

Bridging Test Construct and Beneficial Washback Effects: Revising the GEPT High-Intermediate Reading Test

Tung-Mei Ma Shu-Fan Li

The Language Training & Testing Center

td@lffc.ntu.edu.tw

Based on the findings of a project which related Taiwan's General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), there was recognition of a need to revise the High-intermediate Reading Test of the GEPT (GEPT-HR), whose level corresponds to the CEFR B2 level. The findings indicated that longer texts better facilitate higher levels of cognitive processing. In addition to including longer texts in the GEPT-HR, increasing the variety of text types was also deemed necessary based on the results of a comparison between the GEPT-HR reading specifications and the CEFR B2 level descriptions established by the Council of Europe. An investigation of the lengths and types of texts found in the reading textbooks used in Taiwan's universities and in several major English reading tests supported the need for revision. To investigate the appropriateness of new items, two pretest forms based on the partially revised specifications were pretested. Examinees' performances and their feedback on both the pretest and the operational GEPT test were statistically analyzed. Although the examinees claimed that the long passages were more difficult, their performances did not support that claim. Their performances were satisfactory in terms of difficulty and discrimination indexes. To triangulate the data, university teachers' opinions were collected. Whether the revised test form could exert more beneficial washback effects on the teaching of English reading in Taiwan was also considered when this project was launched.

Key words: CEFR, GEPT High-Intermediate Reading Test, revision of reading specifications, text length, text type, pretest, feedback, beneficial washback effects

INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to enhance the construct validity of the GEPT High-Intermediate Reading Comprehension Test (GEPT-HR) through partial revision of its specifications. Another equally important aim was to achieve positive washback effects on the teaching of English reading in Taiwan. The results of a previous questionnaire survey indicated that this should be a goal (Wu, 2008:8). Fully 90% of high school and university teachers who took the survey agreed that external exams such as the GEPT influenced their teaching and assessment practices. This study first experimented with testing longer passages of approximately 350 and 400 words in length, passage lengths which would better match the can-do descriptors at the CEFR B2 level established by the Council of Europe. The testing time of 50 minutes and word-count of approximately 3,000 words remained the same as in the operational GEPT-HR. Second, to include a broader selection of text types, one argumentative text was used in the reading comprehension part. The results of the pretest are presented in this paper.