Exit Exams as Levers for Educational Policies:  
Taiwan’s Attempt at English Proficiency Benchmark Settings

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Abstract

This study explores how 18 administrators from 14 tertiary institutions in Taiwan attempted to mediate between the desires of the government and classroom teachers of non-English-major students regarding a policy of requiring all students to obtain English proficiency certificates. It also examines what prompted 12 such administrators to comply with government directives and six to avoid doing so. In addition, ways in which they sought to fulfill differing—and at times conflicting—stakeholder interests are recounted. The evidence reveals how administrators vary widely in terms of their responses to government mandates.

Keywords: washback, exit exams, test-driven policies, test administration

Introduction

Over the past two decades, researchers such as Bachman (2005), Kane (1992, 2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), McNamara (1998, 2004, 2008), Messick (1989, 1996), and Shohamy (2001a, 2007) have argued that focusing solely on the content and construct validity of a test is insufficient; the consequences of test use must also be considered. Therefore, an increased amount of attention has been devoted to determining how tests influence stakeholders, as the growing body of washback/impact research attests. Previous washback studies have tended to focus on teachers and students, with little scrutiny on how administrators mediate instructional policies, curricula, or learning behaviors. The purpose of this study is to determine why some administrators implemented a test-driven policy while others did not, to ascertain what measures they took, and finally to discuss their perceptions of the policies that were implemented.

Background

The economy of Taiwan is heavily dependent on international trade, the bulk of which is conducted in English (Taiwan Bureau of Foreign Trade, 2008). When considering the importance of English proficiency in Taiwan, government officials have voiced their concern about the feasibility of requiring university/college students to reach a satisfactory level of English proficiency before they graduate. In 2001, Ma Ying-Jiu, the then Mayor of Taipei, suggested that university students should not be allowed to graduate if their proficiency in both Chinese and English is not satisfactory, due to the fact that Taiwan’s competitiveness requires students to be proficient in both languages (Chen & Han, 2001). In the same year, the then Minister of Education, Tzen Zhi-Lang, called for the improvement of the basic English
proficiency of university students and required interested parties to investigate whether it was appropriate to set exit requirements for English (Chen & Han, 2001). In 2003, the subsequent Minister of Education, Huang Rong-Cun, recommended that English exit requirements be established to scrutinize and evaluate whether students attain the English proficiency expected of them by the time they graduate (Yang, 2003).

In 2004, Taiwan’s Education Ministry imposed the “2005–2008 Educational Administrative Action Plan” with the goal of having 50% of its university and college of technology students achieve a level of English proficiency equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A2 Waystage level by 2007. For those unfamiliar with this framework, it can be conceived of as a task-oriented yardstick for measuring foreign language proficiency. Taiwan’s Education Ministry (2004a, 2004b) also set the ambitious goal of increasing the number of English certificate holders among such students by 10% annually. Though neither goal was realized, some administrators attempted to implement policies regarding minimal EFL proficiency benchmarks for graduates.

Under the “2005–2008 Educational Administrative Action Plan”, Taiwan’s Education Ministry has implemented two broad measures regarding tertiary-level English education over the last decade. First, it has encouraged institutes of higher education to require students to take one of the English certification tests in Table 1. The English proficiency tests listed in the table are considered representative of CEFR A2 or B1 levels (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004c).

**Table 1**
The Taiwan Executive Yuan Department of Central Personnel Administration’s 2006 ranking of several current English proficiency tests in terms of two CEFR levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CEFR Level</th>
<th>TOEFL</th>
<th>TOEIC</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>GEPT</th>
<th>CSEPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paper-and-pencil</td>
<td>CBT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2 Waystage</td>
<td>390–456</td>
<td>90–136</td>
<td>350–549</td>
<td>Band 3</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>170–229</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>240 +</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, the Ministry announced that it would distribute funds based upon how many students passed the exams in Table 1, offering rewards to tertiary institutes that performed well (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2007). Since 2004, nearly US$1.2 million has been spent each year assisting technical universities/colleges to create educational resources to supposedly enhance students’ English proficiency (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2008). Hence, there are strong incentives for tertiary institutes to comply with the Ministry’s directive.

In 2012, there are 163 colleges and universities in Taiwan, 77 of which are four-year technical universities/colleges. In 2008, at the time of the study, thirty-one percent ($n = 24$) of these technical universities/colleges claimed to have adopted one of the proficiency tests in Table 1 to fulfill the exit requirements for non-English-major students, and their practice is the focal point of this study. It
should be noted that private institutions have been less willing to follow this government directive than their public counterparts, as shown in Table 2. This is probably due to the fact that they depend less upon government subsidies.

**Table 2**
*Taiwanese 4-Year technical universities/colleges claiming to have English Certification Exit Requirements for non-English Majors in 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>% with Exit Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public tertiary institutes with English certification exit requirements</td>
<td>56% (10 out of 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private tertiary institutes with English certification exit requirements</td>
<td>23% (14 out of 60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Literature Review**

**The Concept of Washback**

In language education, “washback” (Alderson & Wall, 1993) or “backwash” (Biggs, 1995, 1996; Hughes, 2003) is defined as “a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on educational systems in general, and on society at large” (Hughes, 2003, p. 53). To better understand both the scope and mechanism of washback, Pan (2010, p. 57) combined Bachman and Palmer’s concept of micro and macro test effects, Bailey’s basic model of washback, and Hughes’ backwash model (1993) to create the model depicted in Figure 1.

![A proposed holistic model of test effects](image)

**Figure 1.** A holistic model of test effects proposed by Pan (2010)

Test effects at the micro level consist of washback on teaching, learning, teaching materials, and learning outcomes, while test effects at the macro level consist of washback on educational goals and society. The test effects at both levels can be viewed as “consequences”. “Participants” refers to all the stakeholders engaged in the
test or the test-driven policy. “Mechanisms” refers to the procedures of how a given test and its mediating factors interact with participants at both levels.

To date, there have been an overwhelming number of studies on test effects on teachers and learners at the micro level in different contexts such as America (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Saif, 1999, 2006); Australia (Burrows, 1998, 2001, 2004); Europe (Wall & Horak, 2006); Hong Kong (Cheng, 2004, 2005); Japan (Watanabe, 1996, 2004), and Taiwan (Chen, 2002; Chu, 2009; Shih, 2007), but relatively little has been written about test effects at the macro level. As Shih (2010) indicates, “there is a lack of studies on the washback effects of tests on school policies” (p. 286). Therefore, one research gap this study seeks to address is how administrators in the tertiary education sector affect test-driven policies.

**Washback Effects on Educational Policies**

The few washback studies on foreign language policies are discussed below.

Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996) examine the reaction of various stakeholders to a high-stakes English matriculation examination in Israel. They found that the instruction time for oral activities increased and the status of English in school appeared to rise substantially. However, students’ reaction to a low-stakes Arabic exam was contrary. It seems the Arabic test did not match class content, relied heavily on grammar translation, and test scores did not correlate with speaking ability. Despite these limitations, all six interviewed administrators believed both tests had reached their objectives and that curricular revision or teacher training were unnecessary. This highlights how administrators can regard tests as useful levers to implement educational goals, even if other stakeholders do not concur. It also reveals how conflicts can exist between those making test use decisions and those merely following given policies. Shohamy et al. alert us to the possibility of Rashomon-like scenarios in which administrators pronounce a test “successful” while teachers and students hold contrary views.

The conclusions of Shohamy et al. are echoed by Ferman (2004), who documented two Israeli school inspectors implementing a high school EFL exam that was reputed to promote curricular reform. Both inspectors claimed that the new test resulted in tremendous positive effects. Mirroring the Israeli Education Ministry’s claims, they avowed that desired teaching approaches were now more widely employed, and that teacher-centered instruction was less prevalent. However, 94% of the interviewed teachers ($n = 17$) stated the test had no impact on how they conducted their classes. The majority of these teachers further conceded that they seldom helped students use English communicatively. In other words, Ferman portrayed another Rashomon-like montage in which different stakeholders perceived test washback effects.

Qi (2004, 2005, 2007) investigated whether changing the content and format of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China was an efficient way to elicit pedagogical changes from traditional teacher-centered to communicative teaching methodologies, which was the main intention of the Ministry of Education (MOE) for introducing this test in 1999. However, the educational system, with primary function being to select candidates for institutions of higher education in
China, appears to disfavor communicative approaches. Subsequently, teachers continued to teach test content in class, with a primary focus on linguistic knowledge rather than on language use. The selection system pressured teachers and students to focus on raising scores because they are regarded the major gauge of educational success in China. Qi asserts that the inability of the test to change how instructors taught was likely due to the multiple—and in some ways conflicting—uses of the test. The gate-keeping functions of the test were incompatible with its communicative goals. As a consequence, the test failed to exert the intended washback effect on English teaching and learning.

The above studies show how opinions about the effectiveness of tests sometimes vary among stakeholders: administrators regarded the tests in question in a positive light, whereas most teachers were less inclined to agree with that assessment. However, these studies addressed the effects of test use mainly from teachers’ and/or students’ perspectives, without examining the relationships between school administrators, teachers, and students. In particular, these studies fail to examine how school administrators mediate teaching and learning for test success. To better understand test washback we need to examine potential conflicts of interest (and points of cooperation) among such stakeholders.

This study contrasts how 12 administrators from nine tertiary institutes in Taiwan with exit examination policies (herein referred to as exit schools) differed from six administrators from five institutions without such a policy (non-exit schools) in terms of their perceptions of a government testing policy. We also explore how the 12 administrators mediated the policy and accommodated conflicting agendas to bring it about.

**Research Questions**

Three questions guided this investigation:

1. How do the narratives of tertiary school administrators in Taiwan at institutions with English certification exit requirements tend to differ from those without such requirements?
2. In the administrators’ view, what positive and negative consequences have the said requirements had on resource allocations, pedagogic practices, and subsequent student learning in their respective programs?
3. What roles have administrators at exit schools had in selecting specific English certification tests, setting cutoff scores, and developing support measures?

**Method**

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to explore the research questions. One of the main reasons why this study adopted a qualitative approach is that structured interviews afford more flexibility than questionnaires. However, since interviewing is a time-intensive procedure, the sample size for this survey is modest ($n = 18$). A limitation of this type of qualitative research is that the generalizability of the findings to the population of all tertiary schools in Taiwan must be called into question. Through the interviews with the administrators depicted in Table 3, we strove to obtain “in-depth information” from “an insider’s view” (Burns, 2000, p. 13).
Table 3
The administrative informants in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Exit (Private)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Head of a language center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Exit (Private)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Dean of Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Dean of Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Exit (Private)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Director of a language center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Director of a language center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>Exit (Private)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Dean of Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9</td>
<td>Exit (Private)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A16</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>General Education Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A17</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Section Leader of academic affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A18</td>
<td>Exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of a language center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10</td>
<td>Non-exit (Private)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11</td>
<td>Non-exit (Private)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Director of a language center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A12</td>
<td>Non-exit (Private)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A13</td>
<td>Non-exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>General Education Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A14</td>
<td>Non-exit (Private)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15</td>
<td>Non-exit (Public)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of an applied foreign language department</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The exit requirement for night school students at A3’s institution was abolished in 2006. A11, 12, 13, and 15 stated their schools were planning to establish exit requirements in 2009.

This survey design not only permitted a comparison between exit and non-exit schools, but it also offered a degree of corroboration between respondents at the same school since informants A1 & A17 were at the same school, as were A4, A8, and A18. As it turned out, none of the statements made by administrators at the same school contradicted each other, except for A13 and A15 who had contrasting views on how directive administrators should be about pedagogical issues. In addition, informants A4, A8 and A18 did point out some issues not mentioned by their peers. For example, informant A4 stated why his school abolished the exit requirements for night school students, though A8 and A18 did not reveal this information.

Also, we should state that the ratio of male/ female informants in this study approximated Taiwan’s tertiary school administrator gender ratio. Since a main focus of this research is to explore how exit administrators implemented a specific test-driven policy, the majority of informants in this study were selected from exit schools, although non-exit schools outnumbered exit schools in Taiwan at the time of this study.

The informants in Table 3 were in positions of responsibility and had enough power to make decisions regarding English certification exit requirement implementation. However, it should be noted that none of them had “first tier” positions such as school president or regent. Ranking as deans, center directors, or vice-presidents, the informants could be conveniently called “second tier” administrators.

In 12 of the 18 cases, first tier decisions concerning whether or not a school would adopt an exit exam reputedly came from the school president. In the remaining
six cases, it was not clear who made the crucial decision of whether to accept or reject the government’s recommended exit exam policy. In all cases, the students could be described as “bottom tier stakeholders” who were not consulted at all in the decision making process.

Interviews were conducted in the participants’ offices in Mandarin. Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and a translation of the core questions guiding the interviewers is listed in Appendix 1. All interviews were recorded and translated from Chinese into English.

Interview transcripts were analyzed according to the five analytical steps proposed by Schmidt (2004). First, “intensive and repeated reading” (p. 254) of the transcribed interviews was done. Second, main and sub-categories were constructed as a fundamental guide by extracting the themes that emerged from the intensive and repeated reading of the transcripts. For example, the reasons why administrators implemented the exit requirement policy were put under the main category “Yes exit”. Under this main category, subcategories such as “student proficiency”, “government fund”, “follow the trend” and “increase reputation” were established. Third, using NVivo (Ver. 8), all data were sorted into categories/subcategories to provide sample responses to the research questions. A summary of the coded key responses appears in Appendix 2. Fourth, results were quantified when possible for a preliminary data overview. Finally, detailed explanations were presented to flesh out the research questions.

Results

Now let us consider each of the three research questions.

Question 1: How do the narratives of tertiary schools administrators in Taiwan working at schools with English certification exit requirements tend to differ from those without such requirements?

Three-fourths (n = 9) of the exit school administrators stated that the primary reason why their schools adopted the exit requirements was to bolster their students’ English level. An example of a narrative discourse about “student improvement” can be seen in A5. That informant stated that he was aware of the importance of building “a solid 4-skills foundation’ to improve students” English levels. However, he felt that the most expedient way to do this was to implement the English certification exit requirement because building a solid foundation was “slow and time-consuming”. Clearly, this administrator believed in the power of the test-driven policy in pushing students to study harder and enhancing their proficiency. He also believed that tests provided a useful degree of accountability—a point that shall be discussed later.

A desire for more government funds was acknowledged as another motive for adopting the policy by two-thirds (n = 8) of the exit school respondents. About 40% (n = 5) of the exit respondents also felt the requirement would help students obtain good jobs. Over a third (n = 4) acknowledged that they were simply following the prevailing trend to adopt exit requirements. In other words, their reason for establishing exit requirements included a desire to stay on par with other schools. For example, A6 stated, “Many private schools have set the exit requirement. We do not
want to stand out. Our school has no excuse not to set it.” It is tempting to suggest that a snowball effect has taken place with regard to English proficiency exit examinations in Taiwan. Adopting the English proficiency exams has become a mainstream norm rather than a cutting edge innovation; by 2008, 31% of the four-year technical universities/colleges in Taiwan had implemented it (Pan, 2010).

On the other hand, six administrators at the non-exit schools felt that few students in their institutes possessed a sufficient level of English competency to meet the exit requirements. They also voiced fears that the policy would negatively impact student enrollment because low-level students may be hesitant to enroll in institutes with the exit requirement. In fact, two institutes, where A3 and A4 taught, abolished the exit requirement policy for their night courses since the benchmark was deemed too high. Moreover, informant A11 worried about not having enough suitable teachers to implement the policy. Lastly, a concern raised by A12 was that the English certification exit requirements might exert unwelcome pressure on teachers. That informant said:

In the past, teachers had no restrictions concerning how they chose to conduct their classes. If the requirement is established, some teachers will be concerned that they will be evaluated according to their students’ performance on the tests.

Most exit-school administrators, however, seemed unconcerned about curricular or pedagogical issues regarding the exit exam policy; fiscal and organizational concerns were foremost in their minds. They also wanted hard figures to deflect potential criticisms of their administrative decisions. This finding is consistent with Guskey’s (2007) claim that administrators often regard large-scale assessment as a way of providing accountability since it “provide[s] a quick, relatively inexpensive, and highly efficient means of gathering information on student learning” (p. 25).

When asked about the likelihood of adopting the requirement policy in the next five years, however, 5 of the 6 non-exit administrators said that they would give in to MOE pressure and adopt the policy, since the Department of Higher Education allocated funds partially based on the percentage of students holding English proficiency test certificates (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004a). Only Informant A11 held fast in her belief that the policy was ill-advised. However, even that informant mentioned her school would encourage students to take certification tests by offering more test-preparation classes in order to show “better figures” to the Ministry.

**Question 2:** In the administrators’ views, what positive and negative consequences did the exit certification requirements have on resource allocations, pedagogic practices, and subsequent student learning in their respective programs?

Let us first discuss resource allocation. CALL resources appeared to be used by exit students more extensively than their counterparts. Two exit schools required students to spend a set time on test-related practice at a self-access center or the school website. Another three exit schools indicated that they “strongly recommended” students utilize those resources. In contrast, none of the administrators at non-exit schools made such claims.
Regarding pedagogic practices, two basic responses were observed among the 12 exit administrators and three at non-exit schools who planned to implement this policy shortly. 73% (n = 11) of these respondents said they actively encouraged teachers to incorporate test materials and/or test-related instruction in class. Three of them (A3, A7, and A16) indicated they also requested teachers to include test questions on the mid-terms or finals. To manipulate compliance, informants A5 and A16 told instructors that student exit exam test score pass rates (or scores on such tests) would be part of their formal teacher evaluations.

In contrast, 27% (n = 4) of the exit administrators claimed to adopt non-directive strategies. For example, informants A2 and A6 felt that they should respect teachers’ judgments and not interfere with their pedagogic choices, but simply keep them abreast of school policies. They acknowledged that the line between “informing” others of school policies and “pressuring” them to comply could be subtle.

Two informants had contrasting views as to whether teachers should be encouraged to incorporate test-related instruction in class. While A13 contended that such instruction should not be encouraged, A15 held the opposite view by raising this rhetorical question:

Why do cram schools do so well regarding students’ performance on tests? How can senior high school teachers enable their students to acquire a huge vocabulary while college teachers can’t? I believe this is because we let college English teachers teach whatever they consider important without uniform standards.

As Firestone, Monfils, Hicks, and Martinez (2007) suggest, how much support each school’s hierarchy has for formal testing seems to influence whether or not administrators are directive about course content. In other words, at schools where the president clearly advocates directive curricular guidance, second tier administrators tend to follow suit. Conversely, if a “hands off” attitude towards this issue is expressed by top management, mid-ranking administrators are more likely to mirror that stance.

Now let us consider what impact the 12 exit school administrators thought the exit requirements had on students. These effects will be summarized in terms of perceived positive, neutral, and negative patterns.

**Perceived Positive Patterns**

Three informants (A1, A4, and A16, and A17) expressed pleasure that their students had earned more certificates. They believed that students were more motivated to study English than before. Informant A4 commented, “To our surprise, we found there was a 30% increase in the number of students holding certificates.” Informant A16 reported that “the number of students who passed English certification tests such as the GEPT or the TOEIC has increased from 100 to 400 from 2003 to 2006.” He also noticed a change in regard to students’ time spent on English study by stating, “You can always see the language center filled with students who go there to listen to English programs or do test-related practice, because we require them to spend a certain amount of time there.”
**Perceived Neutral Patterns**

Informants A2, A6, A7, A8, and A9 stated that they could not observe any significant effects of the exit exam policies on their students. Informants A7 and A8 acknowledged that they had little contact with their students and were not in a position to ascertain how they were actually feeling.

**Perceived Negative Patterns**

Informants A1, A16, and A17 stated that many students felt stressed by the exit requirements. They noted how students were being pushed harder to learn English, despite the fact that most had low proficiency and only marginal interest in it. For example, A1 said that a mere 6–8% of his students passed a certification test on their first try. Faced with the pressure of not being able to graduate, many have become obsessed about their English test scores. Although the higher pass rate is regarded as a positive sign by administrators, we should not ignore many students’ heightened anxiety.

Moreover, two informants expressed disappointment over their schools’ high failure rates. A7 said with chagrin that only 18% of his students could pass an authorized CEFR Level B1 exam. In the same vein, A3 grumbled that the goal of a 75% exit exam pass rate by 2008 was unattainable—only about 58.8% of his students reached that goal.

Informants A5 and A1 also groused that English proficiency test content was not being taught, as a consequence many students had to take extra lessons at cram schools to meet the graduation requirements. In addition to the cram school tuition fees, Informants A3 and A8 also claimed that test administration fees were a financial burden to many undergraduates.

**Question 3: What roles did administrators at exit schools have in selecting tests, setting cutoff scores, and developing support measures?**

Although school presidents generally had a decisive voice regarding whether or not to adopt exit exams, details regarding the implementing of such policies were invariably left to subordinates in the educational hierarchy. During the process of selecting specific certification tests and assigning cutoff scores, the administrators in this study said they consulted with the English faculty on a host of issues. At eight of the exit schools, panels were established to make exit exam implementation decisions. All but one (A5) of the administrators said that students at their schools were free to choose any test in Table 1 within the CEFR level their institution adopted as a minimum standard.

Regarding cutoff determinations, 7 out of 9 exit school administrators indicated that they (or more precisely, their committees) chose relatively easy tests and “soft” cut off targets. Only informant A6 admitted to setting an ambitious target to enhance the school’s image.

When asked about support measures for students who did not pass the exit exams, two responses were typical. At three exit schools, students could bypass the
Exams entirely by taking remedial classes—significantly enfeebling the whole exit exam policy. Since none of the schools paid certification test fees, administrators felt compelled to offer this loophole. The predominate response, however, was to require students to demonstrate proof of test failure before allowing them to enroll in a remedial class. Five of the exit-school administrators felt that all students should take an actual English certification test at least once.

Significantly, 7 out of the 9 exit schools created a way for students to get around the exam requirement. Only one informant (A1) remained adamant about requiring students to pass an actual English proficiency exit exam. In all other cases, a “back door option” allowed students to graduate without passing a certificate exit test. This illustrates how conflicting forces mold educational systems: pressures to set high standards are often mitigated by counter-pressure to have students pass through the system and obtain their diplomas on schedule.

Discussion

One thing apparent from this research is that the administrators tended to espouse multiple motives for implementing the policy investigated. Whereas 75% (n = 9) of the exit school administrators voiced a desire to improve the general quality of English education through the exit exams, 66% (n = 8) acknowledged that pecuniary considerations were also involved in the decision-making. In view of this, the exit requirement policy seems to favor schools with more proficient students because Taiwan’s Education Ministry has avowed that certificate ratios would determine funding awards. This policy will likely widen the gap between high-ranking and low-ranking schools. As successful exit schools become better funded than non-exit schools, the disparity between both institutions is likely to widen in ways similar to what Hoffer (1997), Jacob (2001) and Vermon, Baytops, McMahon, Padden, and Walther-Thomas (2003) have observed.

The fact that multiple attributional narratives were employed by many informants suggests that competing agendas may have been at play: desires for money, prestige, educational validity, and bureaucratic efficiency appear to mesh together in complex ways.

Another factor that this research revealed is how the hierarchical structure of schools in Taiwan is reflected in decision making processes. The crucial decision of whether to accept or reject the government policy was made “high up” (generally by school presidents). The burden of translating executive decisions into educational policies was the purview of second-tier administrators. The fact that no students were consulted in the decision making process is also revealing: that stakeholder group was left voiceless. This finding is not surprising because exit requirements represent a top-down policy.

Conclusion and Implications

An interesting finding this study brought to light is how all schools (even those declining the Ministry’s recommended exit exam policy) sought to appease the Ministry in some way. This suggests that some MOE directives in Taiwan are difficult to ignore completely. However, it also reveals how tertiary educational institutions in
this context have a degree of autonomy: a delicate equilibrium between independence and submission can be said to exist regarding MOE dictates.

This study revealed how each group of administrators embraced differing bodies of evidence to justify their actions. The exit school administrators tended to validate their decisions on the basis of increased exam pass rates. Conversely, non-exit-school administrators also validated their decisions by citing concerns about students’ low proficiency, fears of reduced admissions, and worries about curricular narrowing. This finding is consistent with insights from Wason and Johnson-Laird (1972, as cited in Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002, p. 1380) about confirmation bias, suggesting that people have a tendency to seek information corroborating the “rightness” of their choices.

This study highlighted how the degree of intervention varied significantly among administrators, and this appeared to influence the extent that teachers taught to the test. It appears that the greater degree of intervention by some administrators has encouraged decontextualized approaches to test preparation. In those situations, teachers are expected to provide more test-preparation activities while students are expected to spend more on preparatory practice after class. Nevertheless, perhaps partially because most administrators at tertiary educational institutions in Taiwan hold a liberal view in regard to educational management their intervention take the form of advice more than direction. The evidence from this study suggests that tests do not seem to be as powerful as Shohamy (2001) suggested. At least in this context, there is reason to question her statement that tests are “the single most influential pedagogical source” of educational change (Shohamy, 2001, p.107). This finding affirms the argument made by previous washback studies that a test itself is not able to determine the outcome. Instead, how participants interact with testing and mediating factors, such as the motivations for implementing a test-driven policy, conflicts between administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of test-relevant issues (e.g., test-preparation), may contribute more to the test consequences than the specific certification tests themselves that are mentioned in this study.

Four behaviors were observed to varying degrees at exit schools. First, students were encouraged (or required) to use self-access test-prep facilities more. Second, more English classes were scheduled. Third, teachers were often advised to adopt more test-preparation in class. Fourth, test-related questions became more common in mid-term and final exams. Administratively, we can say that exit requirements resulted in a major change in the allocation of educational resources for English programs.

Did administrators use exit requirements as a lever to achieve their educational goals? A tentatively affirmative answer is suggested. All of the exit administrators made marginal adjustments to their work. A few more resources were devoted to the English study and the number of compulsory English and test-preparation classes increased. Moreover, more attention was devoted to instruction and to learning to help students to pass the certification test and earn certificates. This suggests that the use of a test as a means to improving students’ test scores may cause superficial changes to educational resources. However, substantial educational reform such as curricular innovation may require collaboration and communication from other stakeholders such as the MOE, and teachers.
When mentioning the implications drawn from this study, we should also carefully acknowledge some of its limitations. First of all, this study focused on the self-reports of a small number of mid-level administrators in Taiwan. Interviews with more informants at higher and lower levels of the educational hierarchy might have shed additional reasons for accepting or rejecting the government policy. Second, we acknowledge that a more evenly matched number of exit and non-exit respondents would have made it easier to contrast these groups. Thirdly, a wider range of core questions for the non-exit school administrators would also have enabled us to offer more detailed comparisons in this respect.

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Appendix 1  Administrator Core Interview Questions

Here is a list of questions guiding the interviews with Taiwanese school administrators. The original questions were in Chinese, and an English translation appears below.

Part I – Questions for ECER-school administrators (n = 12)

* What percentage of students at your school have passed an Education Ministry approved English certification test?

* Are teachers at your school advised to adjust to their teaching plans or syllabi to address the English certification requirement, or meet its goal of increasing the percentage of students passing MOE-approved tests?

* What positive and negative effects have you observed as a result of English certification exit requirements at your school?

* What motivated your school to establish English certification exit requirements and also who made the acceptance decision?

* Were students’ opinions regarding the establishment of exit requirements at your institution sought?

* How were English proficiency tests selected at your school for the exit requirement? How were the cutoff scores for such tests determined?

* What educational resources have been provided at your school to address the English certification exit requirements?

* Does your school have any support measures to help those unable to pass the English certification tests? What were the reasons for setting up those measures? Are there any criticisms about them?

Part II – Questions for the non-ECER school administrators (n = 6)

* What factors have prompted your school to avoid adopting the English certification exit requirement?
Appendix 2  Coded Interview Responses

Here is a translation of the coded responses of the Taiwanese school administrators. The information below is not a word-for-word transcription of the interviews but a coded digest of salient responses (Ss = students).

A1 actively encouraged teachers to include more test materials in class; happy that students earned more certificates; Ss seemed more stressed; financial burden on some Ss noted; no “backdoor option” for Ss who failed exam
A2 non-directive; suggested various measures to improve Ss’ English proficiency in addition to the exit requirements; felt it was too early to observe any effects since the policy was adopted in 2005
A3 actively encouraged Ss to do online test-preparation practice; requested test items be included on mid-terms; disappointed at the low pass rate; financial burden on some Ss noted
A4 happy Ss earned more certificates; test-related instruction requested include for third year English classes; voiced concern about teachers’ pedagogy if Ss were not able to pass exit requirements
A5 used Ss exam scores in teacher evaluations; complained teachers were not teaching test content enough
A6 non-directive; happy that teaching to the exit exam policy did not exist in his school yet; suggested various measures be offered to improve Ss’ English proficiency other than the exit requirements; his school president recently directed him to establish the exit exam policy and set benchmark requirements
A7 actively encouraged Ss to do online test-preparation practice; requested test items be included on mid-term; observed no effects; disappointed at low pass rates
A8 actively encouraged teachers to do more test preparation in class in order to help Ss meet the exit requirements due to the dean of academic affair’s suggestion; observed no effects; financial burden on some Ss noted
A9 observed no effects, believes teachers should teach test content in class and suggested that they help Ss with test preparation
A10 the school did not adopt the exit requirement policy because of Ss’ low proficiency and concerns about recruitment; at school, English classes are screened into four levels, A, B, C and D; believed Ss at levels A and B were more likely to pass the GEPT Elementary Exam and therefore were assisted with test-related instruction. Ss at levels C and D were unassisted; feared that “there might be two possible results: high-level Ss would become better and/or low-level Ss become even worse”; his school planned to implement the exit requirement policy in 2009
A11 worried about having enough teachers to implement the policy; thought policy was ill-advised, but would encourage Ss to take an approved test
A12 the school did not have the exit requirement policy at the time of interview; planned to give directive strategies to teachers regarding pedagogy next year when the policy was adopted; planned to actively encourage teachers to include more test materials in class and make teachers “accountable” for their teaching
A13 non-directive; believed that other attempts to improve English had failed; school president played an active role in establishing the exit requirements
the school did not implement the exit requirement policy because of Ss’ low proficiency and recruitment worries; in order to increase pass rate to enhance the school’s accountability, the school offered GEPT and TOEIC prep classes, which Ss could take for free, and once they passed the tests and received the certificates, the school would give them some money in recognition of their achievement

the school would implement the policy a year after the interview; planned to actively encourage teachers to include more test materials in class

actively encouraged teachers to include more test materials in class; used Ss’ exam scores in teacher evaluations; requested test items be included on mid-term; increased Ss stress observed

actively encouraged teachers to include more test materials in class; happy Ss earned more certificates; increased student stress observed

English teachers were not directed to teach test content in class—they were free to teach whatever they found essential and helpful to their Ss, but teachers who taught third year students were requested to include test preparation instruction in class