



Teacher and Learner Washback of a High-stakes Lexical Grammar Writing Test

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Introduction

Test effects are typically investigated as “washback” (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Hughes, 2003), but the mechanism of washback is complex and multi-faceted and functions dynamically (Green, 2013). Both test factors (e.g., test format, test difficulty, skills tested, test stakes) and mediating factors including various stakeholders’ (e.g., teachers and students) perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward test use play essential roles in the washback’s variability and intensity (Bailey 2005; Cheng, 2014; Green, 2007, 2013; Pan, 2014; Tsang & Isaacs, 2022). Given the increased focus on the consequences of language testing (Cheng, 2014), many studies have explored the washback of large-scale standardized language tests to determine the effects of educational policies in educational settings. However, very little research have addressed how a non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test affects teaching and learning.

The quality of the English components of four-year technical and vocational education joint college exams in Taiwan has improved to a remarkable degree. Nevertheless, English tests are criticized, because they tend to focus on evaluating reading skills and utilizing multiple-choice questions and not students’ communicative competence. From an academic viewpoint, productive forms of testing are much more likely to have positive washback versus indirect methods using the multiple-choice response format. In view of this criticism, beginning in 2015, the administration of the joint vocational college English exam added non-multiple choice writing tasks. Therefore, this study’s goal, conducted three months prior to the debut of the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test, explored the washback effects on vocational high school English instruction and learning in Taiwan. It aimed to compare the differences between these teachers and their students in regard to their viewpoints of the non-multiple-choice (NMC) English lexical grammar writing test and between their reactions toward English teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Theoretical Washback Studies

The notion of washback has undergone a gradual shift from the effects of tests to the consequences of test use over the past three decades. Hughes (1993) proposed a trichotomy of the backwash model (p.2), where “participants” “process(es)”, and “product(s)” indicate how participants interpret and react toward



a test and how and what their response to it will be. Hughes' model implied that test quality itself can determine washback test effects. Alderson and Wall's 13 washback hypotheses (1993) argued that in addition to a test, there are other factors that elicit more effects from some learners and teachers than they do for others. For example, they indicated "Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback" (p.121). They also assumed that tests affect what and how teaching and learning take place in terms of content, sequence, rate, and degree. Bailey (1996)'s basic model of washback further included stakeholders like teachers, students, material writers, and curriculum designers to account for washback in the educational context. These aforementioned models tend to highlight the appearance of washback effects and who is affected, but they do little to address the factors that contribute to the phenomenon.

Shih (2007) questioned the "linear relationship between tests and teaching or learning" (p. 137) and established a washback model of students' learning to explore the factors that might lead to test effects. In his model, extrinsic factors (e.g., social economic factors, school and educational factors, personal factors such as students' part-time jobs), intrinsic factors (e.g., students' learning attitudes), and test factors (the immediate importance of the test; test anxiety, the way the test-driven policy was implemented) are responsible for the phenomena perceived. Tsang and Isaacs (2022) adopted Shih's model and found seven mediating factors accounting for washback on learning: teacher's preference of the course focus, after-school tutorial lessons, language proficiency, peer influence, the influence of personal contacts (e.g., parents' expectations), and students' exam knowledge. Green (2007) developed a more comprehensive washback model, including testing and non-testing factors in order to better understand the intensity and variability of washback. His model suggested the variability of washback contains (1) testing factors that include test demands (e.g., test content, test format, test complexity), test purpose, test stakes, and test difficulty and (2) mediating factors that include course curriculum, teaching materials, teaching and learning approaches, and stakeholders' knowledge or understanding of test demands, resources to meet test demands, and acceptance of test demands. In summary, Green (2007) concluded that "washback intensity varies in relation to participants' perceptions of test stakes and test difficulty... The higher the test stakes are, the more intense is the washback. The more challenging the test is to the participants, the more intense is the washback if test preparation is both "attainable and amenable" (p. 24-25).

Many studies have explored washback effects of large-scale standardized language tests brought about in the classroom contexts (e.g., Chou, 2015; Dawadi, 2021; Green, 2007; Pan, 2011, 2013, 2014; Wu, 2008; Xie, 2013, 2015). One area is teacher response to test preparation and changes in tests varies based on both testing (e.g., viewpoint on the test's quality and content) and mediating factors (e.g., teachers' educational backgrounds, beliefs, and concerns for students' proficiency levels). In addition, washback studies on learning reveal varied findings. Factors such as test stakes, test difficulty, and students' attitudes toward learning play a significant and complex role in mediating washback.

The studies mentioned above imply that test factors and mediating factors both contribute to the intensity and variability of washback effects. These factors formed the theoretical basis for this present study: test factors including one's perceptions of test content and test difficulty and mediating factors including one's reactions toward the test due to personal factors (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, language proficiency level) and contextual factors (e.g., educational resources).

Empirical Washback Studies on Writing

Very few washback studies have examined the effects that changes to writing tests have had on teaching or learning. In the U.S., Stecher et al. (2004) investigated the effects of assessment-driven reform on the teaching of writing in Washington state. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in Writing evaluated students' ability to produce two pieces of writing of different genres. By means of questionnaire surveys collected from 277 teachers, this study found that Washington's education reform widely affected the content of the writing curriculum and the methods used to teach writing. For example, teachers increased the amount of time allocated to writing and placed a greater emphasis on specific aspects of writing. These teachers taught not only writing conventions (e.g., the micro-skills of writing),

but also all of the stages of the writing process (prewrite, draft, revise, edit, publish), the latter of which was what WASL in Writing evaluated.

In the U.K., Green (2007) explored the differences between EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classes and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) preparation classes. By triangulating the findings from 476 student questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, he discovered that students in EAP classes expected to write long texts and use information from external sources in their writing. Those in IELTS preparation classes expected test-taking practice such as learning to describe graphs and diagrams, time management skills, and learning vocabulary and phrases that they could use to complete the writing test.

In China, Li (2009) collected questionnaire responses from 25 teachers and interviewed eight teachers in order to discover how the writing section on the College English Test (CET) influenced teaching and learning. From teacher perspectives, the overall influence of the CET writing section was weak, and teachers did not teach the test due to the low weight of the writing section on CET, the limited amount of class time, large class sizes, and teachers' lack of professional training. These empirical studies showed the variability of washback on writing: positive effects - test effects align with the test construct; negative effects - teaching to the test with a great deal of test-related writing practice; or weak effects - little change due to contextual factors.

All of the theoretical and empirical studies mentioned above formed a picture of what test effects look like and what may possibly cause them. To add one piece of evidence on how a high-stakes non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test affects teaching and learning, this present study examined participants' perceptions of this new test and the process brought about by the test and mediating factors. Thus, the three research questions designed to fill the gap in the washback literature were:

- (1) What are teachers' and students' perceptions of the non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing tasks?
- (2) To what extent does the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test affect teaching and learning?
- (3) Does the new writing test bring about a difference in classroom writing activities within the three years of vocational high school students?

Research Context

English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Taiwan within a classroom-based environment. The curriculum guidelines for English education, according to the Ministry of Education (2003, 2005), emphasize English communicative competence and concern how the four English skills should be taught. Unfortunately, given the test-driven tradition of Taiwan education, even though the Curriculum Guidelines were established with the goal of building communicative competence and emphasizing the ability to apply the four skills, the entrance exams to high/vocational high schools mostly take the form of written multiple-choice questions and primarily assess linguistic knowledge (grammar rules, vocabulary, phrases, and reading skills). Therefore, teachers instruct and students study mainly what is covered in the test. Although productive skills now receive an increased amount of attention, receptive skills remain the focus of instruction (Chen, 2006).

Vocational high school graduates, the focus of this study, must take the four-year technical and vocational education joint college exam (TVJCE) to enter four-year technical universities/colleges. Since merely two to four hours of English is offered every week at vocational high schools, and the English proficiency of the students who choose to study at vocational high schools is generally lower than those who choose to study at high schools (Lin, 2009; Zhang, 2006; Zhou, 2005), the average English scores of vocational high school graduates on TVJCE are between 40 and 45 points out of 100 (see Table 1) over the past ten years and therefore are considered low and unsatisfactory (Daly, 2011; Liu, 2009; Shi et al.,

2000; Zhang, 2006; Zhou, 2005).

The Target Test

The previous four-year technical and vocational education joint college exam in English (TVJCE) consisted of 50 multiple-choice questions in vocabulary, dialogue completion, text completion, and reading comprehension sections. In 2014, the Testing Center for Technological & Vocational Education (TCE) announced the five types of non-multiple-choice writing questions that would be tested on 2015 TVJCE: fill-in-the-blank questions, translation questions from English into Chinese, translation questions from Chinese into English, rewriting sentences with given structures, and putting words/phrases in the correct order. The sample questions were offered on the TCE website, as shown in Table 2. These constructed-response items are usually used to measure one's lexical grammar - a term used in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to emphasize the interdependence of vocabulary (lexis) and syntax (grammar) (Halliday, 2003).

TABLE 1

Average English Test Scores on Four-year Technical and Vocational Education Joint College Exam (TVJCE) from 2004-2013

Year	Number of vocational high school test takers	Mean	SD
2004	189,100	39.73	17.50
2005	182,591	41.66	17.79
2007	172,530	42.19	18.64
2008	169,974	45.69	21.37
2009	158,154	43.65	19.56
2010	158,025	42.34	18.37
2011	159,243	43.27	18.82
2012	144,776	40.96	18.15
2013	137,836	44.98	22.00
2014	135,206	46.75	22.13

Source. Testing Center for Technological & Vocational Education, Taiwan

Methodology

Survey questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations are commonly employed to explore the complexity of washback effects (Cheng et al., 2010; Shih, 2007; Watanabe, 2004). This present study utilized questionnaires to gather information from a large number of students and teachers (Burns, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007) and interviews with these two stakeholders to generate a better, in-depth understanding of what might not have been apparent in the answers to the questionnaires (Reichardt & Cook, 1979).

TABLE 2

Sample Test Tasks of the Non-multiple-choice Lexical Grammar Writing in 2014

Task format	Test Item
1 Fill in the blanks	他聰明得令人難以置信。 He is _____ smart _____ believe.
2 Translate from Chinese into English.	棒球是臺灣最受歡迎的運動一。
3 Translate from English into Chinese.	Drunk driving is not only illegal but also dangerous.
4 Rewrite sentences with given structures	This story is interesting. I like it very much. (Hint: so ... that ...)
5 Put the words/phrases in the correct order	There's/done/a lot of/to be/by tomorrow/work

Source. Testing Center for Technological & Vocational Education, Taiwan

These writing questions account for 24 points out of 100 at the most on the English TJVCE. The TCE stated that the non-multiple choice writing questions were created to measure students' ability to use lexicon and patterns (Testing Center for Technological & Vocational Education, Taiwan, 2013). At the time of the study, the third-year vocational high school students who would take 2015 English TVJCE did not know exactly the types of writing questions on which they would be tested.

The writing tasks assigned by TCE could be thought of as controlled or form-focused writing. In other words, these tasks may be able to measure students' ability to "produce language to display their competence in grammar, vocabulary, or sentence formation, and not necessarily to convey meaning for an authentic purpose" (Brown, 2004, p. 225).

Subjects

Table 3 shows that 783 vocational high school students from seven vocational high schools in Taiwan recruited for this study. Of these 783 students, 201 were male and 582 were female. Each academic year of the students accounts for one-third of the sample population. Four female and two male year-3 students with the labels S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6 were interviewed to further explore the washback effects from students' perspectives.

TABLE 3
Profile of the Vocational High School Students Recruited for This Study (n = 783)

Gender		Year of study		
Male	Female	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year
201	582	256	260	267
30.2%	69.8%	32.7%	33.2%	34.1%

Table 4 shows that 139 English teachers, 42 males and 97 females, from 35 Taiwan vocational high schools were recruited for this study. Around 60% of the teachers had between six and 15 years of teaching experience, while the remainder had less than five or more than 15 years. Eighty-eight teachers taught first-year vocational high school students, 85 taught second-year, and 90 taught third year. Some teachers taught all three years of students, some taught only one level, and some taught two levels. Two female teachers with 6-10 years of teaching experience who were labelled T1 and T2 were interviewed to further explore the washback effects from teachers' perspectives.

TABLE 4
Profile of the 139 Vocational High School Students Recruited for This Study

Gender		Teaching year			Years of teaching experience				
Male	Female	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	20+ years
42	97	88	85	90	21	47	34	20	16
25.7%	74.3%				15.2 %	34.1%	24.6%	14.5%	11.6%

Instruments

Both questionnaires and interviews were designed to explore washback effects brought about by the new NMC lexical grammar writing test. The effects shown in Table 5 were test factors, mediating factors, and test effects on teaching and learning. See Appendices 1 and 2 for details of the questionnaires and interview questions.

TABLE 5
Breakdown of Teacher and Student Questionnaires/Interviews

	Student questionnaire	Teacher questionnaire
Test factors	1. understanding test content 2. perceptions of test difficulty	1. understanding test content 2. perceptions of test difficulty
Positive and negative test effects	positive/negative effects (e.g., proficiency enhancement, time devotion, motivation, pressure, financial burden)	Positive/ negative effects (e.g., instruction on test-related writing tasks, test-taking strategies, test-related practice, workload)
Test effects on classroom activities	1. test-driven learning/teaching activities for writing 2. learning/teaching activities aligned with test construct	
	Student interview	Teacher interview
Mediating factors	How did their attitude, proficiency level, and contextual factors affect their reactions toward this new writing test?	How did their beliefs, educational backgrounds, and contextual factors affect their reactions toward this new writing test?

All of the questions in the questionnaires used a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree; very easy to very difficult; or always, usually, sometimes, seldom, never). There was also an open-ended question to give participants an additional opportunity to express their opinions.

The Chinese version of the student and teacher questionnaire was provided to facilitate the process of completing the questionnaire and to put the participants at ease (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Cronbach's α reliability for the 29 items on the student questionnaire was 0.87 and for the 15 items on the teacher questionnaire was 0.81.

Data Collection Procedure

The student and teacher questionnaires were distributed three months prior to the administration of the 2015 English four-year technical and vocational education joint college exam, which took place on May 2, 2015. The student questionnaires were distributed in person through the researcher's network to seven vocational high schools in Taiwan, while 265 teacher questionnaires were sent by post to English teachers at 30 vocational high schools all over Taiwan. The teacher response rate was around 52% ($n = 139$).

Data Analysis

PASW Statistics version 18 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were utilized to calculate the frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations of the questionnaire items and test scores. Inferential statistics (e.g., one-way ANOVA) were employed to check for a statistical significance level of .05 ($p < 0.05$).

Results

This section presents the findings to the three research questions.

Research Question 1: What are Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Non-multiple-choice (NMC) Lexical Grammar Writing Tasks?

In terms of their understanding of the five possible to-be-tested NMC lexical grammar writing questions, more than 80% of the teachers ($n = 114$) had a full understanding of the test tasks, test content, and its weight. Around 15% of the students were well aware of the new change ($n = 147$), 80% of whom were year-3 students. Table 6 presents details. Among the five writing tasks, students considered "rewriting sentences with given structures" the easiest ($M = 3.44$), while the most difficult task was

“translation questions” from Chinese to English ($M = 2.92$). The teachers considered “filling-in-the-blank questions” to be the easiest ($M = 3.40$) for their students and “translation questions” from Chinese into English ($M = 3.29$) the most difficult. Based on the findings indicated above, “translation questions from Chinese into English” were considered the most difficult writing task by both teachers and students.

TABLE 6

Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Difficulty Levels of the Five Possible To-be-tested Writing Tasks on 2015 English TVJCE

Five possible to-be-tested writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE	Teachers' perceptions of difficulty levels (n = 139)		Students' perceptions of difficulty levels (n = 783)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Filling-in-the-blank questions	3.40	.940	3.08	1.17
2. Translation questions from English into Chinese	3.29	.937	2.95	1.17
3. Translation questions from Chinese into English	2.86	1.09	2.92	1.18
4. Rewriting sentences with given structures	3.39	.877	3.44	1.21
5. Putting words/phrases in the correct order	3.08	.993	3.30	1.17

The two interviewed teachers were well aware of test tasks and felt positive about the addition of the NMC lexical grammar writing test. One teacher worried (T1) whether students were able to cope with the change given the fact of their low level of English proficiency and that English was not the core subject in her school. Half of the interviewed students understood the test tasks, and they were told by their teachers to prepare for these questions by memorizing more new words, idioms, and sentence patterns. One student (S2) said, “I kind of know what writing tasks will be tested... To be honest, my English is very poor, and translation questions from Chinese to English is just too hard for me. At least I can take a guess for other tasks by writing only one or few words, but I am really not able to start from “0” for the translation task, which I need to do by myself.” However, S6 expressed his awareness of the new writing test tasks and was happy to have the opportunity to do more practice on her translation skills even though she also found this part the hardest one.

These vocational high school students appeared to be more comfortable with the micro-skills of writing, where form and mechanics are the focus, than with the macro-skills of writing, where the rhetorical forms and conventions of written discourse are the primary concern (Brown, 2004). Stoneman (2006) noted that students' perception of test difficulty appeared to account for the level of effects on learning. Those who found the test too difficult to pass tended to have a negative feeling toward a test-driven policy and did not study for the test. Since both teachers' and students' saw the translation tasks as the most difficult, and students' English proficiency level was not satisfactory given the limited hours of weekly English lessons, it is clearly understandable that students were recommended to memorize new words and to be familiar with pattern drills when preparing for the new test. As Green (2007) mentioned, test intensity tends to become weak if the test task is challenging, but no sufficient or attainable preparation is given to conquer the difficult part.

The limited size of their vocabulary, a weak foundation of grammatical knowledge, insufficient practice time, and low English proficiency were the top five factors that students and teachers reported on the questionnaires about the difficulty in completing the translation questions from Chinese into English. These comments imply that the students and teachers think that a good writer should possess a wealth of understanding of grammar rules and vocabulary. Like speaking, writing is an effective means of communication, and one of the aspects of building communicative competence is grammatical competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Therefore, an assessment of the micro-skills of writing and having significant understanding of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics, and phonology are essential before one can master the macro-skills of writing. Since most tasks for this new writing test involve form-focused writing, a question arises: Does this result in an emphasis on

vocabulary memorization and the practice of grammatical rules (e.g., tense, combining sentences, and using transition words) in English teaching and learning, as it did in vocational high schools in Taiwan?

Research Question 2: What are Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Test Effects Brought about by the New Writing Test on Their Teaching and Learning?

As shown in Table 7, nearly 90% of the teachers indicated on the questionnaires that the addition of non-multiple choice writing questions to the 2015 English TVJCE had increased the time they devoted to class writing activities related to the new test such as lectures on the usage of vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structure patterns ($M = 4.01$). Around 85% of the teacher respondents stated that they focused mainly on the tips for answering writing questions but failed to conduct meaningful controlled-writing activities due to the very limited class time ($M = 4.18-4.22$). Furthermore, 75% of them noted that they had included non-multiple choice writing questions in their quizzes and therefore increased their writing corrections' workload ($M = 3.85-3.96$). On the other hand, nearly half of the teachers reported that the new writing test did not bring about much change to their teaching except for reinforcement of their students' vocabulary and phrases, given the students' low English proficiency ($M = 3.36$). Merely 1/3 of the teachers felt that their students' lexical knowledge, grammar, and writing ability had improved, because of the upcoming new constructed-response writing test ($M = 3.04-3.12$).

TABLE 7

Teachers' Perceptions of the Washback Effects from the 2015 English TVJCE (n = 139)

The possible to-be-tested non-multiple-choice writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE has...	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
• made me focus mainly on the tips for answering writing questions, because of the very limited class time	4.22	.88
• made me fail to conduct meaningful controlled-writing activities, because of the very limited class time	4.18	.92
• increased the time I devoted to class writing activities related to the new test such as lectures on the usage of vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structure patterns	4.01	.76
• increased my workload for marking and correcting test papers	3.95	.99
• made me include non-multiple choice writing questions in my quizzes	3.86	.88
• not brought about much change to my teaching except for the reinforcement of my students' vocabulary and phrases, given their low English proficiency	3.36	1.15
• improved the students' size of vocabulary bank	3.14	.83
• enhanced the students' grammar knowledge	3.12	.85
• improved the students' writing ability	3.04	.85

During the interviews, T1 and T2 perceived different effects brought about by the new test. T1 experienced quite some pressure from her school because students' scores were one aspect for teachers' accountability. She said, "I had done my best by giving my students a lot of writing practice, but you know, it was not easy to boost students' skills within a short period of time, especially if the students were not well motivated...". T1 also complained about the increasing workload by marking and correcting students' NMC lexical grammar writing tasks, as in "...you know, there are about 40 students in my class, and I have three year-3 students this year. The time I spent on marking students' translation responses was quite a lot. It was quite impossible for the students to check the NMC lexical grammar responses." T2 expressed that she did not really care about students' test performance. It was her educational belief that teaching of the test would not be something she would do in her class. Instead, she would prefer to equip her students with a good foundation of language skills by using various meaningful and interesting activities. "When I'm teaching, I try my best to teach the 4 skills to students. Honestly speaking, some hardworking students will study for the writing part of the test. Yet, for those who already give English up, it makes no difference at all." These findings seem to correspond with the variability of washback resulting from the mediating factors mentioned above.

The details of student questionnaires results are presented in Table 8. The main finding is that the new writing test brought about both positive and negative effects on their learning. Around 60% of the

students contended that their vocabulary and grammar proficiency had improved, because of the new test ($M = 3.55-3.59$). Around 30-40% of them had mixed feelings about this, saying that this new writing test (1) increased the financial burden placed upon them due to the purchase of test preparation materials ($M = 2.90$), (2) lowered their interest in learning English and enhanced their learning pressure, because their low English proficiency could not manage to cope with the writing tasks ($M = 3.09-3.26$), (3) led to their studying for the test and learning merely test-taking strategies ($M = 3.13$), but also (4) enhanced their motivation to practice writing ($M = 3.07$) and (5) increased their opportunities to practice writing and the amount of time they devoted to that task, therefore enhancing their writing proficiency ($M = 3.06-3.20$). Also, approximately 1/3 of the students were not sure about whether the new writing test had any positive effects on their learning time and motivation to practice writing or negative effects on their financial burden and test-oriented learning activities. A little more than 1/4 of the students stated that the new test neither increased their opportunities or their time spent on English writing practice nor enhanced their motivation to practice writing or their writing proficiency. They also did not agree that the new test led to their studying for the test or learning mainly test-oriented writing skills.

In the interviews, S4 and S6 indicated that they took the after-school lessons to prepare for the NMC lexical grammar writing task, because their parents hoped they would do well on the test and therefore would have a better opportunity to be admitted to a prestigious university. S4 even felt sorry for his parents because they needed to pay additional fees for the preparation materials and tutoring, which to some extent was a financial burden to them. S3 and S5, who passed the intermediate General English Proficiency Test equivalent to B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), expressed the positive effects this new test had brought to them. S5 said, "Because of the new writing tasks, more writing activities similar to the test format were conducted in class. However, it was a pity that we were not required to do the essay writing. I like to write a whole piece of essay so that I can express my own ideas in English."

All these findings imply that this new writing test has affected students to different degrees. Some were affected by the test positively, some negatively, and some unnoticeably.

Table 8

Students' Perceptions of the Washback Effects from the 2015 English TVJCE (n = 783)

The possible to-be-tested non-multiple-choice writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE has...	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
• enhanced my grammar knowledge	3.59	1.06
• increased the size of my vocabulary bank	3.55	1.05
• increased my learning pressure, because of my low English proficiency	3.26	1.17
• enhanced my English writing ability	3.20	1.51
• made me study for the test and learned merely test-taking strategies	3.13	1.05
• increased my opportunity to practice English writing	3.13	1.08
• lowered my interest in learning English, because of my low English proficiency	3.09	1.37
• increased my motivation to learn English writing	3.07	1.08
• increased my time devoted to practicing English writing	3.06	1.07
• increased my financial burden due to the purchase of test-preparation materials	2.90	1.16

Research Question 3: Does the New Writing Test Have a Difference in Classroom Writing Activities Among the Three Years of Vocational High School Students?

Table 9 reports, from the student perspective, the frequency of writing-related activities they did in the classroom, arranged in order from highest to lowest. Regular teacher-centered activities, including listening to lectures, practicing vocabulary, phrases, and grammar, reading materials, and taking vocabulary quizzes are the most frequently reported in-class learning activities, with the means ranging from $M = 3.97$ to 3.76 . Test-related writing activities are next, including practicing the five test-related writing tasks and mock tests (focusing on multiple choice questions), listening to lectures on tips for answering these writing tasks, and making sentences, with the means ranging from $M = 2.42-3.25$. Communicatively oriented writing activities such as writing short essays (e.g., diary writing,

picture-description writing, and letter writing) and practicing project-task writing (e.g., writing short stories, scripts for presentation slides, English commercials, and English drama) are least reported in class, with the means ranging from $M = 1.74$ to $M = 1.83$. Similar to the findings from student questionnaires, most students at the interview did not mention the major change on their learning activities for writing except for more writing practice on the test tasks in the classroom. S4 mentioned the various test-related activities by his English teacher such as offering test-taking tips, doing question analysis, using a formula approach to teach English translations, adopting preparation textbooks, and less attention paid to oral skills.

TABLE 9

Students' In-class Learning Activities Related to the 2015 English TVJCE (n = 783)

Students' in-class learning activities related to the possible to-be-tested five writing tasks on the 2015 English TVJCE	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
• listening to lectures on vocabulary, phrases, and grammar	3.97	1.00
• listening to lectures on reading materials and practicing exercises	3.88	.97
• taking vocabulary quizzes	3.76	1.21
• practicing the task of rewriting sentences with given structures	3.25	1.07
• practicing the task of putting words/phrases in the correct order	3.23	1.06
• listening to lectures on tips for answering these writing tasks	3.19	1.29
• practicing the task of translation questions from Chinese into English	2.95	.98
• practicing the task of translation questions from English into Chinese	2.94	.99
• practicing the task of sentence making	2.52	1.04
• practicing mock tests that focus on the multiple-choice reading questions	2.42	1.26
• practicing short-writing tasks such as diary writing, picture-description writing, and letter writing	1.83	.91
• practicing project-writing tasks such as writing scripts for presentation slides, short dramas, and short stories	1.74	1.02

As shown in Table 10, the student questionnaire responses indicated that the statistically significant differences in learning activities among the three years of vocational high school students can be grouped into two categories: (1) controlled and test-related writing activities and (2) real writing activities and regular lectures. The former refers to conducting practice on translation questions, ordering questions, rewriting sentences with certain structures, and mock tests. The latter refers to listening to lectures and exercise of vocabulary, phrases, grammar, and reading materials, and completing group writing projects such as writing short stories, scripts for presentation slides, English commercials, and English drama. The following activities show no statistically significant differences among the three years of students: (1) listening to lectures on tips for answering non-multiple-choice questions, (2) taking quizzes on vocabulary and phrases, (3) practicing sentence making, and (4) doing short-essay writing practice such as diary writing, picture-description writing, and letter writing.

TABLE 10

Significant Differences from In-class Learning Activities Among the Three Years of Students

Students' in-class learning activities among the three years of students	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
(1) controlled and test-related writing activities			
• practicing the task of translation questions from Chinese into English	(2,781)	10.51	.000
• practicing the task of translation questions from English into Chinese	(2,781)	7.05	.001
• practicing the task of rewriting sentences with given structures	(2,781)	20.02	.000
• practicing the task of putting words/phrases in the correct order	(2,781)	18.51	.000
• practicing mock tests that focus on the multiple-choice reading questions	(2,781)	140.74	.000
(2) real writing activities and regular lectures			
✓ listening to lectures on vocabulary, phrases, and grammar	(2,781)	6.98	.001
✓ listening to lectures on reading materials and practicing exercises	(2,781)	5.48	.004
✓ practicing project-writing tasks such as writing scripts for presentation slides, short dramas, and short stories	(2,781)	7.53	.001

According to Table 11, first-year students have more contact with writing-related practice than students in the second and third years, no matter in the frequency of listening to lectures or doing test-related writing practice. However, third-year students appear to have more practice on mock multiple-choice English tests than their first- or second-year counterparts, and the second- and third-year students did more project-oriented writing practice than first-year students, although the frequency was not very often. The reason why second- and third-year students had slightly more experience engaging in project-oriented writing practice was probably due to the fact that during these two years these students had more opportunities to attend contests that required the involvement of writing tasks such as English presentation contests, English drama contests, and English story-telling contests.

These findings above suggest that the new English writing test did result in more test-related writing practice for first year students but did not have much change for third-year students, who conducted test-related writing practice merely when they practiced mock tests. The possible reasons for these findings will be discussed in the next section.

Table 11
The Tukey Post Hoc Test of Differences from In-class Learning Activities Among the Three Years of Students

Student's in-class learning activities	(I) Year of students	(J) Year of students	Mean (I-J) differences	Standard error	<i>p</i> (Sig.)
(1) controlled and test-related writing activities					
• practicing the task of translating questions from Chinese into English	1	2	.369*	.086	.000
	1	3	.303*	.085	.001
• practicing the task of translating questions from English into Chinese	1	2	.303*	.087	.002
	1	3	.257*	.086	.008
• practicing the task of rewriting sentences with given structures	1	2	.288*	.092	.005
	1	3	.581*	.092	.000
	3	2	.292*	.091	.004
• practicing the task of putting words/phrases in the correct order	1	2	-.268*	.092	.010
	1	3	-.557*	.092	.000
	3	2	.288*	.091	.005
• practicing mock tests that focus on the multiple-choice reading questions	3	1	1.358*	.095	.000
	3	2	1.401*	.095	.000
(2) real writing activities and regular lectures					
✓ listening to lectures on vocabulary, phrases, and grammar	1	2	.283*	.085	.003
	1	3	.269*	.085	.004
✓ listening to lectures on reading materials and practicing exercises	1	2	.288*	.092	.005
	1	3	.581*	.092	.000
✓ practicing project-writing tasks such as writing scripts for presentation slides, short dramas, and short stories	2	1	.261*	.090	.011
	3	1	.331*	.090	.001

Discussion

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data imply that the content of the exam affected the teaching and learning activities in the classroom, but the variability and intensity of washback effects may vary person to person. On the whole, this study confirmed one of Alderson and Wall's washback hypotheses (1993) on the sequence of teaching probably because of test and mediating factors. The sequence of test-related teaching activities seemed to focus on vocabulary (lexis) and then syntax (grammar) in terms of the difficulty of the test. Quite a few of them included NMC lexical grammar questions in their quizzes and therefore increased their writing corrections' workload. However, nearly half of the teachers reported that the new writing test did not bring about much change to their teaching except for reinforcement of their students' vocabulary and phrases, given the students' low

English proficiency, insufficient education resources like limited hours of class time and big class size, and their educational belief not to teaching to the test. All these findings indicate that there is not always a linear relationship between a test and teaching practices (Dawadi, 2021; Shih, 2007)

Students across the three years of vocational high school were affected in different ways. The third-year students seemed to only study for the test and learned a lot from doing mock tests, which focused mainly on the multiple-choice reading questions. The first-year students appeared to benefit from this new writing test more than the second- and third-year students by having done more practice on the macro-skills of writing related to the five writing test tasks. These findings coincide with the claim of Shohamy et al. (1996) that “washback varies over time” (p. 299). Some studies (Shohamy et al., 1996; Shih, 2007) determined that the effects of the EFL test increased and that the effects of assessment for learning declined to the point of insubstantiality over the years. Others (Andrews et al., 2002) discovered that the effect on learning outcomes was delayed, becoming more apparent in the second year of the test than the first. Some teachers stated in the free response questionnaire part that because of the new writing test tasks, they had made effort at enhancing students’ grammar and translation skills in order to help them to cope with the new change. However, the limited time and students’ low level of English proficiency were unlikely to improve students’ writing ability within one year. Thus, for those who taught year-3 students, what they could do was to have these students do mock tests.

In Stoneman’s study (2006), students’ perception of test difficulty appeared to account for the level of effects on learning. Those who find the test too difficult to pass tended to have a negative feeling toward a test-driven policy and did not study for the test. Since both teachers and students found the translation tasks the most difficult and students’ English proficiency level was not satisfactory, it is clearly understandable that year-3 students were recommended to memorize more new words and to be familiar with pattern drills to prepare for the new test. Their frequency of doing practice on the translation task was lower than first- and second-year students. These findings all confirm the complexity of washback, attributing to both test and mediating factors.

As the entity in charge of the high-stakes test, the Testing Center for Technological and Vocational Education (TCE) stated that the non-multiple-choice writing questions were created to measure students’ ability to use lexicon and patterns. In terms of this test construct, this new writing test appears to have resulted in a greater focus on the micro-skills of writing in English teaching. For students with low proficiency, it is essential to build up solid fundamentals and basic tasks of writing. The new test has achieved its intended washback. However, with the limited hours of English classes every week, teachers were not able to conduct meaningful writing activities to help students to master the basic writing tasks for this new test, but instead gave lectures or had the students take vocabulary quizzes. In order to foster positive washback, more hours of English classes should be offered for teachers to design communicatively oriented writing activities so that students will benefit from them and improve their micro-skills of writing.

Conclusion

This was the first study in Taiwan to explore the washback effects of the 2015 English Four-Year Technical and Vocational Education Joint College Exam (TVJCE) on English teaching and learning in vocational high schools. Three major findings emerged in this study: (1) Test content affected the teaching and learning activities in the classroom, focusing on macro-level writing skills; (2) The intensity and variability of washback effects were due to students’ and teachers’ perceptions of test factors and certain mediating factors such as students’ English proficiency, teachers’ beliefs, and educational resources; and (3) The new test influenced different years of vocational high school students in different ways. Third-year students mainly conducted mock test practices, while first-year students benefited from this new test policy and reported doing more test-related writing practice in class.

Messick (1996) stated that washback effects usually appear after the test has been used for a while. Since teachers and third-year students were notified of the new writing test content a year prior to the debut of the 2015 English TVJCE, they probably were not offered enough time to conduct or practice test-related writing activities. Further research is essential to explore whether more positive effects will be discovered after students and teachers are more familiar with the new writing test. Furthermore, this study investigated students and teachers from a small number of vocational high schools, and thus the findings cannot be generalized. Further studies that involve a more significant number of teachers and students from all over Taiwan need to be conducted in order to better understand the whole picture of the washback effects that this new writing test has generated. Finally, the stakeholders of the new writing test, such as test developers, school administrators, material publishers, and even parents can be queried to generate a better understanding of both the educational and societal effects derived from the addition of the non-multiple-choice writing questions to the high-stakes college entrance English test.

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Appendix A-1

Student Questionnaire (English version)

Dear Student:

I am conducting research regarding the impact of the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing on English learning for vocational high schools in Taiwan. I am interested in your opinions of the new writing test and would like to know how you usually prepare for it in the classroom. To assist in this research, please fill in this questionnaire based upon your own experience. Any information you provide will be held in the strictest confidence and used solely for the stated purpose of this research.

Thank you for your time and participation. Your input is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Yi-Ching Pan, Ph. D.
Associate Professor, National Pingtung University

Part One: Please indicate your answer with a checkmark (v) where appropriate.

- (1) Gender: Female _____ Male _____
- (2) Name of your school : _____
- (3) Year of study: _____

Part Two: What are your perceptions of the non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test?

	5	4	3	2	1
Do you know the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test in terms of its tasks, and content? 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree					
What are your perceptions of the difficult level of the five possible to-be-tested writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE? 5 = very easy, 4 = easy, 3 = not sure, 2 = difficult, 1 =very difficult					
Filling-in-the-blank questions					
Translation questions from English into Chinese					
Translation questions from Chinese into English					
Rewriting sentences with given structures					
Putting words/phrases in the correct order					

Please specify the reason for your most difficult writing task:

Part Three: What are the in-class writing activities related to the 2015 English TVJCE?

5 = always, 4 = usually, 3 = sometimes, 2 = seldom, 1 = never	5	4	3	2	1
What are your perceptions of the difficult level of the five possible to-be-tested writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE? 5 = very easy, 4 = easy, 3 = not sure, 2 = difficult, 1 =very difficult					
■ listening to lectures on vocabulary, phrases, and grammar					
■ listening to lectures on reading materials and practicing exercises					
■ listening to lectures on tips for answering these writing tasks					
■ practicing mock tests that focus on the multiple-choice reading questions					
■ practicing project-writing tasks such as writing scripts for presentation slides, short dramas, and short stories					
■ practicing short-writing tasks such as diary writing, picture-description writing, and letter writing					
■ practicing the task of putting words/phrases in the correct order					
■ practicing the task of rewriting sentences with given structures					
■ practicing the task of sentence making					
■ practicing the task of translation questions from Chinese into English					
■ practicing the task of translation questions from English into Chinese					
■ taking vocabulary quizzes					

Others (Please specify.): _____

Part Four: What effects does the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test bring about?

5= strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree	5	4	3	2	1
■ enhanced my grammar knowledge					
■ increased the size of my vocabulary bank					
■ increased my learning pressure, because of my low English proficiency					
■ enhanced my English writing ability					
■ made me study for the test and learned merely test-taking strategies					
■ increased my opportunity to practice English writing					
■ lowered my interest in learning English, because of my low English proficiency					
■ increased my motivation to learn English writing					
■ increased my time devoted to practicing English writing					
■ increased my financial burden due to the purchase of test-preparation materials					

Others (Please specify.): _____

Appendix A-2

Teacher Questionnaire (English version)

Dear Teacher:

I am conducting research regarding the impact of the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing on English learning for vocational high schools in Taiwan. I am interested in your opinions of the new writing test and would like to know how this test has affected your teaching. To assist in this research, please fill in this questionnaire based upon your own experience. Any information you provide will be held in the strictest confidence and used solely for the stated purpose of this research.

Thank you for your time and participation. Your input is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Yi-Ching Pan, Ph. D.
Associate Professor, National Pingtung University

Part One: Please indicate your answer with a checkmark (v) where appropriate.

- (1) Gender: Female _____ Male _____
- (2) Name of your school : _____
- (3) Years of teaching experience: _____

Part Two: What are your perceptions of the non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test?

	5	4	3	2	1
Do you know the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test in terms of its tasks, and content? 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree					
What are your perceptions of the difficult level of the five possible to-be-tested writing tasks on 2015 English TVJCE? 5 = very easy, 4 = easy, 3 = not sure, 2 = difficult, 1 =very difficult					
Filling-in-the-blank questions					
Translation questions from English into Chinese					
Translation questions from Chinese into English					
Rewriting sentences with given structures					
Putting words/phrases in the correct order					

Please specify the reason for the most difficult writing task for your students:

Part Three: What effects does the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test bring about?

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree	5	4	3	2	1
■ made me focus mainly on the tips for answering writing questions, because of the very limited class time					
■ enhanced the students' grammar knowledge					
■ improved the students' size of vocabulary bank					
■ improved the students' writing ability					
■ increased my workload for marking and correcting test papers					
■ increased the time I devoted to class writing activities related to the new test such as lectures on the usage of vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structure patterns					
■ made me fail to conduct meaningful controlled-writing activities, because of the very limited class time					
■ made me include non-multiple choice writing questions in my quizzes					
■ not brought about much change to my teaching except for the reinforcement of my students' vocabulary and phrases, given their low English proficiency					

Others (Please specify.): _____

Appendix B-1

Student Interview Questions:

1. To what extent do you understand the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing task?
2. Which of the 5 possible to-be-tested lexical grammar writing tasks do you find the most difficult? What are your reasons for your response?
3. What are the writing activities do you do in the classroom?
4. Has the new writing test affected you? If yes, how?
5. What are the positive and negative effects that are brought about by the new writing test?

Appendix B-2

Teacher Interview Questions:

1. To what extent do you understand the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing task?
2. Which of the 5 possible to-be-tested lexical grammar writing tasks do you find the most difficult for your students? What are your reasons for your response?
3. Have you made a change on your teaching in response to the new non-multiple-choice lexical grammar writing test? Why or why not for your response?
4. What are the positive or negative effects that are brought about by the new writing test?