An Investigation into Students' Attitudes towards Test-Preparation Teaching in Their TOEIC- Oriented Courses

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Abstract

The demands of high score achievements lead to the necessity of "test-preparation teaching" which is commonly perceived as a practice of preparing students closely to the test under pressure of high-stakes testing. There have been a lot of discussions on this issue, yet little has been mentioned from the learners' perspectives. For this reason, the research "An investigation into students' attitudes towards "test-preparation teaching" in their TOEIC-oriented courses" was conducted at Tay Do University to find out how English teachers prepare their students for tests and the students' attitudes towards this course. A triangulation of questionnaires, interviews and observation was carried out over a sample of 167 students from 5 classes whose teachers claimed to have frequently employed this teaching in TOEIC-oriented course 2. The results reveal that the teachers have extensively been involved in a variety of "test-preparation teaching" practices at a fairly high frequency (M= 3.73), and the students have shown a relatively favorable attitude towards these practices employed in their classrooms (M= 3.63).

Keywords: *high-stake testing, test – preparation activities, TOEIC-oriented course*

1. Introduction

In the trend of modernization and integration, English has played an increasingly important role because it is an indispensable communication language of people for working and studying in many countries. The remarkably vital necessity of English makes it become one of the must-have standards for graduation in most of the schools in Vietnam. This leads to the fact that learners attempt to study to get high scores for the English tests, not for their language acquisition or application in real life. As a result, "test-preparation teaching" appeared as a solution. This type of teaching has been employed widely for its undeniable benefits.

Obviously, "test-preparation teaching" helps students be familiar with the test content and format as well as avoid the "feeling of strangeness" when taking the "real test". Another equally important point is that students are able to do the test for the best result within their ability thanks to introduced effective test-taking strategies. These involve the techniques to deal with the questions in the test and to manage the limited time efficiently. These regular practices more or less bring students more chances to get better scores for "the more practice the better". Consequently, teachers and students tend to spend class time on practicing tasks for form-based exams instead of focusing on activities to improve students' communicative competence (Gao, 2012; Ming & Jaya, 2011; Pan & Block, 2011). This leads to the so-called "test score pollution" consequence in which "many examinees become expert in taking language tests, but not to learn how to use the language" (Gilfert, 1996). A clear illustration for this matter is the observation of Hoang Van Van et al. (2006) in which he points out a considerable mismatch between teaching and assessment objectives in Vietnam high schools.

Educators in different situations with different purposes have presented their contrary conceptions on "test-preparation teaching". However, there has been little discussion over how the students perceive the practice of" test-preparation teaching" employed in their classroom. Actually, students' needs and beliefs which consciously or unconsciously direct their own learning should be seriously considered as a basis for reformation and improvement in English language teaching. That is the reason why the study "An Investigation into Students' Attitudes towards "Test-preparation Teaching" in their TOEIC-oriented Courses" was conducted to find out the answer to the issued presented above.

This study was conducted to (1) find out how General English teachers help students get good scores for the tests at Tay Do University and (2) to investigate students' attitudes towards the practice of "test-

preparation teaching" in their TOEIC-oriented classroom.

To obtain those aims, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. *How do General English teachers prepare their non- English major students for high - stakes test?*
2. *What are students' attitudes towards this "test- preparation teaching"?*

2. Literature Review
2.1 The term "test-preparation teaching"

Recently, test preparation for high-stakes English language tests has received increasing research attention in the language assessment field. Despite widely- discussed, the phrase "test-preparation teaching" has yet to be thoroughly defined, causing much confusion with other similar terms and over whether it is good or bad.

According Wikipedia, "test preparation" or "exam preparation" is an educational course, tutoring service, educational material, or a learning tool designed to increase students' performance on standardized tests. Generally, it can be defined as a colloquial term for any method of education whose curriculum is heavily focused on preparing students for standardized test. "Test-preparation teaching" tends to occur under high-stakes condition in which test score is so powerful that it has severe consequences for the participants. (Shepard, 1990; Miller and Seraphine, 1993; Monsaas, 1993; Popham, 2001; Haladyna, 2001; Menken, 2006).
When learning about "test-preparation teaching" or "teaching to the test", it would be useful to examine the concept of "washback" which is generally perceived as a backward effect of test on teaching and learning (Buck, 1988; Hughes, 1989; Shohamy, 1992; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996; Brown, 2005). Bailey (1996), after carefully reviewing the concept, proposes a basic model of how washback works. This model helps to clarify "washback" by classifying the effects of test-derived information on test-takers as "washback to the learners" and those to the teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, counselors, ect…

2.2 Essential components of "Test- preparation teaching"

"Test-preparation teaching" contains various activities which can be broadly incorporated into 4 components including teaching test content and format, test-wiseness traning, curriculum narrowing and motivational activities.

Teaching test content and format
Teaching test content and format is a practice which is mainly aimed at teaching the tested content and familiarizes learners with the test format. This component is comprised of several activities which can be classified into four broad categories (adopted from Popham, 1991 & Moore, 1994) including previous-form preparation, current-form preparation, same-format preparation and varied-format preparation.

In a well-round view, Merrens et al. (1998) and Perlman (2003) argue that "test-preparation teaching" can have both positive and negative effects on test validity, depending on how it is controlled. The upside is that learning about test format can help students reduce anxiety and eliminate the potential sources of error variance caused by students' unfamiliarity with the test and therefore, improves the validity of test scores. In an attempt to explain for the source of "inflated test score gains" in norm-referenced test, Shepard (1991) argues that students who are taught closely to the test receive more focused instruction on the tested content and therefore, outperform the students in norming sample group who did the test unannounced, unanticipated and of course, without having benefit of such excessive test preparation.

Test- wiseness training
The existence of test-wiseness which can be seen as "test sophistication" (Erickson, 1972) or "test-wisdom" (Preston, 1964) has been discussed in the literature for many years. Test-wiseness was originally suggested as a possible effect or of reliability to measurements. It can be identified as a persistent, general attribute of the examinee that would contribute in part to individual differences. Test-wiseness has also been considered as one of the sources of variation entering into observed test score differences. Millman, Bishop & Ebel (1965:707) assert that test-wiseness "is logically independent of the examinee's knowledge of the subject matter for which the items are supposedly measures".

To respond to different opinions, the proponents of test-wiseness training argue that test-taking skills are not a "bag of tricks" that can magically help ill-prepared students to get by (Crocker, 2005). In fact, test-wiseness training is only essential and appropriate as long as it is implemented suitably and considerably.

Curriculum narrowing
Because of focusing on preparing students for tests, teachers tend to narrow the curriculum so that it gives more priorities for test. As a result, other subject areas

are ignored. That is the reason why Wiggins (1989) states that "tests determine what teachers actually teach and what students will study for". In fact, Brown (2005) on listing harmful aspects of washback implies test preparation closely gears towards the test that leads to considerable narrowing of the curriculum. According to Phelps (2011), curriculum narrowing mentions extensive test preparation activities in which teachers concentrate on teaching students to pass the test rather than the subject itself.

The current literature of educational assessment tends to perceive "test-preparation teaching" as negative washback resulting from a high-stakes test since "test-preparation teaching" is geared so closely to the test that the pre-determined curriculum will be considerably narrowed. Therefore, it is important to note that the term " test-preparation teaching" or " teaching to the test" can also be addressed as "item-teaching" (Popham, 2001), "curricular reductionism" or "measurement-driven instruction" (Crocker,2005).

Motivational activities

Along with test content and format instructions and test-wiseness training, motivation also plays a fairly important role in "test-preparation teaching" for getting desired scores. According Moore (1994), motivational activities are test preparation activities "designed to focus classroom attention to the test and get students psychologically prepared to tackle tests. Motivational activities are also reported in Smith's study (1991) as "exhortation" and "stress inoculation".

These activities can be giving students rewards for completing in-class/sample tests with high scores; encouraging attendance in the test week and providing rewards for high attendance like score bonus; taking to students about the advantage of high test scores for their future; boosting students' confidence by proving that they are capable of doing well on the test; encouraging students to eat breakfast, get enough sleep and be rested for the days of testing; and using test report to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.

3. Methodology

In regard to these questions, an exploratory research was carried out to investigate teachers' prevalent practices and students' attitudes towards test-preparation teaching" in their TOEIC- oriented classes. Then, it was decided that the best technique to adopt for this investigation was a triangulation of methods.

With its exploratory nature and adopted triangulation, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaires to 10 teachers and 167 student respondents, interviews with 10 students and 3 classroom observations. Results were obtained from close and open-ended questions, typically presenting both quantitative and qualitative methods. Particularly, the close-ended questions were designed in form of 5-point Likert scale and results would be analyzed with objective statistics such as mean, standard deviation, ect. whereas results from open-ended questions would be qualitatively described with frequency and percentage.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results from the questionnaires to teacher respondents

The first question in this study sought to understand how General English teachers prepare their non-English major students for high- stake test. The results from questionnaires to teacher respondents indicate that they have employed a variety of "test-preparation teaching" activities including (1) teaching test content and format, (2) test-wiseness training, (3) curriculum narrowing and (4) motivational activities. More specifically, among the four components of "test-preparation teaching", those frequently used are (1) test-wiseness training (M=4.08), (2) curriculum narrowing (M= 3.99) and (3) motivational activities. Meanwhile, teaching test content and format shows a medium frequency (M= 3.31), suggesting that the activities of this component sometimes occur only.

Table 4.1: Summary of the extent to which "test-preparation teaching" is employed at TDU

"Test-preparation teaching practices"	Mean
1. Teaching content and format	3.31
2. Test-wiseness training	4.08
3. Curriculum narrowing	3.99
4. Motivational activities	3.52
M = 3.73	

4.2 Results from questionnaires to student respondents

Table 4.2 below illustrates students' attitudes towards different components of "test-preparation teaching" at Tay Do University.

Table 4.2: Students' attitudes towards different components of " test-preparation teaching"

No	Components	Students' attitudes (mean of satisfaction)
1	Teaching content and format	3.60
2	Test-wiseness training	3.57
3	Curriculum narrowing	3.68
4	Motivational activities	3.67
		M= 3.63 (Relatively favorable)

The findings above provide a platform to investigate learners' attitudes towards "test-preparation teaching" in their TOEIC –oriented courses at Tay Do university, which is also the primary objective of the current study. The results reveal a fairly favorable attitude towards all of the components of test preparation. Specifically, curriculum narrowing is most favored (M= 3.68), followed by motivational activities (M= 3.67), test content and format (M=3.60) and test-wiseness training (M=3.57). This result reveals that students highly appreciate most of the activities offered by their teachers, even advice on health and psychology. Obviously, the students seem to prefer activities which are considered appropriate to serve the purpose of test score achievement and convenience.

Noticeably, there is a discrepancy between teachers' practices and students' attitudes towards "test-preparation teaching" at Tay Do University. Particularly, test-wiseness training receives the least supportive responses from the students although it is the most frequently applied by the teachers. The reason could be that there is a mismatch between teacher's belief and students' expectations.

4.3 Results from interviews with students

On the evidence of the results gained from the interview, it is possibly claimed that these test-preparation courses have been received positive feedback from the respondents participating in the interview, particularly test-wiseness training and teaching test content and format thanks to its practicality and usefulness for the test. On the downside, some students think that "test-preparation teaching" only serves the purpose of testing, not for

their communicative skill which is very necessary in their future studying and working. Unfortunately, the result from the questionnaire for student respondents is quite contradictory to the result from the interview with 10 students. Particularly, 5 out of 10 students show supportive attitudes towards test-wiseness training while this component receives the lowest mean of 3.57 in the questionnaire. Noticeably, no interviewees highly appreciate curriculum narrowing while it gets the most favorable attitudes from the survey.

4.4 Results from classroom observation

What was described in the three cases indicates a quite similar procedure by which students were prepared for the final test at Tay Do University. With cases B and C, under test-driven environment, it seems that communicative language learning did not have many chances to be utilized even in small-sized classes. Instead, previous-form preparation, same-format preparation and curriculum narrowing were frequently employed to provide a close-to-test review with drilling in vocabulary and grammar content that was regularly tested. Therefore, productive language use in these classes was not sufficiently promoted. Surprisingly, communicative skill in the target language was mainly employed in a big class with 53 students, along with the test-wiseness training. This implies that, in some cases, what is done in the classroom and how students react mostly depends on the teacher's selection and behavior, or teachers' beliefs can decide what will happen in the classroom.

5.Conclusions

Generally, on preparing their students for TOEIC and the final test simulating TOEIC, the teachers have employed a variety of "test-preparation teaching" activities with different degrees of frequency. Among the four components of "test-preparation teaching", those frequently used are test-wiseness training, curriculum narrowing and motivational activities. Meanwhile, teaching test content and format shows a medium frequency, suggesting that the activities of this component sometimes occur only. It is significant to note that although the teachers have employed a wide variety of test preparation activities listed in chapter 2, their practices seem more driven by the issue of practicality and convenience on teaching for the test.

The student respondents at Tay Do University held a fairly favorable attitude towards all of the components of "test-preparation teaching". It seems that the students preferred to learn for the "present target" of passing the final exam and the "future goal" , TOEIC certificate, not for long-term communicative skills.

On the other hand, the interviewees confirm the effectiveness of the applied "test-preparation teaching" practices in improving the tested content such as vocabulary, grammar and receptive skills. Some of them acknowledged English communicative competence as an indispensable soft skill for their future career and prefer more chances to practice productive language use in their classrooms.

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