

Wash back Effect of the Greatest on Teaching Practices & Perspectives in Select Engineering Colleges in Telangana: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Washback effect of testing on teaching practices is one of the much-researched, fertile area in the field of ELT. This study reports the findings of the washback effect of GRE on teaching practices, as surveyed amongst a group of 45 teachers in select autonomous engineering colleges in Telangana. The data was analyzed qualitatively and results seem to reveal significant changes in their teaching practices and perspectives such as realization of the need for improving their skills and understanding, becoming more goal-oriented, changes in evaluation and adapting materials and improvising on them.

Keywords

GRE, washback, argument, verbal, qualitative

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Introduction

The GRE (Graduate Record Exam) is one of the high stake tests used as an entry level test for higher education abroad. In addition to the quantitative aspect of the test, the analytical writing part and the verbal reasoning component of the test contribute to their overall scores. Although the GRE tests are not tests of English-language proficiency (ELP) per se, they do “measure skills important for graduate and professional education at institutions where the language of instruction is English” (ETS) An average of 1 lakh students have taken the test in 2020, according to a 2020 Resurvey, as reported by The Hindu. Telangana happens to be one of states that highest wherein the government requires students to produce scores of GRE, TOEFL to qualify themselves for the financial assistance to avail themselves of scholarships to study in foreign universities. In most autonomous colleges in Telangana, the verbal component is taught by English language teachers working in engineering departments (Tomlinson, 2005). Therefore, we decided to situate our study in this context and explore how teaching for GRE impacts their overall approach to teaching these classes (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Spratt, 2005).

Earlier studies have focused on studying the washback effects of various tests such as GRE, IELTS on teachers and the modes of instruction. Studies have revealed that scores in tests seem to significantly impact high-stakes tests such as TOEFL, GRE and IELTS and to significantly impact classroom methodologies, educational practices, materials and teaching practices of language teachers (Spratt, 2005) Based on these tests, course materials and teaching practices are modified according to the tests (Bachman, 2005; Bozorgian & Muhammadpour, 2020). Many studies have focused on studying the washback effect of tests such as TOEFL and IELTS (Spratt, 2005). However, the washback effect of GRE test has not been explored much, more so in Indian contexts. Hence, we decided to take up this study.

Research questions

This study addresses the following two research questions:

RQ1 :To what extent do GRE tests influence **how** teachers teach these GRE classes?

RQ2: To what extent does the GRE test influence **what** teachers teach in their GRE classes?

Data collection: Instrument

The data for this study was collected from a group of 45 college teachers employed in 12 engineering colleges in Telangana district. Convenience sampling was used to collect data because colleges in Telangana reopened much early after the Covid lockdown was relaxed for colleges. These language teachers were training students for their GRE courses simultaneously in addition to their general English classes. Semi structured interviews were conducted over telephone and the data was analyzed thematically. The questions used are presented in Appendix A. We did not follow the order so rigidly in terms of structure but ensured that we followed the overall pattern to elicit maximum responses. In some cases, we had to prompt and these prompts are presented in brackets (Erfani, 2012; Goulding, Rowland, & Barber, 2002; McNamara, 2003).

Data analysis:

The data was analyzed qualitatively. All the interviews conducted were transcribed and analyzed for the emergence of patterns. The following table 1 presents the codes that emerged and numerical values were assigned to these codes. The term R has been prefixed after the protocols in the later part (while referring to protocols) to indicate the number of that particular respondent

(eg R16 refers to the 16th teacher who was interviewed)

Table 1:
Themes Vs Codes

Themes	Codes
Methodological changes (MC)	22
Adaptation of materials (AM)	12
Specific & goal-oriented teaching(SGT)	35
Choice of passages beyond market materials/text books (MBM)	4
Changes in evaluation pattern (CEP)	14
Improvement in Reasoning Abilities (IRA)	43

Methodological changes (MC):

Owing to the complex nature of passages, a vast majority of teachers admitted to bringing in significant changes in the way they handle. Some of the protocols related to this are presented below:

“To begin with, in the first two classes, I simplified the passages before teaching argument structure ..”(R14)

“I had to deal with the passage paragraph by paragraph” (R1)

“I glossed some of the terms in reading passages (R6)”

“Vocabulary and logic were the most difficult parts and I had to address those parts first before I could make any progress” (R13)

“I started using a more analytical approach” (R6)

“Background knowledge was a problem that I discovered with some students when it came to teaching to tackle reading passages. So, at times, I had to work on giving them the needed background knowledge...” (R10)

“I could not do so many group work activities/pair work as I could when I teach IELTS/TOEFL”(R49)

Improving Reasoning Abilities (IRA):

One of the chief challenges of GRE reading passages is the heavy, argumentatively-loaded pattern of passages. Many teachers admitted that they found it challenging to deal with them. Hence, they devised some strategies to overcome this challenge. Our interviews revealed that many teachers, despite having their Phds, found some of the passages to be complex and dense.

“The passages are difficult not because of the sentence length, but because of the basic nature of the passages”(R40)

“The toughest part for me was to understand the deeper meanings of the terms like premises, assertions etc. I had to do a lot of preparation and homework and sharpen my own understanding of logical reasoning before I entered the class” (R36)

“The moment I read GRE passages, I understood it is logic that I have to develop my reasoning skills because my general language skills were in place” (R5)

“I realized that it was a two-pronged battle for me – I should understand how to deconstruct reasoning” (R42)

“I had serious troubles with the reasoning part and had to work a lot on it” (R2)

"Most words we come across in GRE tests are something we read in text books but not what we use regularly. So I had to do a lot of self-learning" (R9)

"Since I found verbal reasoning and argument structure in the critical reasoning section to be challenging, I had to work more on breaking an argument and deconstructing it" (R14)

"I worked on bringing a lot of my passive vocabulary to active vocabulary so that I could crack the sentence completion tasks myself before I take it up with my students (R7)

"My analysis revealed that some of the best scorers had the Kaplan vocabulary memorized. Therefore, I resorted to drill students with those items in language (R39)"

"I used a lot of vocabulary games to teach sentence completion exercises. Especially when the distractors given in the options were so close" (R45)

Specific, Goal-oriented teaching (SGT):

Most teachers expressed that they reduced the time spent on explaining language items in general and instead, focused on what was needed for their students to attain that particular score

"I stopped focusing on the basics of language and instead moved on to discussing only that which is needed for the classes" (R10)

"Most of my students were looking to get a grade 4 for their written component. So I was totally goal oriented ...getting them to obtain features of Grade 4 in their essays instead of strengthening their grammar or argument" (R14)

"I stuck to lesson objectives and start looking at general language doubts as a distraction" (R8)

"I became more goal oriented and focused on scores" (R8)

"I tried my best not to distract from the lesson objectives" (R2)

Materials beyond books(MBB):

Very few teachers expressed that the materials given in textbooks were sometimes too complex and that they had to look beyond market materials. A few protocols from interviews related to this are presented below:

"For students weak in their basic language skills, I had to explain premises and argument by way of simple, small passages "(R8)

"The published ETS books like Kaplan or others did not help me sometimes. I even took up some passages in literature" (R9)

Changes in evaluation pattern(CEP):

Evaluation is an integral part of teaching and learning and we focused on finding if teachers made any changes to their method or mode of evaluation. The following protocols reveal that they drew heavily from the scoring guidelines and depended heavily on diagnostic tests available online. Some of the protocols related to this are presented below:

"I changed my teaching and evaluation pattern to fit the rubrics in the scoring criteria...so any general discussion related to language was kept out of the way" (R18)

"I began using all diagnostic tests before I decided on what to focus on in that particular hour(R42)

"The diagnostic tests available online helped me in every class. After drilling them with new vocabulary items for sentence completion, I would immediately follow it up with a diagnostic test"(R 43)

"When students handed over their practice essays, I started evaluating their essays based on certain aspects of scoring in the guidelines given – like vocabulary, grammatical structures etc"(R36)

Conclusions:

In congruence with the earlier research studies, the component and the task types of GRE test seem to impact training and teaching methodologies significantly. Further, a majority of the respondents (80%) had mentioned that they had to improve on their reasoning abilities in general because mere proficiency in language wouldn't help them train their students for GRE successfully. Overall, there was a clear challenge experienced by them while handling the reasoning part. They had to work on methodological adaptations and also work around their materials to suit students' needs in terms of scores, thus answering research questions 1 and 2. Variations in testing modes and testing frequencies were also reported.

Limitations:

One of the major limitations of this study is the smaller sample size. Also, all the teachers who participated in the survey were not at the same levels of language proficiency. Our interviews revealed that some of these teachers were clearly at an advanced level, while some were still at the intermediate level. Therefore, the changes they made to their teaching patterns or methodologies might not have resulted in the desired results in terms of scores. Further, not all teachers had acquired special qualifications to teach GRE/TOEFL. Further, during our interviews, when we wanted our teachers to expand on their responses, some directions for them to think were given by way of prompting phrases. There is a possibility that researcher bias might have crept in during these occasions, though we tried our best to identify and filter the same while coding and transcribing the responses.

Interview questions:

1. Please give us an idea into your educational background.
2. How long have you been training candidates for the GREtest?
3. Did you take up any specific language training courses to train learners for GREtest? If yes, provide details: -----
4. Are you a trained examiner for any other language tests?
5. Which component of GRE have you been teaching?
6. Your main objectives of teaching GRE tests? (Institutional requirements, continuing professional development, financial reasons)
7. Duration of the GRE classes you teach in terms of hours?
8. Student strength in your classes
9. Chief objectives of your GRE teaching classes:(improve the general language levels of learners, help students prepare for their GRE tests)
10. Do you think that the structure and nature of GRE verbal part has an impact on the way you choose the content of language items you teach in classes?
11. Do you use activities in your classes? If yes, What kinds of activities?
12. Does the GRE test influence the way you teach? If yes, how?
13. How do you use the GRE materials in classes? (modify them according to learner's levels without leaning heavily on course books, depend totally on course books and make very minor modifications, totally transform them, add activities created by you)
14. Was there a shift in your general orientation towards teaching GRE classes? If you have answered "yes" what was it?
15. Did you bring in any methodological changes in the classroom? Give details
16. Did you introduce any variations in your testing pattern? Give details

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