

A Comparative Study of Class Activities and Students' Expectations of IELTS and TOEFL iBT Preparation Courses: A Methodological Triangulation Washback Study

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ABSTRACT: Washback refers to the influence of a test on teaching and learning. This study was an attempt to compare the influence of IELTS and TOEFL iBT on the expectations the students brought to their courses and to investigate how these expectations were fulfilled. To this end, 100 IELTS and 120 TOEFL iBT students attending preparation courses took a questionnaire survey, and a sample of their ten classes was observed as a part of validation process of triangulation research. The data gathered were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results of the study indicated that the IELTS students' expectations of the courses were higher than those of the TOEFL iBT students. On the other hand, both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students had higher expectations of the courses than what they had during their class activities; however, the IELTS students' expectations were fulfilled to a greater extent. The study also concluded that the students of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT adjusted their expectations mostly to accommodate to the demands made by test tasks. Generally, the class activities and the expectations of both groups were more influenced by negative washback of the tests. However, IELTS seemed to promote more positive washback on students' expectations and class activities.

Keywords: class activities, IELTS, students' expectations, methodological triangulation, TOEFL iBT, washback

The notion of washback is commonplace in the educational and applied linguistics literature. There is a widespread belief that tests have impact on teachers, classrooms, and students, and that such impact is usually perceived to be negative. As Alderson (2004) suggests, the phenomenon is a hugely complex matter and very far from being a simple case of tests having negative impact on teaching. "The question today is not 'does washback exist?' but much rather what does washback look like? What brings washback about? Why does washback exist" (p. ix).

It is useful to make a distinction between students and other stakeholders since the washback processes that influence students will directly affect language learning (or non-learning), while the influences on other stakeholders will affect efforts to promote language learning. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), the students themselves can be affected by “1) the experience of taking and preparing for the test; 2) the feedback they receive about their performance on the test; and 3) the decisions that may be made about them on the basis of the test” (p. 31).

Many educationalists have written about the power of tests over what takes place in the classroom. Where a test is used for selection, candidates attempt to gain the skills they believe necessary to succeed on the test. It is believed that working on test-taking skills, test format, and sample test is likely to boost the scores but unlikely to promote general understanding of the students. This idea is supported by Cheng and Curtis (2004) who point out that “performing well on a test does not necessarily indicate good learning or high standards, and it only tells part of the story about the actual teaching and learning” (p. 17).

Madaus (1988) argues that the long-term effects of negative washback are profound in a high-stakes situation, and eventually a commercial industry would develop to prepare students for it. That is why expensive preparation courses that prepare students only for the tests come out where high-stakes tests are the major components of an educational policy. Due to the negative washback effect, test takers seem to improve their test-taking strategies rather than their genuine English proficiency in order to obtain a certain range of scores on some of the standardized EFL tests.

Spratt (2005) raises the interesting possibility that one reason why some teachers tend to rely more heavily on exam preparation materials and test-like activities might be because they try to fulfill students’ expectations. Lumley and Stoneman (2000) found that the students were more concerned with familiarizing themselves with the test format and seemed to be less concerned with the broader suggestions for improving their language performance. That’s why teachers teach to the test since they may wish to fulfill students’ expectations or their presumed expectations. In relation to this, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) identified that the teachers in their study believed “it was the learners who drove the methodology by insisting on doing practice tests and TOEFL-like items” (p. 285).

In Iran, IELTS and TOEFL iBT are utilized to measure the EFL proficiency required to attend a university or to facilitate immigration to an English speaking country. Some universities may require the tests to qualify candidates for higher education. Therefore, many candidates take either IELTS or TOEFL iBT for the above reasons in test centers in different cities across the country, which administer the tests on a regular basis. Some attend relevant preparation courses to obtain a certain range of

scores which is deemed a prerequisite to successful education, graduation, employment, immigration, promotion, etc.

Since both IELTS and TOEFL iBT, focusing on communicative competence, are anticipated to have a positive washback effect on how English is taught and learned, this study was carried out to investigate how much students' expectations and class activities in preparation courses of IELTS and TOEFL iBT were diverted from mainstream, well-designed language proficiency classes built around communicative competence into unproductive test taking strategies and sample test exercises. If teachers do not teach communicatively in IELTS and TOEFL iBT preparation courses, is it the fault of the teachers, or is it the fault of the students who expect a certain kind of teaching? To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there any significant difference between the students' expectations of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT preparation courses?
2. Is there any significant difference between the class activities and the students' expectations of the IELTS preparation courses?
3. Is there any significant difference between the class activities and the students' expectations of the TOEFL iBT preparation courses?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 100 IELTS students at Safir Language Institute, and 120 TOEFL iBT students at Aryanpour Language Institute in Tehran who took the questionnaire survey. A sample of their five IELTS and five TOEFL iBT classes was also observed. The demographic features of both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students regarding their educational status, age, and the reasons for taking the courses are illustrated in the following Tables:

Table 1. *Frequency of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Educational Status*

	Diploma or below	B.A. or B.S.	M.A. or M.S.	Ph.D.	Missing	Total
IELTS	12	45	16	7	18	98
iBT	3	42	49	4	19	117

Table 2. *Frequency of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Age*

	20 and below	21-30	31-40	Above 40	Missing	Total
IELTS	12	58	22	1	5	98
iBT	5	99	8	-	5	117

Table 3. *The IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Reasons for Taking the Courses*

<i>About the reasons for taking the preparation course</i>	<i>IELTS Students</i>	<i>iBT Students</i>
1. I am taking the course because I want to get a good grade on IELTS/TOEFL iBT.	80.6%	91.5%
2. I am taking the course because I want to learn useful skills for studying at the university in Iran.	11.2%	11.1%
3. I am studying on this course because I want to improve my general ability to use English.	65.3%	63.2%
4. I am required to take the course by my employer or other authorities.	12.2%	12.8%
5. I am going to attend a college/university in an English speaking country.	59.2%	86.3%
6. I am going to immigrate to an English speaking country.	60.2%	48.7%

Instrumentation

The students' questionnaire for those attending IELTS/ TOEFL iBT preparation courses was used. The closed-ended items of the questionnaire were on a five-point Likert Scale of frequency. The checker items, restated in slightly different forms to evaluate consistency in responses, were also included. The items were mostly taken from Hawkey (2006) and Green (2007). The questionnaire contained three parts. Part I gathered information about the students' educational status, age, and their reasons for taking the test, already illustrated in Tables 1 to 3. Part II, with 13 items, asked about the students' expectations of preparation courses. The data gathered from this part were analyzed to find out whether the students held the same expectations of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT preparation courses. Part III, with 13 items, provided information about learning activities in preparation courses. The data collected from Parts II and III were analyzed to compare the differences between the class activities and the students'

expectations of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT preparation courses. At the end of the questionnaire students were asked to write their comments on the courses.

Procedure

At the outset of the study a pilot study was conducted with 30 IELTS and TOEFL iBT students which led to the elimination and modification of some items. Then, the participants of the study were asked to complete the questionnaires. In terms of questionnaire development, qualitative input ensured the content validity. Factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha were also employed to ensure the construct validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability indices for IELTS and iBT questionnaires were estimated 0.71 and 0.85, respectively. Each section of both questionnaires met the three assumptions of singularity, sampling adequacy, and multi-collinearity. The students' responses to closed-ended items were analyzed through descriptive statistics and Chi-square.

Since the responses to questionnaire items may not always reflect what participants actually think, feel, or do, it seemed that a check was needed on the veracity of the responses. This was achieved through the students' written open-ended comments on their courses and class observations which made the design of the study a methodological triangulation in which more than one procedure is used for eliciting data following Bailey's (1999) argument regarding the incorporation of triangulation in any investigation of washback. The comments of the participants at the end of the questionnaires were analyzed twice for two different purposes; first, to identify the relevant categories and, second, to count the frequency of occurrences which belonged to each of the derived categories. Then the most frequent categories were reported.

Then five IELTS classes of the Academic training Reading, Academic training Writing, General training Writing, Speaking, and Listening, and also five TOEFL iBT classes of Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Vocabulary were observed, video and audio recorded. During the observations, various classroom events were written down in detail on a note-taking sheet. Each observation session lasted for about 100 minutes. All class observations were held in 2010. As a part of validation process, class observations made a useful check on whether the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT classes displayed features similar to those described in the questionnaire responses by the students. The transcriptions of classroom events were analyzed to verify their claims on class activities in their preparation courses.

The qualitative analysis of class observations involved reviewing the notes and filling in the necessary information through reading the notes, watching the videos, and listening to the voice recordings. The

interpretation of the meaning of behaviors described was deferred until a later time, because it is believed that simultaneous recording and interpretation often interfere with objectivity (Best & Khan, 1989). The transcriptions of classroom discourse were analyzed to categorize the characteristic features of classroom events. Then the approximate duration of each activity was calculated as a percentage of total class time.

Results

(A) The Results of Quantitative Analysis Based on the Questionnaire's Items

To investigate the first research hypothesis, the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students' answers to the expectations items of the questionnaire were analyzed. As revealed in Table 4, the IELTS students held higher expectations (81.2 percent) of their preparation courses than the TOEFL iBT students did (73.5 percent). The figures always show the combined categories of "quite a lot" and "very much" in all Tables of percentages.

Table 4. *Frequency and Percentage of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Expectations Items*

		NOT AT ALL	NOT REALLY	Undecided	QUITE A LOT	VERY MUCH	TOTAL
IELTS	Count	13	57	164	525	486	1245
	% within TESTS	1.0%	4.6%	13.2%	42.2%	39.0%	100.0%
TOEFL iBT	Count	56	275	428	1175	928	2862
	% within TESTS	2.0%	9.6%	15.0%	41.1%	32.4%	100.0%
Total	Count	69	332	592	1700	1414	4107
	% within TESTS	1.7%	8.1%	14.4%	41.4%	34.4%	100.0%

Table 5. *Chi-square of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Expectations Items*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	44.643	4	.000

As Table 5 displays, the higher obtained value of Chi-square (44.64) than its critical value (9.49) at 4 degrees of freedom indicates that there is a significant difference between the students' expectations of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT preparation courses.

As for nonparametric analyses, summaries of the percentages of responses to each item seemed necessary to validate the results of qualitative analysis of the study.

Table 6. *A Comparison between the Percentage of the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Expectations Items*

<i>Students' Expectations Items</i>	<i>IELTS Students</i>	<i>iBT Students</i>
1. I expect to learn about the test format.	93.8%	90.6%
2. I expect to go for broader suggestions on improving language performance.	72.7%	68%
3. My immediate goal of English learning on this course is to obtain a high score on the test.	88.8%	93.9%
4. I expect to take practice tests in this course.	86.7%	91.4%
5. I expect the activities they perform in the course to be similar to those on the test.	91.8%	92.2%
6. I expect to find better ways of leaning English.	81.4%	73.7%
7. I expect the teacher to tell them exactly what to do on the test.	88.8%	81.7%
8. I expect to learn ways of improving English language test scores.	98%	94%
9. I expect to develop their ability to communicate in a natural setting.	82.1%	73%
10. I expect to capture the integrated nature of the use of skills in academic settings.	79.8%	76.7%
11. I expect more opportunities for questioning.	75.5%	57.9%
12. I expect to perform the tasks that require complex thinking or problem-solving.	66%	57.9%
13. I expect to spend more time on pair and group work.	48.5%	33%

Table 6 shows that both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students had high expectations of their relevant courses. However, most of the expectations items were selected by higher percentages of the IELTS students than the TOEFL iBT students. The higher expectations of both groups were learning the ways of improving language tests scores, learning about format of the test, and performing activities similar to the tests. However, the lower percentages of both groups expected to perform the tasks that require complex thinking, and to spend more time on pair and group work in their relevant courses.

To answer the second research question, the IELTS students' responses to the expectations and class activities items of the questionnaire were analyzed. As presented in Table 7, the IELTS students' expectations were well beyond the class activities carried out in their classes. While 81.2 percent of the IELTS students held higher expectations of their courses, for 58.3 percent of the IELTS students there was a correspondence between the class activities and their expectations of preparation courses.

Table 7. *Frequency and Percentage of the IELTS Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectations Items*

		SECTION * CHOICES Cross tabulation						
		CHOICES					TOTAL	
		NOT AT ALL	NOT REALLY	Undecided	QUITE A LOT	VERY MUCH	L	
SECTION	EXPECTATIONS	Count	13	57	164	525	486	1245
		% within SECTION	1.0%	4.6%	13.2%	42.2%	39.0%	100.0%
	CLASS ACTIVITIES	Count	54	144	400	586	252	1436
		% within SECTION	3.8%	10.0%	27.9%	40.8%	17.5%	100.0%
	Total	Count	67	201	564	1111	738	2681
		% within SECTION	2.5%	7.5%	21.0%	41.4%	27.5%	100.0%

Table 8. *Chi-square of the IELTS Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectations Items*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	226.58 ^a	4	.000

Table 8 indicates that the observed value of Chi-square (226.58) exceeded its critical value (9.49) at 4 degrees of freedom, which suggests that there is a significant difference between the class activities and the students' expectations of the IELTS preparation classes.

Table 9. *A Comparison between the Percentage of the IELTS Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectations Items*

<i>Class Activities Items</i>	<i>Students' Expectations</i>	<i>Class Activities</i>
1. Working on the test format.	93.8%	83.7%
2. Improving language performance	72.7%	53.6%
3. Learning how to obtain a high score on the test	88.8%	39.6%
4. Taking practice tests in the course	86.7%	73.4%
5. Working on the test content	91.8%	57.3%
6. Developing skills with a use beyond the course	81.4%	43.6%
7. Working on test taking strategies	88.8%	70.1%
8. Receiving feedback in the form of the test band score	98%	55.3%
9. Developing ability to communicate interactively in Natural setting	82.1%	51.6%
10. Working on integrated skills	79.8%	55.7%
11. Opportunities for questioning	75.5%	75%
12. Performing tasks that require complex thinking or problem solving	66%	55.2%
13. Spending time on pair and group work	48.5%	29.2%

Table 9 suggests that the IELTS students had higher expectations of the preparation courses than what they claimed about the class activities. A closer look at Table 9 reveals that the IELTS students' expectations of working on the test format, taking practice test, and opportunities for questioning were the most fulfilled in their classes. However, their expectations of learning how to obtain a high score on the test, receiving feedback in the form of the test band scores, and developing skills with a use beyond the courses were fulfilled the least in their classes.

To investigate the third research hypothesis, the TOEFL iBT students' responses to the class activities and the expectations items of the questionnaire were analyzed. As demonstrated in Table 10, the TOEFL iBT students' expectations were well beyond the class activities carried out in their preparation courses. While 75.8 percent of the TOEFL iBT students held high expectations of their preparation course, for 40.7 percent of the TOEFL iBT students there was a correspondence between their expectations and the class activities carried out in their classes.

Table 10. *Frequency and Percentage of the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectations Items*

		SECTION * CHOICES Cross tabulation						
		CHOICES						
			NOT AT ALL	NOT REALLY	Undecided	QUITE A LOT	VERY MUCH	Total
SECTION	EXPECTATIONS	Count	26	123	211	625	504	1489
		% within SECTION	1.7%	8.3%	14.2%	42.0%	33.8%	100.0%
SECTION	CLASS ACTIVITIES	Count	230	334	442	489	201	1696
		% within SECTION	13.6%	19.7%	26.1%	28.8%	11.9%	100.0%
SECTION	Total	Count	256	457	653	1114	705	3185
		% within SECTION	8.0%	14.3%	20.5%	35.0%	22.1%	100.0%

Table 11. *Chi-square of the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectations Items*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	477.09 ^a	4	.000

Table 11 reveals that the observed value of chi-square (477.09) was higher than its critical value (9.49) at 4 degrees of freedom, which leads to the conclusion that there is a significant difference between the class activities and the students' expectations of the TOEFL iBT preparation classes.

Table 12. A Comparison between the Percentage of the TOEFL iBT Students' Responses to the Class Activities and the Expectation Items

<i>Class Activities Items</i>	<i>Students' Expectations</i>	<i>Class Activities</i>
1. Working on the test format.	90.6%	57.6%
2. Improving language performance	68%	38.8%
3. Learning how to obtain a high score on the test	93.9%	27.7%
4. Taking practice tests in the course	91.4%	63.2%
5. Working on the test content	92.2%	75.7%
6. Developing skills with a use beyond the course	73.7%	16.2%
7. Working on test taking strategies	81.7%	48.2%
8. Receiving feedback in the form of the test band score	94%	27.5%
9. Developing ability to communicate interactively in Natural setting	73%	19.2%
10. Working on integrated skills	76.7%	37.3%
11. Opportunities for questioning	57.9%	80.4%
12. Performing tasks that require complex thinking or problem solving	57.9%	27.7%
13. Spending time on pair and group work	33%	9.5%

As presented in Table 12, the percentages of the responses of the TOEFL iBT students indicated that they had higher expectations of the preparation courses than what they claimed they really faced in the classes. While the TOEFL iBT students' expectations of receiving feedback in the form of test band scores, developing skills with a use beyond the course, and developing ability to communicate interactively were fulfilled the least, their expectations of opportunities for questioning, and working on test content were fulfilled the most in their courses.

(B) The Results of the Students' Comments Analysis

The analysis of the students' comments about their preparation courses at the end of the questionnaires showed that both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students mostly believed that the courses did not help them to become proficient in the English language and what they learned was a number of strategies used for test taking. However, they assessed these courses useful for taking the test. Both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students pointed out that they needed more opportunities to interact with the teachers. A few TOEFL iBT students said that they needed test format and test content information more, and that their classes were teacher-centered.

Table 13. *Test-Related Activities as a Percentage of Total Class Time*

Behavior Observed	Approximate IELTS Classes	Approximate iBT Classes
Giving instruction on content of the test	7	6
Giving instruction on format of the test	4	8
Working on assignment and giving feedback on the correct forms	7	7
Giving feedback on the test scores	4	3
Working on sample tests and test answers	15	11
Working on test taking strategies	13	11
Working on skills development through test activities	15	7
Working on integrated skills	1	7
Working on test activities/tasks interactively	4	0
Assigning learners in pair and group for test activities	5	0
Asking questions and learners participation	7	6

(C)The Results of Class Observations Analysis

Table 13 suggests that the IELTS courses spent more time on the test related activities than the TOEFL iBT courses. The differences between the two courses in the amount of time spent on giving instruction on the content and the test scores, and working on test taking strategies, were worthy of note. However, the differences between the two were much more evident regarding working on sample tests, test answers, and skills development through test related activities. The surprising differences between the two courses were the amount of time spent working on test task interactively and assigning students in pairs and groups for test activities in the sense that while there were considerable amount of these activities in the IELTS classes, they were completely absent in the TOEFL iBT classes.

Although teachers were predominant focus of the IELTS courses, they provided ample opportunity for the students to interact. Communicative activities in line with the test task and working in pairs and groups were evident in these classes. In the TOEFL iBT courses, teachers dominated talking time; thus there was too little opportunity for the students to create their own interactions which left students inactive as well.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed not only the types of expectations the students brought to the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT preparation courses, but also obvious commonalities and discrepancies between their expectations and the class activities carried out during the courses. Questionnaire data

confirmed that, in both preparation courses, students highly expected test-taking practice and activities that emulated the IELTS or the TOEFL iBT test tasks. This reflected obvious evidence of negative washback of the two tests on the students' expectations which can be supported by the findings of Lumley and Stoneman (2000).

The analysis of the questionnaires' data and class observations showed that there were substantial areas of common practice between the two courses. Most of the class time in both courses was spent working on sample tests. This finding, as evidence of negative washback, is supported by the finding of Hawkey (2006). Both class types focused extensively on test format, test taking strategies, test content, and getting high scores on the test. These activities, highly expected by both groups, were characterized as negative washback by Watanabe's (2004) study.

Based on the analysis of the Likert-items and open-ended comments in the questionnaires, it can be discussed that the students of both courses expected the test preparation courses to be instrumental. They were more concerned with strategies for passing the test rather than developing language proficiency. This finding supports the general assertions of Berry and Lewkowicz (2000) about the nature of language test preparation courses that students' expectations may be just concentrated on practicing and mastering item types for the tests and thus they neglect the real business of learning the language.

There were some opportunities for communication, exchange of information and interaction, and assigning the students in pairs and groups to perform test-related tasks in the IELTS classes. The IELTS students also expected these types of activities more than the TOEFL iBT students which were also characterized as positive washback by Watanabe (2004). The development of the skills required by the test through skills building activities is supported by the findings of Green (2007). In other words, the IELTS teachers also fulfilled the students' expectations reflecting positive washback of the test.

Class observations suggested that there was little evidence of assigning the students in pair and group work in TOEFL iBT classes. This finding supports Alderson and Hamp Lyons' (1996) investigation of TOEFL teaching in which the exam classes spent much less time on pair work. On the other hand, the TOEFL iBT students expected these activities less than the IELTS students. Thus, the TOEFL iBT teachers responded to their students' expectations affected by the negative washback of the test.

Small amount of communicative teaching particularly in the TOEFL iBT classes was among the other findings of the study. This contradicts the students' expectations of the amount of work given to the communication ability and language use beyond the course. However, the TOEFL iBT students expected to have more interaction and communicative tasks in

their classes. Therefore, it can be argued that contrary to the findings of Lumley and Stoneman (2000) teachers do not always teach based on the demands and expectations of the students.

As revealed by the students' expectations and class observations, the amount of interactions among students, working on interactive language practice and communication strategies as indicators of positive washback (Watanabe, 2000) was considerably more in the IELTS classes than in the TOEFL iBT courses although these activities did not play a substantial part in any of the courses.

Conclusion and Implications

Generally, both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT students' expectations reflected negative washback of the two tests. On the other hand, class observation analysis, to a great extent, verified their claims regarding the class activities in the sense that the teachers of both courses highly fulfilled the expectations which were influenced by the negative washback more than those affected by positive washback of the test; however, this was less obvious in the IELTS than in the TOEFL iBT classes.

Some implications have emerged from this study at the pedagogical level. The teachers should know the behaviors encouraged by a standardized, high-stakes test like IELTS or TOEFL iBT including those obviously related to the test format such as intensive test practice, and those related to more general language learning strategies, such as spending more time interacting in English. This implies at the same time that the test could encourage both narrow test-preparation strategies as evidence for negative washback and greater engagement in language learning activities as evidence for positive washback.

Teachers should familiarize the students with not only the test format but also the constructs underlying the test design. Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to make students aware of the value of their courses which provide them with learning opportunities besides activities required to obtain the desired scores on the tests. Students must have sufficient understanding of the design of the test and its implications for their learning. The students may assume that reaching the level required for the test indicates their readiness for academic or vocational settings; however, they should expect to have opportunities to go beyond the demands of the test. Further investigation on the attitudes of teachers is suggested to explore whether the way they teach is a reflection of their own beliefs or it is simply a response to the demands of the students. Studies also need to be conducted on the effectiveness of the courses on test performance and the relationship between the candidates' scores on IELTS and TOEFL iBT and their future academic/vocational success.

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