, with each of these 133 institutes of higher learning having their TOEIC (listening and reading) graduation requirements listed on their websites [1].

There are myriad reasons why individual institutions and school systems have adopted high-stakes testing strategies. One of the reasons that administrators, and policy makers give for utilizing standardized high-stakes proficiency testing is the idea that these tests provide a way to hold institutions and individual teachers accountable for their students' progress. Within this idea of accountability, there are four major educational theories which testing proponents claim support their idea. These are Alignment theory, Information Theory, Symbolism and Motivational Theory. These same theories are also utilized by many educators to dispute the advisability of adopting these accountability techniques. The following is a brief overview of these four theories with special emphasis being placed on Motivational Theory due to the fact that this theory is most relevant to the scope of this paper [2].

2. Alignment Theory

Alignment Theory advances the idea that standardized tests will ensure that there is a high degree of uniformity among all the major components of the educational system. Alignment Theory maintains that it is important for schools to be internally synchronized as well as synchronized with other schools within their system. Advocates of this theory stress the importance of matching the major components of the educational system, such as learning objectives, curriculum and assessments, with other classes within the individual institution as well as matching schools within the same district or region.

3. Information Theory

Information Theory is also widely used as a means to justify the educational systems' ever deepening reliance on standardized tests. This theory holds that the information gained from standardized tests can be used to provide important information which can in turn be used to help teachers and students remediate areas of academic weakness.

4. Symbolism

Symbolism is another theory that is often used within the testing discourse. Symbolism theory maintains that the system of using standardized tests in order to punish or reward academic institutions and individual teachers is justified because it is a system which signals important values to the people who are most concerned with the

success or failure of the students and teachers being evaluated. In this way the tax payers who fund public education know whether or not their money is being put to good use.

5. Motivational Theory

Motivational Theory is the theory that administrators and policy-makers most often use to support their policies of employing high-stake standardized testing as a tool for teacher and program accountability. Because of its popularity, the theory should be discussed in some detail. Test proponents argue that test-based accountability produces improvement in teacher efficacy and student learning, by introducing high-stake motivators into the learning process. According to Gardner and Lambert's 1959 study, there are two distinct categories of motivation for learning a second language [3]. ESL students fall into one or the other of these camps: they are either motivated by integrative or instrumental stimulus [4].

The integrative approach motivates students to learn a second language by encouraging interest in foreign language acquisition in general, or by increasing the student's desire to interact with native speakers from the target community [5]. Within this paradigm, students are motivated for social and cultural reasons as well as their desire to become integrated into the culture of the second language group and participate in social interchange with members of the target culture. According to Gardner, students who are motivated by these factors possess "a high level of drive... to acquire the language of a valued second language community in order to facilitate communication with that group" [5]. The idea of integrative motivation has become a widely researched concept. Csizer and Dornyei effectively write that, "integrativeness appears to be the single most important factor" of L2 acquisition as studies and research show "that learners ranking high on integrative orientation work harder and learn faster than those who are low on integrative motivation" [6].

The integrative approach attempts to help students internalize the value of learning a second language thus creating L2 learners who are intrinsically motivated. Within this approach, the students' feelings of autonomy and innate sense of curiosity are encouraged [7]. The benefits of creating intrinsically motivated learners are numerous, including the facts that internally motivated students tend to be more actively involved in their own education and tend to seek educational opportunities without having to be rewarded or punished by secondary sources. According to Dev, intrinsically motivated students tend to retain information longer than their externally motivated peers [8]. Intrinsically motivated students also tend to experience a sense of joy at learning new skills and tend to be life-long learners. They tend to continue their education within formal and informal settings long after their externally motivated peers have given up on education, and long after rewards such as high grades, certificates and diplomas have become irrelevant [9]. Not only do intrinsically motivated students have no need for external rewards, they are also more persistent and will usually stay engaged in an activity until they have successfully completed it [10,11].

According to a number of researchers, some of the assumptions that go along with the theory of intrinsic motivation are the ideas that all humans are active beings who exhibit an innate curiosity and who desire autonomy [7,12]. However, in Taiwan, university students typically experience very little autonomy in regard to their education. Students have little say about which university they will attend; they are allowed to choose between a few universities where they qualify through their high-school exit exams. Students also do not have freedom to choose their major. Students are not allowed to select the teachers they prefer and are often forced to attend the same classes as the rest of the students who entered the university at the same time. Taiwanese university students are also often required to sit in assigned seats, where they are referred to by student number instead of name. Attendance is taken at least once during each class period. Most of these constraints do not exist in American universities, where students choose not only their university but also their field of study, where classroom attendance is determined by the extent that the students find the professor's lectures to be stimulating or instructive, where assigned seats are unheard of, and where being referred to by number is considered insulting. Whereas it is true that nearly all American universities and colleges rely on either SAT or ACT scores for admissions, these scores are generally only part of the admission process and the student's interview, entrance essay and extra-curricular activities are also factored into the admission process. The SAT or ACT tests are typically the last standardized tests that American university students are required to take, unless they later apply to graduate school.

Despite these limits placed upon students' experience of autonomy, most Taiwanese university ESL programs have, until recently, at least given lip-service to the integrative approach to second language acquisition. This could be seen by the preponderance of courses which utilized four-skill materials designed to stimulate students' interest in English through depictions of Western culture and references to English literature and popular icons, as well as the use of native English speakers and other experts in western culture as classroom instructors. However, there has always been a tension between the stated goals of providing an integrative classroom experience for university ESL students and the practical considerations which often dictate that ESL programs adopt teaching methodology which is decidedly not integrative in nature. These considerations come in the form of Taiwan's university ranking system, which is driven by students' test scores and corporate hiring policies which often require job applicants to be able to prove that they have earned specific scores on standardized tests of English before they can obtain employment in certain fields. This has become even more of a problem as the dwindling number of students entering university (due to Taiwan's low birth rate) has forced universities to scramble in order to attract and retain students or face the risk of closing programs and entire universities. Under this immense strain comes the pressure to be able to provide evidence that the university has a program which is effective at teaching English as a foreign language. Within this new reality, students feel external pressure to master the English language in order to secure future employment while university instructors

feel pressure to raise test scores to keep their jobs and university administrators feel pressure to raise test scores to keep their universities open.

As these pressures increase, many Taiwanese universities have responded by adopting a more pragmatic approach to teaching English as a second language. This new approach is what Gardner termed the instrumental orientation [3]. Instrumental orientation utilizes systems of external pressures and rewards to motivate students to learn new skills. In other words, within this paradigm, students learn English as a means to meet pragmatic goals, such as being allowed to graduate or being able to obtain employment after graduating. According to researchers, external motivation provides the least amount of student autonomy because educational tasks are performed solely to avoid external punishments or receive external rewards [7,11]. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that students confuse the goal of learning English — meaningful communication and cultural competency within an English-speaking environment — with its measurement — passing an exam. As a result of this new direction, four-skill textbooks with titles like *American English File* and *Top Notch* are being replaced by textbooks with titles like *Skills for the TOEIC TEST* or *TOEIC PRACTICE TESTS* which are designed for the sole purpose of helping students/instructors/universities raise test scores. Whereas supplemental reading materials used to consist of titles like *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, new ESL outside readers consist of titles like *Acquiring Proficiency in TOEIC Reading and Vocabulary*. These classes are typically taught by Taiwanese teachers (in Chinese) with little regard for context or western culture in general.

Recently, an American conference speaker from ETS told her Taiwanese audience of university English instructors an anecdote which seems to illustrate this problem perfectly. The presenter told the audience how her (Taiwanese) flight attendant on her flight from America to Taiwan was unable to answer basic questions in English despite being able to deliver a pre-flight safety demonstration and speech in flawless English. The conference speaker went on to talk about how this type of English learning — rote memorization without context — should be avoided. However, she did not seem to realize that her own company (ETS) was a major part of the problem. Nor did she seem to realize that all Taiwanese flight attendants are required by their respective airlines to attain at least 550 on their TOEIC exams as a condition of employment. According to the ETS website [13], a score of 550 indicates that the student should be able to communicate at a high-intermediate level. In this instance, it is clear that the flight attendant's motivation to learn English was external to a high degree and, as a result, her attainment of English was short-lived and easily forgotten. In essence, her goal was to pass an English test in order to receive the reward of working for an airline and not to learn English for the sake of being able to communicate with English speakers.

According to a 2004 study involving 18 foreign students who were attending university in New Zealand, standardized tests seem to have a minimal effect on motivating students to learn [14]. The researchers found that, despite the fact that the participants knew that passing an English proficiency test would have a

significant impact on their academic careers, the majority of students made no effort to improve their test scores. This study was replicated in 2007 through a small study of 29 Taiwanese university students [15] where, although more than half of the students interviewed considered their required English proficiency tests to be important, almost none of the students actually spent time preparing for it. This resulted in the same conclusion: that simply understanding that a test is important is not enough to actually motivate the students to study for the exam.

6. Do High Stakes Tests Promote Learning?

Because of the implementation of the TOEIC as a graduation benchmark, curriculums within Taiwanese schools have begun emphasizing reading, grammar and listening to the detriment of speaking, writing and critical thinking. An American study conducted in 2004 found the same trend in American schools which had adopted the practice of high-stake testing with the conclusion that, “[i]n practice, test preparation merges with instruction, with a concurrent de-emphasis of non-tested content” [16]. In Taiwanese schools, current test questions which, in the past, required reading and writing skills as well as critical thinking such as “Please discuss Dorian Grey’s biggest character flaw” have been replaced with exam questions which require only reading such as “What type of business is Barnes and Noble?” As a result, many Taiwanese university students are unable to carry on even the most rudimentary of conversations with an English-speaking foreigner even after having studied English for more than a decade.

In addition to the curriculum, another problem is the timing for administering the TOEIC in Taiwanese universities. Because the test is most often used as the culmination of classes rather than the starting point, little useful information, such as their students’ English speaking or listening ability, is actually acquired by classroom teachers. As a result, the classroom teacher has no opportunity to remediate the students’ problem areas. By the time the test results have been disseminated, the students have already matriculated from one English class into the next, and their lack of English ability becomes another teacher’s problem. Associate Professor Jason Supovitz, from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, agrees that high-stakes proficiency exams are often not nuanced enough to actually affect how teachers present material within their classrooms, proposing that

[educators] need to embed information about patterns of student understanding into assessments that can be used by teachers for instructional guidance. Teachers need better information about student subject matter (mis)conceptions and problem-solving strategies and the capacity to use this information to guide their instructional responses and assessments are an important tool to provide this information. Insight into how students are thinking about content is necessary to shape an effective instructional response. Without clues about how students arrived at an answer, teachers are much less able to craft a response that moves student understanding forward [2].

However, since Taiwanese universities test preparation classes typically utilize the TOEIC as the final exam for the course, it is highly unlikely that classroom teachers will gain any meaningful knowledge from the assessment or will be able to adjust their teaching style and classroom content to meet the deficits identified within their students' understanding of the English language.

Another concern is that a significant number of students who perform quite well on the TOEIC are unable to achieve a similar high score on other English proficiency tests even though the other tests supposedly measure the same skills. This phenomenon is not unusual, nor is it specific to Taiwanese students. In general, students are unable to transfer their knowledge to another English proficiency test because the students have not learned (and teachers have not taught) English; they have only learned how to pass a specific test. American research shows similar results. For example, Klein et. al. compared the results of students' performances on state-wide high-stakes tests with their results on low-stakes national exams which were designed to test the same information. The students had been actively (vigorously) studying for the high-stakes test and had not been actively studying for the low-stakes test and little positive correlation was found even though they ostensibly measured students' proficiency in the same academic skills. The findings suggest that the students' apparent improvement as measured by one test may not necessarily indicate that the students have mastered the desired skill when it is tested by another rubric [17]. Similar results were observed at a medium-sized private university in Taiwan which saw students' GEPT scores drop 18% across all academic majors the semester after TOEIC was introduced as a graduation requirement [18].

7. Conclusion

Whereas the present academic course is understandable in light of the unsustainability of Taiwan's current educational climate, we as educators have to ask ourselves some difficult questions about the efficacy of standardized proficiency tests for increasing student motivation and learning.

In the 1960s the theories of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget supported the overhaul of the British education system and the Plowden report urged the imperative for educators to "[f]ocus on the process of learning, rather than the end product of it" [19]. As educators today all around the world, rather than simply teaching strategies that students can apply to pass a specific exam, we should be focusing not only on how to motivate them to learn but also teaching learning strategies that will be useful throughout their lifetimes. This notion, as has been illustrated in this paper, seems to be diametrically opposite to the current direction of Taiwanese EFL education. It seems that the Ministry of Education has decided to invest a substantial amount of time and money toward creating a system where all learning outcomes can be objectively measured by a test

rather than delve into the deeper issues of teacher efficacy and student motivation. Assessment certainly has a place within education but the disproportionate emphasis that standardized proficiency tests currently receive within the EFL curriculum is part and parcel of the unwillingness of the educational leadership to engage in a discussion of the deeper issues which the Taiwanese educational system currently faces.

References

- [1] Pan, Y. (2014). Learner Washback Variability in Standardized Exit Tests. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, 18(2). Retrieved March 27, 2016.
- [2] Supovitz, J. (2009). Can High Stakes Testing Leverage Educational Improvement? Prospects from the Last Decade of Testing and Accountability Reform. *The Journal of Educational Change*, 10(2), 3rd ser.
- [3] Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1959). Motivational Variables in Second-Language Acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13(4).
- [4] Nicholson, S. J. (2013). Influencing Motivation In The Foreign Language Classroom. *Journal of International Education Research*, 9(3).
- [5] Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- [6] Csizer, K., & Dornyei, Z. (2005). The Internal Structure of Language Learning Motivation and Its Relationship with Language Choice and Learning Effort. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(1).
- [7] Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- [8] Dev, P. C. (1997). Intrinsic Motivation and Academic Achievement: What Does Their Relationship Imply for the Classroom Teacher? *Remedial and Special Education*, 18(1).
- [9] Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin.
- [10] Oxford, R., & Shearin, J. (1994). Language Learning Motivation: Expanding the Theoretical Framework. *Modern Language Journal*, 78.
- [11] Noels, K. A., Pelletier, L. G., Clément, R., & Vallerand, R. J. (2003). Why Are You Learning a Second Language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination Theory. *Language Learning*, 53, 1st ser.
- [12] Ushioda, E. (2003). "Motivation as a socially mediated process". In D. Little, J. Ridley & E. Ushioda (Eds.) *Learner Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom: Teacher, Learner, Curriculum and Assessment*. Dublin: Authentik.
- [13] TOEIC® Listening Score Descriptors. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEIC/pdf/TOEIC_LR_Score_Desc.pdf.
- [14] Bright, C., & Randow, J. V. (2004). Tracking Language Test Consequences: The Student Perspective. In CLESOL (Vol. 9). Christchurch, New Zealand: National Conference on Community Languages and English for Speakers of Other Languages.
- [15] Shih, C. (2007). A new washback model of students' learning. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64 (1), 135-162.
- [16] Fuhrman, S. H., Editor, & Elmore, R. F., Editor. (2004). *The effects of testing on instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- [17] Klein, S. P., Hamilton, L. S., McCaffrey, D. F., & Stecher, B. M. (2000). What do test scores in Texas tell us? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (49).
- [18] Lin, D. (personal communication, Sept. 15, 2014).
- [19] Plowden, B. (1967). *Children and Their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council of Education England*. London: H.M.S.O.