

High-stakes tests can improve learning - Reality or wishful thinking?

Jessica Wu, Judy Lo, and Anita Lin
Language Training & Testing Center (LTTC)

Having been influenced by the trend of globalization, education across levels in Taiwan requires students to demonstrate their English ability at a specified Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level through taking a standardized English language test (e.g., GEPT, IELTS, TOEFL iBT, TOEIC). This practice has been increasingly criticized for failing to achieve its intended goals of enhancing students' English language proficiency, given the fact that these tests are mostly used for summative purposes rather than formative ones. In students' minds, tests are used to judge how good one is rather than to help one to learn better. Therefore, there is an urgent need to alter such mindset resulted from using standardized tests as a means to improve learning.

This study sought to improve the use of the GEPT in facilitating learning by reforming the current score reporting practices. For this study, the information provided in the score report was expanded to include not only test scores but also diagnostic feedback for GEPT test-takers based on the principles of Learning-Oriented Assessment (Jones & Saville, 2016). We believe that providing learners with detailed and personalized analysis of their test performance can help them understand what their strengths and weaknesses are (feed-back) and what they can do to improve their learning more effectively (feed-forward).

To provide effective feedback to test-takers, detailed can-do statements underlying the ability measured in the test were first developed and each test item was then tagged with its corresponding can-do statement by a panel composed of five researchers who are familiar with the GEPT specifications. To investigate the effectiveness of the new score reporting practices, around 1,000 learners were invited to take the GEPT listening and reading test in June 2018. Besides test scores, they received diagnostic feedback including: 1) a general description of the ability underlying the scores attained, 2) an analysis of individual strengths and weaknesses in listening and reading ability, and 3) personalized learning suggestions. In addition, an online questionnaire was administered to investigate test-takers' perception of the new score reporting service. Among them, about 5% of the test-takers were selected for a follow-up interview. Questionnaire responses and interviews including both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed.

Results showed that in general the test-takers were highly satisfied with the new score reporting. More than 95% of the questionnaire respondents reported that the diagnostic feedback increased their understanding of their ability and was useful for their future learning. The findings suggest that with the new score reporting service, the GEPT can be used to improve learning. Therefore, we call for a paradigm shift from test orientation to learning orientation among learners, teachers, and testers in view of the consequences of using standardized tests to improve learning.