

Are teachers test-oriented? A comparative corpus-based analysis of the English entrance exam and junior high school English textbooks

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Abstract. The communicative language teaching approach has dominated English teaching and learning since the 1970s. In Taiwan, standardized and high-stakes English tests also put focus on the assessment of learners' communicative competence. While the test contents change, the modifications teachers made are superficial rather than substantial. A comparative corpus-based analysis of the English test items in Senior High School Entrance Exams (SHSEE) and curriculum-based English textbooks was conducted to provide more valid information for syllabus design, language instruction, and materials development. Two major corpora were compiled: an exam corpus, consisting of English test items in SHSEE from 2001 to 2014 and a junior high school English textbook corpus. AntConc and Readability Test Tool were employed to analyze the frequency of occurrence of the marked structures (relative, adverbial, and passive clauses) in the two corpora. The results showed rare occurrence of the marked structures in SHSEE but much higher frequency in textbooks. Teachers might be textbook-oriented, rather than test-oriented. It was suggested, based on the corpus-based analysis of the native speakers' use, that a grammar list with finer guidelines for the national curriculum and textbook writers should be built. It could provide teachers easily accessible reference in selecting grammatical patterns for teaching.

Keywords: corpus-analysis, test-oriented, backwash, marked structure.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the communicative language teaching approach has dominated the English language teaching and learning in all contexts. Test writers for SHSEE have intended to bring about the positive changes by testing learners' English communicative competence in Taiwan. However, teachers still devote a substantial amount of class time to traditional activities such as textbook explanation or exercises on grammar (Pan, 2011). They also have a propensity to prepare learners for English tests through abundant test-preparation instruction. Although most studies indicate that teachers tend to teach for the test, several studies state that tests do not significantly influence teaching (e.g. Green, 2007); the modifications teachers have made seem to be superficial rather than substantial. Therefore, in this study, we carried out a comparative corpus-based analysis of the English test in SHSEE and curriculum-based English textbooks. This research aimed to examine whether there was a mismatch between what is being taught and tested. The study was designed to address two research questions. First, what is the frequency of occurrence of marked structures in the English exam in SHSEE and the curriculum-based English textbooks? Second, what is the backwash effect of the English exam in SHSEE on teachers' instruction?

2. Method

2.1. Corpus selection

Two main corpora were compiled for the current study. One was CAP corpus, which consisted of all the English test items in SHSEE from 2001 to 2014. The other one is textbook corpora, including Kang-Xiuan Corpus and Han-Lin Corpus, two major versions of junior high school English textbooks in Taiwan. The marked structures (relative, adverbial, and passive clauses) were chosen for the study because they were difficult for Taiwanese learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Chang, 2008). Moreover, teachers firmly believed learners had to master these structures to get higher scores in the entrance exam.

2.2. Data analysis

The corpora were analyzed by using AntConc 3.4.3 (Anthony, 2014) and the Readability Test Tool (Simpson, 2014). The frequency of occurrence of the marked structures in the CAP, Kang-Xiuan, and Han-Lin Corpora was counted. Then, a comparative corpus-based analysis of the collected data was conducted.

3. Discussion

Table 1 showed that the total number of the relative clauses occurring in the CAP corpus is 249. About 98% of them were designed for recognition (reading) and only 2% were for production (writing). The adverbial clauses occurred 106 times but only 1.88% of them were tested for production. The passive clauses appeared 87 times but only 13 occurrences were tested for production. Most of the marked structures were tested for recognition (97%), not for production (3%). The rare occurrence of these complex structures in the English exam was in line with Ellis’s (2012) proposition that frequent and unmarked structures should be acquired first in L2 acquisition.

Table 1. Frequency of the relative, adverbial, and passive clauses in the CAP corpus

Grammatical Patterns	CAP Corpus		
	Tokens for Recognition	Tokens for Production	Total Tokens
A. Relative			
1. that	126	3	129
2. who	65	2	67
3. which	10	1	11
4. whose	1	0	1
5. where	18	0	18
6. how	6	0	6
7. why	17	0	17
B. Adverb			
1. if	87	1	88
2. although	8	1	9
3. though	8	8	9
C. Passive			
1. by	79	8	87
Total	410	16	426

Teachers in Taiwan invested lots of class time to teach these infrequent marked structures, which was believed to help students get higher test scores (Chang, 2008). However, the results revealed the English exam in SHSEE contained a very low proportion of the marked structures. Test takers were rarely required to produce these marked structures, except for recognition. Teaching for the test, at most, means teachers adhered to the test format, rather than the test construct. Such conflict might be attributed to teachers’ incomplete understanding of the nature of the exam, inadequate training, or lack of professional background.

Examining the English textbooks provided another explanation for teachers’ overemphasis on marked structure instruction. Table 2 showed the result of the frequency occurrence of the marked structures in the two most popular

versions of junior high school English textbooks. The frequency of the complex sentence patterns in Kang-Xuan and Han-Lin corpora were 13.63% and 31.77%, respectively. There was an overemphasis on rarely used marked structures in the English textbooks. The results implied teachers might be textbook-oriented, rather than test-oriented. The findings showed the backwash effect, i.e the effect of the examination on classroom methodology and selection of teaching materials, to be limited, although the test construct of the English exam in SHSEE showed marked changes over the past 14 years in Taiwan.

Table 2. Frequency of the relative, adverbial, and passive clauses in the textbook corpora

Grammatical Patterns	CAP			Kang-Xuan	Han-Lin
	Tokens	Non-tested tokens	Tested tokens	Tokens	Tokens
A. Relative					
1. that	129	126	3	89	212
2. who	67	65	2	24	65
3. which	11	10	1	11	31
4. whose	1	1	0	1	3
5. where	18	18	0	7	13
6. how	6	6	0	6	18
7. why	17	17	0	5	7
B. Adverb					
1. if	88	88	0	61	99
2. although	9	8	1	10	19
3. though	9	8	1	1	4
C. Passive					
1. by	87	79	8	51	118
Total	426	410	16	266	589
Total word tokens	55440			49050	48072
Total sentence numbers	6551			7104	7362

4. Conclusion

The results indicated a rare occurrence of the marked structures in the English exam in SHSEE; there was, however, an overemphasis placed on them in the surveyed textbooks. Such information can be vital in designing curriculum, and teachers should use this information to effectively direct their pedagogical focus, since it is not sufficient to change exams. As Cheng (2005) mentioned, an exam on its own cannot bring about change if the educational system has not adequately prepared the teacher. Teachers and language testers should try to make a match between what is tested and what is taught. Chang (2008) contends that positive test effects usually occur when there is a match between test content and curricula. To facilitate EFL learners' acquisition, teachers should avoid overloading learners with infrequent and marked structures. Moreover, teachers should not "blindly"

follow the textbooks. Two pedagogical implications were suggested. First, there is a need to develop a grammar list with clear guidelines for the national curriculum and textbook writers. Second, a distinction should be made between production and recognition structures in the junior high school English textbook. This would provide an easily accessible reference to guide teachers in selecting grammatical patterns for teaching.

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