

Washback Effects of IELTS on Students' Emotions and Motivations

Hui Ma

Southeast University

Michelle Meadows

University of Oxford

This research explores the washback effects of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) from the perspective of undergraduate students. The study used a mixed methods approach to investigate how the IELTS effected students' motivations and emotions. Data was collected by an online survey (101 respondents) and group interviews (53 participants). It was found that the IELTS motivated students to learn but it also negatively affected students' emotions. Some students reported experiencing pressure, anxiety and loss of confidence. The paper makes practical recommendations for those who prepare students for high-stakes exams, such as IELTS. Supporting those students who experience high levels of test anxiety would be compassionate and improve the validity of tests used in a high-stakes contexts.

Keywords: washback, IELTS, emotion, motivation, test anxiety

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is endorsed as an English language test by the UK Home Office (Pearson, 2020) and is accepted worldwide by academic institutions, governments and employers as a measure of English proficiency (Dang & Dang, 2021; Pearson, 2021). Within the context of the internationalization of higher education, the IELTS and similar testing systems are increasingly important in determining entry to undergraduate and postgraduate study and progression through courses. Insufficient research has been conducted into the impact of testing from the perspective of test-takers (Elwood et al., 2017; Tsagari, 2013; Tsang & Isaacs, 2021), especially Chinese students (Li, 2019). Further, too few studies have explored test-takers' attitudes and beliefs regarding the IELTS test (Hamid, 2016; 2019; Rasti, 2009). By searching multiple academic datasets, few studies have been found on examining the impact of the IELTS test on Chinese undergraduate students' motivations and emotions within the context of Sino-UK programme in China. Passing the IELTS was high-stakes for these students as it determined whether they could enter their second and third years of study on courses with English

as the medium of instruction (EMI).

Literature Review

Washback

It is well established that testing influences teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Tsagari, 2016). In the wider assessment and language testing literature, this influence is frequently referred to as test "washback." Many studies have investigated the intricate nature of washback, some in relation to teachers and students (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Tsang & Isaacs, 2021), others taking a broader view of education and society (e.g., Tsagari, 2009).

In her washback framework, Bailey (1996) argued that testing can have a direct impact on participants, and that participants' attitudes toward the test can impact the results of their learning. The complex influences that testing can have on teachers and students can be negative or positive. For example, Tsagari (2013) argued that students' intrinsic motivations to learn can be discouraged if teaching and learning are mainly focused on test-taking skills. On the other hand, effective testing can motivate learners and teachers to accomplish their educational goals (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Tsang & Isaacs, 2021; Xie & Andrews, 2013).

Tsang and Isaacs (2021) and Tsagari (2013) argued that investigating the impact that testing has on teaching is

Hui Ma, School of Foreign Languages, Southeast University;
Michelle Meadows, Department of Education, Oxford University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hui Ma, School of Foreign Languages, 2 Southeast University Road, Jiangning, Nanjing, 211189, China. E-mail: huima@seu.edu.cn

important but that researching how testing impacts learning is equally, if not more important because so little is known about students' opinions about testing and how they are influenced by tests. Tsagari and Cheng (2016) highlighted the importance of investigating the effects of testing on students because tests can have serious consequences for them. These include psychological, motivational and emotional effects, which can impact students' test scores (Tsagari, 2013; Tsang et al., 2021).

Students' learning motives, anxiety, pressure and self-confidence, can all shape learning. This is especially true for high-stakes tests, which students believe can determine their future life chances (Putwain, 2009). Sinclair and Larson (2019, p. 249) found that "before, during and after the test administration", high-stakes language tests can impact students. In sum, understanding the impact of any test that is a major entry requirement for a programme of study, such as the IELTS, on students' emotions and motivations is very important (Rea-Dickins, Kiely et al., 2007).

As Watanabe (2004, p. 22) states, teachers' views are "relatively well explored in the area of washback to the program, while less emphasis has been given to learners". Shih (2007, 2009, 2010) has made an important contribution in this area by exploring English language tests' influence on students in the East Asia context. Shih (2007) proposed a further washback framework based on Bailey's original model, as he believed that the current theories and frameworks were not able to account for the impact on students' learning. Shih's framework consists of three types of factors—extrinsic, intrinsic and test related factors. Previous frameworks were more simplistic regarding the effect of these factors (Pan, 2008). Shih argues that the three factors play an important role in students' learning and in their psychology. The factors are interrelated and create the washback of a test on students, in terms of the content of their learning, the time spent in learning, learning strategies, motivation and anxiety.

Shih's framework is in line with Alderson and Wall's (1993) hypothesis that a test will influence the way in which learners learn (the content), the rate and sequence of learning, and learners' attitudes (incorporating anxiety and motivation). Shih's framework shows how test factors interact with individual student characteristics to influence test washback on students' learning and psychology. The framework also shows that test results can reversely influence the intrinsic aspects of students and their subsequent learning.

Motivations

Motivation has been approached from multiple perspectives.

A distinction is often drawn between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the desire to do something because it is interesting, enjoyable, or challenging (Deci & Ryan, 2001). Extrinsic motivation is the wish to carry out activities for reasons other than inner desire (Benson, 2011) and results from influences outside of the activity. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) definition, extrinsic motivation refers to "the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (p. 71). Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, directly enhances academic achievement (for a review, see Hattie, 2009).

Extending this dichotomy, as well as amotivation (i.e., a lack of motivation), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that people may have several different and unique extrinsic reasons to spend their time and energy in specific behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These reasons are referred to as: external (i.e., being pressured by others), introjected (i.e., putting pressure on oneself owing to ego-involvement), identified (i.e., doing something because one finds it meaningful), and integrated regulations (i.e., doing something because it is aligned with one's values and sense of self).

In turn, these complex motivations are affected by a student's learning environment and experiences, and can be influenced by their teachers, peer group, or experience of success or failure (Oxford, 2016). Parents also play an important role in motivating students (Suzuki, 2014). As students come from a variety of backgrounds, their motivation, values, and resources play a crucial role in washback, and should be considered in test design (Green, 2007).

Motivation plays an important role in the test-taking process, especially in the case of high-stakes tests (Wise & Smith, 2016). The greater the test's consequences, the more impact it can have on students (Cheng, 2005). For example, students' motivation can increase because of the anticipated reward in a high-stakes context (Stenlun et al., 2017). However, students' motivation (and confidence) can decrease if they fail many times (Shih, 2007). On the other hand, positive emotions can increase student motivation and support their performance and learning (Bruinsma, 2004; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Motivation is also related to context and culture. In the Chinese context, students do not want to fall behind their classmates and be considered academically weak. This motivates them to learn (Li, 2007).

Emotions

According to Shuman and Scherer emotions are defined as "multifaced phenomena involving sets of coordinated

psychological processes, including affective, cognitive, physiological, motivational, and expressive components” (2014, p. 2). Pekrun (2014) argues that emotions not only control students’ attention, motivate them to learn, and modify students’ learning strategies, they also affect students’ self-regulation of learning. Hence, studying students’ emotions is important because they influence learning and development. Indeed, emotional well-being is important and should be viewed as a goal in itself.

While there has been extensive research into emotions, they have been insufficiently studied in the high-stakes language testing setting. In the studies that exist, the most common emotion experienced by students is anxiety (Gardiner & Howlett, 2006; Pearson, 2019). Test anxiety is generated from test-takers’ fear that they will fail on certain tests or that they do not have sufficient knowledge of the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Test anxiety is an unintended effect of a test. No matter how well it is designed, anxiety and stress will always be generated for some students in certain assessment contexts (Contreras-Soto et al., 2019). This is because students believe the test outcomes can determine their future life chances (Putwain, 2009). These adverse consequences can create negative washback in relation to students’ emotions, which can lead to “feelings of stress, anxiety, boredom and demotivation” (Tsagari, 2009, p. 6).

There is a relationship between test results and students’ feelings (Ata, 2015; Pekrun, 2014). Positive emotions can strengthen students’ motivation and help them in their learning activities and performance (Bruinsma, 2004; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Even negative emotions like anxiety can strengthen a students’ learning efficiency by helping them to focus on certain tasks (Horwitz, 2001).

However, negative emotions like anxiety can grow to such an extent that they reduce students’ desire to achieve and result in poor performance. Indeed, test anxiety is negatively correlated with measures of academic performance (Putwain, 2008; von der Embse, Jester, Roy, & Post, 2018). This is in part because anxiety reduces the working memory capacity of students (Putwain & Symes, 2018) directly limiting their potential performance. But Hembree (1988) and Paris et al. (1991) also found that test anxiety could lead to poor academic performance because, when facing an important test, students of low ability would abandon their efforts and stop learning in order to reduce anxiety and promote self-esteem.

It is important to recognise, though, that the emotional effects of any test will vary between students. They will each perceive different types and levels of washback (Burrow,

2001; Shohamy, 1993). For example, Shih (2007) found a particularly negative impact of the GEPT English test on students’ confidence and motivation in those students who had failed the test three times.

In sum, studies of washback on students’ emotions and motivations, and their perspectives on high-stakes tests, are much needed, not least because they are related to students’ test performances. As high-stakes language tests such as IELTS are popular and influential across the globe, it is important to study the washback of such tests in particular. This study will contribute to understanding of washback effects by addressing the following research question: *What are the washback effects of the IELTS test on students’ motivations and emotions within the context of an English as a medium of instruction programme?*

Methods

Research Setting and Participants

The participants were undergraduate students studying Sino-UK programmes in medicine or biology within a Chinese university. Students who complete the four-year programmes, graduate with certificates from both the Chinese and UK universities involved. Importantly, all of the specialised courses are delivered in English.

Students don’t have to take the IELTS test to be admitted onto the programmes. However, to enter Year 2, they need to achieve an overall IELTS score of 5.5 (representing a modest to competent level of English) at the end of Year 1. To enter courses in which English is the Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Year 3, an IELTS score of 6.0 (competent level) is required. There are no specific requirements relating to the individual IELTS modules (listening, reading, speaking and writing). During Year 1, the university provides at least two hours per day of English teaching to help students improve their English and take the IELTS.

Participants were Mandarin-speaking, Chinese nationals, above the age of 18 who attended the programmes. They were Year 3 and 4 students who had taken IELTS and had achieved an IELTS score of 5.5 or more. Almost all of the participants had been studying English for more than 6 years.

An online survey was responded to by 101 students (response rate = 54.6%, see Table 1) and 53 students participated in group interviews. The interviews were divided into eight groups (see Table 2), each with a mix of male and female students.

Table 1

Student Questionnaire Respondents

Year of study	Total number of students	Respondents	Percentage
Year 3	97	56	57.7
Year 4	88	45	51.1
Total	185	101	54.6

Table 2

Student Interview Participants

Year of study	Group	Male students	Female students
Year 3	G1	3	4
	G2	3	3
	G3	2	5
	G4	1	6
	G5	1	5
Year 4	G6	4	2
	G7	2	5
	G8	2	5

Research Instruments

During the survey design, careful consideration was given to the wording and presentation of the questions. Questions were revised to be as clear as possible and the number of questions tailored to the amount of time that students were likely to give. A mix of multiple choice and scale type items were used. A respondent-friendly layout was adopted. To increase clarity and to avoid a potential confound with English language ability, the survey was written in Chinese. The survey questions were guided by Shih's (2007) framework in order that the full range of contextual influences on students in the research context could be examined.

The interview questions were formulated by considering Shih's (2007) framework of washback factors influencing students' learning, motivations and emotions. A semi-structured approach to the questioning was adopted to balance the need to guide the interviews with the desire to allow participants to raise issues important to them (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). The questions were open-ended and designed to obtain full answers.

Both the survey and interview questions were piloted with three teachers from the university. Suggestions and advice were sought from them, for example, teachers suggested the number of the question items in survey were too many and should be reduced, this led to some unnecessary questions being deleted.

Research Process

The study utilised a mixed-methods approach to support a

full understanding of the data (Creswell, 2017). The survey and interviews were conducted concurrently.

Students were recruited to the survey via their online chat group. They were sent an information sheet outlining the project. Students were asked to complete the survey online. They were reminded that they could quit at any stage of completion.

Interview participants were recruited via the online chat group or their personal tutors. They were told they were able to withdraw at any time. Group interviews, lasting 40–60 minutes, were carried out within the university, at a time and location convenient to the participants. They were conducted in Mandarin. Transcriptions from the interviews were completed immediately after interview completion. They were initially transcribed in Mandarin and then translated into English.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six steps detailed by Nowell et al. (2017) were followed to process the thematic analysis and to ensure its trustworthiness, that is: data familiarisation, the development of initial codes, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and theme reporting (p. 4).

Results and Discussion**Test Taking Motivations and Learning***Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations*

Respondents selected their primary motives for taking the IELTS test (see Table 3).

Table 3

Students' Primary Motives for Taking the IELTS Test

Category	N	%
To get high IELTS scores and enter the special course that is taught in English provided by a joint foreign university	81	80.2
To get the joint foreign university degree	65	64.4
For postgraduate study abroad	55	54.5
To improve my comprehensive ability in English	42	41.6
To stand out in job hunting	30	29.7
For postgraduate study in China	20	19.8
To learn English culture further, to satisfy my own learning interest	14	13.9

Total N = 101

The most common motive was extrinsic—to meet the requirements needed to enrol into the EMI courses (80.2%) and to gain a joint university degree (64.36%). In the interviews, students described these reasons for taking the test:

Example 1

In our college, IELTS is very important, because it decides whether you can enter the course provided by the joint foreign college. For example, we need to pass a certain IELTS score to enter the third year. If you fail to reach that score, you will have to retake the second-year study again. (G4S6)

IELTS is very important because it can decide whether you can graduate with a joint foreign university degree. We have spent so much money on the tuition fees for this degree, if we cannot graduate with a foreign university degree, all the money would be wasted. (G8S5)

These motives were expected as they reflect the policies of the joint college programme in which IELTS has the role of gatekeeper for entrance to the next level of study and graduation. This policy had clearly raised the test stakes and motivated students to learn English.

Another commonly reported motive was in preparation for postgraduate study abroad (54.5%). Indeed, one interviewee (G5S1) reported that students who intend to go abroad to study for postgraduate study must take the IELTS test: “You won’t be able to go aboard to study without IELTS, I want to go aboard for my postgraduate and PhD study, so I definitely need the IELTS score.”

Far fewer students reported the desire to stand out when looking for a job and/or the motive of postgraduate study within China. Interestingly, the motive selected least often by respondents was intrinsic in nature—to satisfy their own learning interests by learning more about English culture (13.9%). In Ryan and Deci’s (2000) typology this might be thought of as an “identified” source of motivation—studying because one finds it meaningful.

Just under half of students (46%) agreed that the attitudes of their parents had influenced their attitudes to the IELTS test (see Table 4). One student said: “Talk about factors affecting my attitudes of learning, that must be my father—he strongly supports my study on IELTS” (G1S1).

Table 4
Percentage of Students Agreeing That Their Parents’ Attitudes Have Influenced Their Attitudes Toward IELTS Test

Category	N	%
Totally agree	17	16.8
Agree	29	28.7
Not sure	27	26.7
Disagree	9	8.9
Totally disagree	19	18.8

Total N = 101

Some students’ attitudes are influenced by their parents and this can sometimes become a source of pressure (what Ryan & Deci (2000) would refer to as external motivation), for example, student G5S7 states that “My parents’ personality belongs to demanding and controlling type. They know more about IELTS than me and kept on telling me that you can do it and you have the ability to get a high IELTS score”. I really do not think I can get a high IELTS score. Most of the pressure is coming from them, they are urging me to take the IELTS... it feels like someone is pushing you to achieve a goal.” Indeed, other studies have also reported that parents play an important role in shaping students’ attitudes and learning, and exercise pressure on them to succeed in examinations (Suzuki, 2014; Tsagari, 2009).

Some students’ learning can also be influenced by their peers. For example, 45% of students agreed or totally agreed that their classmates’ attitudes have influenced their own attitudes toward the IELTS test (see Table 5 below).

Table 5
Percentage of Students Agreeing That Classmates’ Attitudes Have Influenced Their Attitudes Toward IELTS Test

Category	N	%
Totally agree	20	19.8
Agree	25	24.8
Not sure	24	23.8
Disagree	14	13.9
Totally disagree	18	17.8

Total N = 101

Some of the peer influence might be viewed as positive, e.g., “When everyone else is studying English to prepare the IELTS test, you will want to study too” (G4S3); “The attitudes from my classmates can encourage me to study more” (G3S6). However, there was also some evidence of negative effects, e.g., “because no one around me is studying, so I don’t study

either” (G4S4).

Peer influence can also create pressure: “When I am looking at my classmates, I feel huge pressure, they can study IELTS all day. When I cannot do this, I become upset with myself” (G5S2). It seems that some students are motivated not to fall behind their classmates. However, 17.8% of students totally disagreed that their attitudes were influenced by other students’ attitudes. As one student put it: “I belong to the type of simple people—I don’t feel any influence from other people” (G7S4).

Generally, the findings align with Cheng’s (2005) conclusion that the higher the consequences of a test, the greater the impact on students. The IELTS test motivated students to learn, as students explained: “without the pressure of taking the IELTS test, there is no motivation, and you will definitely learn with more effort” (G7S1) and “taking the IELTS test pushed me to learn English, otherwise I would not have been able to work very hard on English in my first two years of university” (G7S3). The motivation of students was high due to the anticipated rewards (Stenlun et al., 2017) and because of the belief that test results would determine their future development (Putwain, 2009). But various other factors, including the wish to study abroad and the desire to improve competency in English itself, also played important roles in motivating the students. As Shih (2007) pointed out, a student’s future development and study plans can have washback on students’ motivations.

Students’ peers also impacted their test-taking and preparation behaviours. When students compared their scores with those of their peers, they felt under pressure and were encouraged to study harder. As Li (2017) observed, Chinese students can be highly motivated by not wanting to fall behind in comparison to their classmates. They do not want to be considered weak students.

Many of the students (41.6%) agreed that a motive for taking the IELTS test was to improve their English comprehension ability. This was also referred to by the interviewees.

Example 2

IELTS gives you a very clear objective. This is a positive influence on English learning because you will understand what level you need to achieve; thus, you will have the motive to improve. (G5S1)

IELTS has given me the motive to learn English. If I were in another university, when I pass Chinese College English test level 4, I won’t need to touch English again.

But now, I have to keep on learning English until I reach the IELTS score requirement of the college. (G1S3)

The majority of students (83.2%) agreed or totally agreed that the IELTS test had made them increase the time they spent studying English and 74.3% of students intended to join or had joined private test training agencies (see Table 6 and Table 7). Interviewees explained, e.g., “During high school, I didn’t spend too much time on learning English. Now, by preparing for the IELTS test, I took this opportunity and spend almost every day on learning English. It has helped me improve my English greatly” (G8S1).

Table 6
Percentage of Students Agreeing That IELTS Made Them Increase Their English Study Time.

Category	N	%
Totally agree	55	54.5
Agree	29	28.7
Not sure	10	9.9
Disagree	3	3.0
Totally disagree	4	4.0

Total N = 101

Table 7
Percentage of Students Who Intended to Join or Had Joined IELTS Test Private Training Agencies.

Category	N	%
No intention	26	25.74
Planning to join	18	17.82
Currently joining	5	4.95
Joined before	52	51.49

Total N = 101

The fact that high-stakes tests can lead to a considerable rise in the test preparation learning is well documented (Gebriel & Eid, 2017). Further, it seems the IELTS test tapped into the intrinsic motivation of students learn English and improve their English proficiency. The IELTS exam can have a positive influence on the development of English skills (Allen, 2016).

Emotions

Emotions During the IELTS Test

Most students (including totally agree and agree 69%) agreed that the IELTS “brought them anxiety” (Table 8). Interviewees talked about this anxiety. For example,

student G1S5 explained that he was so worried that his body was shivering during the test “I felt so nervous that during the oral test part my body was shaking, it was such an awful experience for me”. Another student stated: “I felt a huge anxiety and pressure the first time I took the IELTS test, because I had not prepared. But after the first time, I understood the whole procedure of the IELTS test, plus after taking some IELTS test preparation classes, I no longer felt anxious” (G1S3). Another student (G1S3) also commented that students can feel less pressure if they have taken the test before.

Table 8
Percentage of Students Agreeing That IELTS Made Them Anxious

Category	N	%
Totally agree	43	42.6
Agree	27	26.7
Not sure	20	19.8
Disagree	6	5.9
Totally disagree	5	5.0

Total N = 101

While most students reported experiencing anxiety, they described how it had positive as well as negative effects. For example, some students reported positive effects on test performance: “I felt really anxious, but the more pressure I have, the better performance I can have on the test” (G4S4); “The pressure and anxiety are super huge—you don’t want to experience it a second time. But it can help me to improve my performance a little bit” (G4S5). However, other students reported only negative effects on their emotions and performance, some of which were physiological:

Example 3

When it comes to the test, I feel pressure and anxiety, and it is all about negative effects on me. Because I was supposed to perform well—but when the pressure and anxiety are coming, I cannot hear anything in the IELTS listening part. It caused a really bad impact on my performance. (G4S6)

I felt too nervous to the extent that I could read nothing at the IELTS reading part, so I stopped and tried to breathe. I could not start to take the test after 16 minutes of adjusting my mood. (G4S7)

This study replicates previous findings that students experience panic, anxiety and pressure when taking high-

stakes tests (Pearson, 2019; Putwain, 2009). In Shih’s (2007) terms, this is the washback of the test’s stakes. According to the interview data, some students believe that these negative emotions can improve test performance, while others believe they negatively affect performance. Indeed, the relationship between emotions and performance is complex. Paris et al. (1991) found that test anxiety can lead to poor performance, while Horwitz (2001) argued that anxiety can strengthen a student’s learning efficiency.

Emotions After Receiving the Test Scores

The majority of students (79% see Table 9) said that the test result affected their confidence. As one student said “I failed my oral test last time. It put me off for a while; I dare not to speak and communicate in English to other people” (G1S5). Others said that their confidence increased after getting good test results. For example, G4S1 and G4S2 both reported that: “If the testing result is good, then it can bring me confidence.”

Table 9
Whether IELTS Test Score Can Affect Your Confidence

Category	N	%
Yes	80	79.21
No	21	20.79

N = 101

Some students had taken the IELTS test many times (see Table 11, 32.67% more than 4 times) and could not achieve the score they needed. They reported the affect this had on their confidence: “I have taken the IELTS tests four times and still cannot get the score higher than six, even though each time I felt I was well prepared. This has made me question myself and hurt my confidence” (G5S1). Student G6S6 explained: “For any assessment test, if you achieved a high score, it can make you feel awesome. It shows how good you are at certain aspects. But if you achieved a low score, from an important test like IELTS, it can bring you a sense of loss.”

Table 10
The Number of Times Respondents Had Taken the IELTS Test So Far

Category	N	%
Once	29	28.7
Twice	24	23.8
Three times	15	14.9
More than four times	33	32.7

N = 101

Some students described the emotions they experienced when making comparisons with their peers:

Example 4

We all have a comparing mentality. For example, if I got an IELTS score of 6, while my classmates around me got less than 6, I would be really happy. If people around me all got 7 and I got a 6, then I will feel unhappy. (G8S1)

When I hear that other students have reached the IELTS score requirement, I feel really worried. Some students I know, including myself, cannot sleep at night before the day of the test. Then, of course, the next day's test performance is bad. (G7S2)

Shohamy (1993) points out that different students experience different types of washback from the same test. While some students in this study had positive experiences, others felt reduced confidence, less enjoyment when learning English, and were worried about being anxious during the test and about the test outcome. Negative emotions were mostly reported by students who had continuously failed to achieve the required test scores from the college. Some students said that the greater the number of times they took the test, the more tired they became of learning English. Further, as reported by Li (2007), some students reported the negative impact of comparing their scores with those of their classmates.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the development of the concept of washback and helps us understand the washback of the IELTS test on students' emotions and motivations within a high-stakes context. It is clear that the high-stakes nature of the test had significant negative impact on some students' emotions, causing them anxiety and pressure. However, the test also motivated some students to devote time and energy to learning English, and achieving good test scores was associated with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

This study showed that the college's policy, students' personal factors, students' parental influence and the influence of students' peers are the four most important factors that can generate washback on students' motivations of test-taking. As Shih's (2007) framework pointed out that school's policy, classmates and parents can determine the stakes of a test, which can have direct or indirect washback on students'

learning and affective factors. In this study, students took the IELTS test with different motivations. The major one was the college's policy for students to enter the special courses and achieving the foreign university's degree. Such a requirement made the IELTS test a very high-stakes for students in this research context. This aligns with Shih's finding that school's policy can determine the stakes of a test, which can in turn generate washback on students test-taking motivations.

Due to the high-stakes nature of the IELTS test in this context, students felt anxiety, panic, pressure and loss of confidence from taking the IELTS test. Putwain (2009) found a similar finding in his study that the negative consequence of a high-stakes test can cause stress and anxiety on students. Most students experience passing moments of high anxiety at some point during an evaluative situation. However, the findings suggest that those students who experience consistently high levels of test anxiety would benefit from targeted support. Cognitive behavioural interventions have been shown to result in moderate reductions in test anxiety (Putwain & von der Embse, 2020). They teach students how to challenge worrisome thoughts and break cycles of maladaptive avoidance behaviour often alongside relaxation strategies and study-skills training (Flaxman et al., 2003).

Such interventions would not only be a compassionate response, they would improve the validity of IELTS in this high-stakes context. Ensuring that all students are able to show what they know, understand and can do is a key part of the validity of any assessment (Newton & Shaw, 2014). Test anxiety is negatively correlated with measures of academic performance, including test scores (Putwain, 2008; von der Embse, Jester, Roy, & Post, 2018). It is believed that this is not simply because less able students are more anxious but because anxiety reduces working memory capacity (Putwain & Symes, 2018). Thus, test anxiety represents a significant threat to test validity.

This study has made a contribution to the field of language testing by exploring the complicated washback effects of a widely used high-stakes IELTS test from students' perspective. What this study has also shown is that students' perspectives are important because they are a major stakeholder in testing systems, and knowing more of their views and opinions can influence how such systems are improved and made more valid. In addition, as the joint college, the parents and students' peer classmates can all affect students' emotions and motivations, this study has also made arguments as to how these factors are also pertinent to any understanding of how IELTS tests operate in practice. There is a lack of research of

the washback effects of IELTS tests in joint college setting in the Chinese context, which this study tries to fill this gap.

A mixed-method approach was used to allow a deeper understanding and some triangulation of results. However, there were limitations related to the scope, transferability, and generalisability of the research. The study involved a limited number of participants and data were collected from just one Chinese joint college. Although the response to the survey was high for this kind of study, ideally more data would be collected from a range of joint colleges.

The study intentionally focused on the perspective of students. However, other stakeholders such as test developers, teachers, and employers may also have experiences and perspectives that could contribute to the understanding of the washback effects caused by the IELTS test. Further, to explore the complex IELTS test washback effects, future research could comprise a longitudinal study and could include the perspectives of students who haven't yet taken the IELTS test or students who failed to enter the EMI courses.

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