

A Study on the Washback Effect of Classroom Teaching Demonstrations on the Development of Oral English Proficiency among English Majors

Benzhi Shao*

School of English Studies, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, Liaoning, 116044, China

ABSTRACT

The washback effect of language testing constitutes a significant topic in foreign language teaching research, with its bidirectional impact on teaching and learning attracting considerable attention. This study examines the washback effect and underlying mechanisms of performance-based assessment tasks on the development of oral English proficiency, focusing on the "classroom teaching demonstration" task in a "Classroom Management" course for third-year English majors at a university in Northeast China. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal that the classroom teaching demonstration task significantly enhanced students' confidence in English expression, accuracy of pronunciation and intonation, content organization skills, and interactive abilities. Moreover, the task prompted students to actively adjust their learning strategies, including reflecting on weaknesses, engaging in deliberate practice, and emulating proficient demonstrators. The results demonstrate that performance-based classroom assessment tasks serve as an effective means to improve students' oral English proficiency, offering both theoretical and practical implications.

KEYWORDS

Washback effect; Language proficiency; English majors

1 Introduction

Washback effect has long been a hot topic and a focus of English Language Testing. It refers to the impact of language testing on language teaching and learning in terms of education. It can help learners to formulate self-assessment and to set down strategy of self-regulation. This paper, taking "Classroom Teaching Demonstration" tasks implemented by English juniors from a certain university in northeast China in the course Classroom Management as an example, deeply delving into the influence of varieties of the performance-based tasks on English majors' language proficiency through questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

2 Literature review

2.1 An overview of washback effect

The washback effect refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning activities. This concept was first systematically introduced by Alderson & Wall (1993) and further explored by scholars such as Hughes (2003). Rashidi & Javanmardi (2011), in their study on IELTS test preparation, found that the presence of testing objectives guided the focus and adaptation of classroom instruction and learning strategies, demonstrating a mixed pattern of both positive and negative washback effects. Salmani Nodoushan (2021), in a comparative analysis of EFL test washback across different contexts, argued that washback should be understood as a multidimensional and dynamically interactive process, whose manifestations depend on factors such as test type, assessment criteria, teacher beliefs, and learner perceptions.

Chinese researches on washback have also seen growing interest. For instance, Amp & Jinding (2004) examined the impact of the CET-SET (College English Test-Spoken English Test) on university students' learning behaviors, revealing that test-takers increased their focus on communication strategies and fluency during preparation. Similarly, Wang Yongshuang (2012) and Zheng Liping (2013), through empirical studies on the TEM4-Oral (Test for English Majors-Band 4 Oral Test), demonstrated its role in enhancing students' test preparation strategies and learning motivation. Their findings suggest that test content selection and feedback mechanisms play a crucial moderating role in determining the direction of washback effects.

2.2 Performance-based assessment and teaching demonstration tasks

Performance-based assessment emphasizes evaluating students' language proficiency through authentic, contextualized tasks, serving as an important complement to traditional multiple-choice testing. As noted by Fröhlich (2010) and Ferman (2004), oral assessments, as a typical form of performance-based tasks, can effectively capture learners' actual language output and communicative strategies, demonstrating high validity and real-world relevance. Cui Jing (2010)'s research on TEM4 oral instruction further indicates that incorporating performance-based speaking tasks in the

classroom helps teachers focus on students' practical communicative competence rather than merely grammatical or lexical knowledge.

Sukyadi & Mardiani (2011), in their study of Indonesia's national English examination, observed that when teaching tasks align with assessment tasks, instructors are more likely to adopt interactive, task-based activities to enhance students' oral proficiency. Similarly, Luo Shaoqian (2002) argued that integrating performance-based assessment into task-oriented language teaching not only increases student engagement but also strengthens their adaptability to real-world communicative contexts.

2.3 Research on the impact of teaching tasks on oral proficiency

Existing studies on the influence of teaching tasks on oral proficiency development have primarily focused on task characteristics, learner strategies, and feedback mechanisms. Zhang & Tian (2021) investigated the long-term washback effects of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) English listening and speaking test, finding that students preparing for such tasks tend to engage in self-directed practice and imitate model expressions, thereby improving pronunciation, intonation, and discourse organization. Ferman (2004) also highlighted that task clarity and teachers' feedback strategies are critical factors in enhancing students' output competence. BHZ A & BBT (2021) explored the lasting impact of China's Gaokao English speaking test on university-level English learning, noting that students retained task-based preparation strategies (e.g., oral journaling, self-assessment) even in higher education. Additionally, Sukyadi & Mardiani (2011) demonstrated that assessment rubrics attached to tasks encourage students to balance linguistic accuracy and communicative strategies, ultimately improving oral performance.

Despite extensive research on washback effects in language testing, current literature predominantly examines standardized testing contexts, such as IELTS (Rashidi & Javanmardi, 2011), TEM4-Oral (Wang, 2012; Cui Jing, 2010), and CET Spoken Test (Amp & Jinding, 2004), with limited attention to performance-based tasks in classroom settings. Specifically, integrated tasks with high authenticity—such as simulated teaching demonstrations that merge language use with professional skills—remain understudied within the framework of language testing and washback. Moreover, existing research primarily targets exam-oriented learners, including non-English majors (Zhang & Tian, 2021) and secondary school students (Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011), while neglecting the dynamic development of oral proficiency among English majors, particularly those in teacher education programs. Most studies analyze washback through test-preparation behaviors (e.g., practice frequency, strategy selection), yet few explore how performance-based tasks, through iterative practice and evaluative feedback, foster advanced oral competencies—especially pedagogical oral expression.

To address these gaps, this study employs classroom teaching demonstrations by English majors as a research context. Grounded in washback theory, it investigates the mechanisms and manifestations of such tasks in shaping students' oral proficiency development. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the literature on task typology, target learners, and methodological approaches, while enriching the practical application of washback theory in localized educational contexts.

3 Research design

3.1 Research question

This study adopted a mixed methodology, selecting the junior English education majors from the two parallel classes in a certain university in northeast China. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and the semi-structured interview of 6 students was recorded, transcribed and then coded to collect qualitative data. Through Excel, both of the data were collected and analyzed to answer questions as follows:

- (1) Does classroom teaching demonstration tasks promote English majors' oral proficiency?
- (2) How do students regard teaching demonstration task as a performance-based assessment in terms of its influence on oral proficiency?

3.2 The teaching demonstration task on the course classroom management

Classroom management is a compulsory course at the sixth semester for students whose focus are English education, with its main contents are rules of classroom management, practices of classroom management and practices of classroom observation. Teaching demonstration task is a mandatory task for this class, accounting for 20% for the final score (the final score of this class is 100 points). Each group should firstly select a passage from the FLTRP Grade 8 English Textbook (Second Semester), then design project paper and class activities in alignment with the selected passage. Each group is required to solely use English during their demonstration. When the group is doing the situational teaching

demonstration, their classmates should imitate the vocabularies and oral proficiency as a eighth grade student and can make mistakes such as false pronunciation, misunderstanding of the showing groups' directions to set barriers for the showing group. The showing group should address these challenges in English.

3.3 Research participants

The participants of this study were two parallel classes of third-year English majors with a focus on education at a provincial university in northeast China, coded class 1 and 2 respectively. A total of 52 students were involved, including 46 females and 6 males, aged between 20 and 22. In the public course "Classroom Management," students were divided into eight groups to conduct "Classroom Teaching Demonstrations" during the 13th, 14th, 16th, and 17th weeks of the semester. Additionally, 43 participants had passed the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM-4), indicating that their overall English proficiency met or exceeded the TEM-4 level.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was released in the 14th, 15th, 17th and 18th weeks of the semester to make clear of the showing group's self-assessment of the influence of the teaching demonstration task. Besides, 6 students were selected to participate in the interview. The contents were recorded, coded and then analyzed by Excel to collect qualitative data.

4 Results

4.1 Analysis of questionnaire

A total of 52 samples were successfully collected. Based on the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire, the findings provide clear evidence that classroom teaching demonstration tasks have a generally positive impact on the oral English proficiency of English majors. Among the 52 respondents, a significant majority expressed agreement that such tasks enhanced various aspects of their spoken English performance. Specifically, 73.08% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their confidence in using English increased as a result of participating in teaching demonstrations, suggesting that the task helped reduce anxiety and promote a more positive attitude toward oral expression.

In terms of practice behavior, 78.85% of respondents reported being more active in practicing spoken English during the preparation process, indicating that the task encouraged more focused and sustained engagement with oral language use. Furthermore, 80.77% acknowledged that they paid greater attention to pronunciation, intonation, grammar, and overall language accuracy, reflecting the task's role in promoting form-focused learning. In response to whether the task helped students organize their speech more clearly and logically, 84.61% responded positively, highlighting the contribution of the activity to the development of discourse organization and coherence.

Additionally, 80.77% believed they could interact effectively with their audience during the demonstration, pointing to an improvement in interactive speaking skills. Importantly, 73.07% of students noted that the task made them more aware of their spoken English weaknesses, demonstrating that the task encouraged self-monitoring and critical reflection. While 63.46% agreed that the task enhanced their motivation to learn spoken English, fewer students (48.08%) reported that they continued to practice speaking after the task was completed, suggesting that the motivational effect may have been more immediate than long-term.

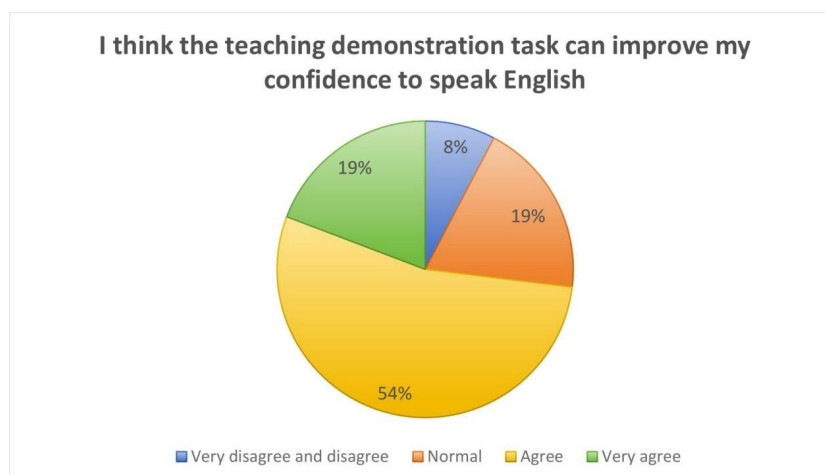


Figure 1 Results of the item "I think teaching demonstration tasks can improve my confidence to speak English"



Figure 2 Results of the item "I think the teaching demonstration task can enhance my motivation to speak English"

4.2 Analysis of interview

Six students were invited to finish an interview after a random selection, three of whom are from class 1 while the other 3 from class 2. The three students from class 1 finished their teaching demonstration tasks in the 13th week of the semester. The three students from class 2 finished their teaching demonstration tasks in the 14th week of the semester. The researcher conducted an interview in the 14th and the 15th week respectively one week after their tasks.

During the interview, all of the 6 students confirmed that teaching demonstration tasks could improve their oral proficiency. They considered it forced them to keep practicing oral speaking everyday before the tasks, and it played a positive role in improving their awareness of learning oral English. Besides, one student mentioned that her preparation of the tasks assisted her in making preparations for the teacher qualification certificate because she accessed to some professional words such as present perfect tense, participles which might significantly help her pass the examination.

However, negative feelings were also seen during the interview. One student argued that the teaching demonstration task may prohibit her academic development, because she didn't learn anything about designing activities and writing project paper before. Too much time poured in its preparation and high-degree mental pressure hindered her focusing on her professional learning. What's worse, one of the participants even said the teaching demonstration task was solely a impractical activity, for students didn't know whether the pronunciation would be evaluated, rendering students' unbalanced concentration on the content only but with the ignorance of practicing pronunciation.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that classroom teaching demonstration tasks, as a form of performance-based assessment, exert a clear positive washback effect on English majors' oral English proficiency. This aligns with previous research on oral testing washback, such as Amp & Jinding (2004) and Wang (2012), who found that speaking-oriented tasks can enhance learners' communicative strategies and speaking confidence. In this study, over 70% of participants reported increased self-confidence, attention to pronunciation and grammar, and improved discourse organization during the preparation and execution of the teaching demonstrations. These results support Rashidi & Javanmardi's (2011) assertion that test tasks with communicative purposes trigger more focused, form-attentive, and sustained practice behaviors.

The qualitative findings from interviews further reveal that the demonstration task stimulated autonomous learning strategies, such as daily oral practice, self-correction, and peer modeling. This corresponds with the long-term washback observed in BHZ A & BBT (2021), where tertiary students continued using exam-derived strategies in university contexts. However, a notable contribution of this study lies in highlighting how integrated, professionally oriented tasks—like simulated teaching—can motivate learners not only to improve linguistic performance but also to connect language use with professional competencies (e.g., classroom management expressions, teacher talk), thereby extending the scope of washback to domain-specific oral discourse.

Despite the overall positive impact, some participants expressed concerns about time consumption, mental stress, and the ambiguity of evaluation criteria, echoing Salmani Nodoushan's (2021) claim that unclear assessment design may dilute washback effects or even induce anxiety. Additionally, the motivational impact appeared to be short-term for some students, with less than half continuing oral practice post-task, suggesting that sustained washback may require systematic integration of such tasks and consistent feedback mechanisms, as advocated by Ferman (2004) and Sukyadi & Mardiani (2011).

However, this study also has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and limited to two classes from a single university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study focuses only on short-term outcomes; the long-term impact of teaching demonstration tasks on oral proficiency remains uncertain and requires further longitudinal investigation. The research's identity of a student, limited efforts to track a long-term impact has made it highly difficult to probe into its long-term effect. Thirdly, the principle or the standards to assess one's language proficiency or to assess one's changes in language proficiency is yet unknown, which might affect the precision of the research results.

6 Conclusion

This study, taking a certain teaching demonstration task in the classroom management course as an example, deeply probes into its washback effect on English majors oral proficiency. Statistics reveal that such kinds of performance-based assessments are conducive to improving students' oral proficiency. Positive attitudes and recognition of the influence on their oral proficiency were found during the study, whereas negative feelings such as high-degree anxiety and mental pressure may hinder students from practicing oral English, letting alone the development of oral speaking. However, the findings indicate that teaching demonstration tasks can be adopted to cultivate students' oral proficiency. This study may compensate for research gaps in domestic washback effect researches, which mostly concentrate on standardized tests but scarcely focus on in-class activities.

* **Corresponding Author:** Benzhi Shao, 1742909425@qq.com.

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