

A Comparative Analysis of Washback from IELTS and CET-4 Listening Tests on Self-Efficacy and Listening Metacognitive Strategies Through the Learners' Lens

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Abstract

This study compares the washback effects of the IELTS and CET-4 listening tests on learners' self-efficacy and listening metacognitive strategies (LMS) use. Using a mixed-methods approach, questionnaire data from 190 Chinese undergraduates and follow-up interviews with six students showed no statistically significant differences in overall washback between the two tests. However, qualitative insights revealed distinct experiential patterns: IELTS preparation strengthened confidence in daily conversational contexts and vocabulary building, while CET-4 preparation tended to foster improvement in later stages through drill practice under test pressure. Although learners reported similar levels of LMS use, interview data indicated that task type and difficulty influenced how LMS were applied. The findings underscore the value of incorporating learner perspectives into test design and pedagogical preparation.

Keywords

Washback effects; Listening tests; IELTS; CET-4; Self-efficacy; Listening metacognitive strategies; Comparative study.

1. Introduction

Research of washback effects of tests, especially high-stake tests, attracted considerable attention over the past twenty years. Among the existing washback studies, more were conducted to examine teaching in language classrooms from teachers' perspective (Green, 2006). Learners, as test-takers and perhaps the most prominent stakeholders, were affected most by testing (Kirkland, 1971), thus were significant enough for more research attention in the testing field.

Students took IELTS and CET-4 mainly for different purposes, the former for university admission (e.g. Tabrizi, 2017), the later for employment opportunity (e.g. Fu, 2021). According to Xie and Andrews (2013), the use of high-stakes tests might affect students' test preparation. Topics of these two listening tests are dissimilar (Chou & Zhang, 2011). For example, CET-4 listening test contains news report texts while IELTS listening test involves texts of daily-life and educational context. Additionally, listening tests of IELTS and CET-4 include different task types, which could exert impact on students' listening comprehension strategies use (e.g. Oxford et al., 2004). The comparison of washback effects of listening test of IELTS and CET-4 deserves further investigation.

Existing studies examined learner washback effects of the IELTS and CET-4, few specifically studied washback effects of listening tests and made comparisons. This exploratory research attempts to address the gap and explores washback effects from learners' perspective on self-efficacy and use of listening metacognitive strategies (LMS) on the preparation of these two listening tests, hopefully shedding some light on learners' better preparation of listening tests and improve learning efficacy.

2. Literature Review

Washback, defined as the influence of testing on teaching and learning, could yield both positive and negative effects (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Central to this concept is the Washback Hypothesis, which posits that tests shape the behaviors of teachers and learners by influencing what and how they taught and learned respectively. In the context of listening, positive washback has been linked to the improvement of test performance (Bailey, 1996).

Self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's abilities to control and accomplish designated response for intended achievements (Bandura, 1997). Research on the College English Test (CET) indicates its substantial washback on learners. For instance, Li et al. (2012) observed in their study that many students perceived enhanced listening skills and increased self-efficacy in practical English use following CET preparation. In a study on the washback effects of the CET, Sun (2016) revealed that students reported higher level of listening test self-efficacy compared to the findings of Li et al. (2012), while also identifying a negative correlation between self-efficacy and task difficulty. Furthermore, self-efficacy appears to directly affect engagement, with students possessing higher self-efficacy demonstrating greater involvement in test preparation (Cheng et al., 2011). Extending the focus to the learning process, Yang (2025) further observed that the TEM-4 listening test exerted a positive washback effect on the listening learning of participants across both examined proficiency levels. The washback of tests like CET-4 also extends to learning strategies (Wu, 2025), particularly metacognitive strategies which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning (O'Malley et al., 1989). Studies confirm that test preparation can promote the use of these strategies. For example, Zhong (2015) observed that over 70% of students acknowledged that preparing for the CET-4 listening test enhanced their metacognitive strategic awareness, and students of higher scores tended to employ more listening strategies. This strategic adjustment targeted at test demands is a common finding (eg. Xiong & Li, 2020). The use of such strategies is, in turn, positively influenced by self-efficacy (Pintrich, 1999). Despite these insights, research specifically on the washback of high-stakes listening tests on learners remains limited, with only one identified study focusing on the IELTS listening test, which noted a goal-oriented learning attitude among test-takers (Mi, 2008).

Given the varying and inconclusive findings regarding learners' self-efficacy and LMS use, further investigation is warranted. This study therefore aims to examine and compare the learner washback effects of the IELTS and CET-4 listening tests on these two key constructs, self-efficacy and LMS use, to better understand the processes involved in student test preparation and listening development. The following research questions are addressed.

- (1) To what extent do the preparation of listening tests of IELTS and CET-4 affect learner' self-efficacy?
- (2) To what extent do the preparation of listening tests of IELTS and CET-4 affect learners' use of LMS?
- (3) What are the differences of learner washback effects on self-efficacy and LMS use between IELTS listening test and CET-4 listening test?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were 190 students in a comprehensive college in southern China. The sample included both English majors and non-English majors across first- to fourth-year cohorts, with female students accounting for 90% of the total. Six junior-year students from the group subsequently participated in follow-up interviews after completing the questionnaire.

3.2. Instruments

Data were collected using two questionnaires. The first was a self-efficacy questionnaire specifically developed for this study. Its content validity was ensured through a review by two experienced teachers and two students, who evaluated the wording, format, and item sequence. A pilot study involving 30 university students demonstrated excellent internal consistency for this instrument, with a Cronbach's alpha of .934.

The second instrument was a LMS questionnaire, adapted from Vandergrift et al.'s (2006) Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ). The original MALQ, which comprises 21 items across five categories measured on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1="strongly disagree" to 6="strongly agree"), has established satisfactory psychometric properties. For the purpose of this study, the adaptation focused specifically on two key metacognitive categories: planning and evaluation, and problem-solving.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS. After confirming normal distribution, means and standard deviations were calculated, and t-tests were conducted to compare the washback effects between the two tests. Qualitative interview data were thematically coded for in-depth analysis.

4. Results

This section presents findings on self-efficacy and LMS use, integrating quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from interviews. Interviewees are anonymized as Students A-F (A-C for IELTS; D-F for CET-4). Results are organized according to the three research questions.

4.1. Self-efficacy

The mean self-efficacy scores were 3.62 (SD = 1.18) for CET-4 and 3.82 (SD = 1.11) for IELTS on a 6-point scale (see Figure). Given that the scale midpoint is 3.5, both scores indicate a moderately positive level of perceived self-efficacy, with the IELTS group reporting a slightly higher average.

Interview analysis identified vocabulary acquisition and increased exposure to daily-life conversations as key factors enhancing self-efficacy, a pattern particularly noted among IELTS candidates. For example, Student B explicitly linked vocabulary growth to heightened self-efficacy, stating, "the accumulation of vocabulary improved her self-efficacy", which subsequently motivated more intensive test preparation. Regarding the perceived timing of listening improvement, responses diverged. While CET-4 interviewees (Students D-F) attributed accelerated progress to the later phases of preparation, citing factors such as test pressure, concentrated practice, and improved use of strategies, one IELTS participant (Student B) described a contrasting experience, reporting quicker initial gains followed by increased anxiety in the final stages.

4.2. LMS

Quantitative analysis of the LMS questionnaires indicated highly comparable levels of LMS use between the two test groups. The overall LMS mean score was identical for both the CET-4 group (M = 4.03, SD = 1.02) and the IELTS group (M = 4.03, SD = 1.04) (see Figure), suggesting a similar, moderately high reliance on the use of metacognitive strategies during test preparation.

This consistency was maintained across the two subscales examined. For the Planning and Evaluation subscale, mean scores were nearly equivalent (CET-4: M = 3.98, SD = 1.05; IELTS: M = 4.04, SD = 1.10). Similarly, for the Problem-solving subscale, scores were very close, with the

CET-4 group reporting a marginally higher mean (CET-4: $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.04$; IELTS: $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.03$).

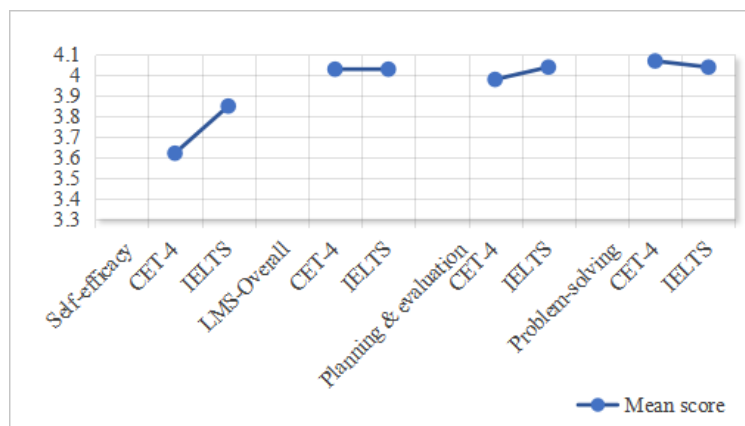


Figure 1. Mean scores of self-efficacy and LMS use by test type (IELTS/CET-4)

Interview data provided further insight into learners' application of LMS. Participants, including Students B and C, reported seeking formal training primarily to acquire such strategies, which they credited with improving both their listening ability and confidence. All interviewees affirmed the utility of LMS, citing techniques like goal-setting as beneficial, and expressed intentions to continue using them.

A common strategy for unfamiliar vocabulary was contextual guessing. Student C further explained that she supplemented this by drawing on background knowledge for familiar topics, stating, "If the topic was familiar, I would also think of my background knowledge for the guessing".

The interviews also indicated that strategy use was adaptive. Student C noted that her planning was influenced by task type, and that she adjusted her focus based on difficulty: prioritizing targeted information extraction for easier tasks, and relying more on inference and prior knowledge for difficult ones.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of Washback Effects

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the washback effects of the two listening tests. After confirming normality, the results indicated no statistically significant differences. For self-efficacy, the difference between the CET-4 group ($M = 3.62$) and the IELTS group ($M = 3.85$) was not significant, $t(188) = -1.348$, $p = .179$. Similarly, for overall LMS use (CET-4: $M = 4.03$; IELTS: $M = 4.03$), no significant difference was found, $t(188) = -0.042$, $p = .966$. The subscales of planning & evaluation and problem-solving also showed no significant differences between the two test groups.

However, qualitative data revealed a nuanced distinction in the perceived source of confidence. IELTS test-takers (Students A–C) specifically attributed increased confidence to exposure to everyday topics during test preparation. In contrast, CET-4 test-takers (Students D–F) did not associate their self-efficacy with confidence in specific thematic content.

5. Discussion

This study examined and compared the washback effects of the CET-4 and IELTS listening tests on learners' self-efficacy and LMS use. Quantitative results revealed moderately positive and statistically comparable levels of self-efficacy and LMS use across both tests, aligning with prior findings on test preparation fostering strategic engagement (Li et al., 2012; Zhong, 2015). The broad positive impact on learner motivation and strategy use resonates with recent research on standardized testing (Wu, 2025; Yang, 2025). Interviews suggested a reinforcing cycle

where perceived progress, often from vocabulary gains, boosted confidence and further involvement, supporting Cheng et al.'s (2011) link between self-efficacy and engagement.

Despite quantitative similarities, qualitative differences emerged. IELTS candidates uniquely derived confidence from familiarity with daily-life topics, while CET-4 students' confidence was more generalized. This highlights how test content shapes the qualitative experience of washback. The adaptive application of strategies, such as contextual guessing supplemented by background knowledge, was confirmed.

The absence of significant differences in washback suggests the high-stakes nature of both tests, rather than their differing purposes for employment or academic pursuit, may be a more potent driver of similar learner responses, offering a nuanced perspective to Xie and Andrew's (2013) work.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study found that both the CET-4 and IELTS listening tests exert similarly positive washback on learners' self-efficacy and use of LMS. Pedagogical implications emerge from these findings. First, the comparable promotion of LMS supports the integration of explicit metacognitive strategy training within listening curricula, regardless of the target test. Second, building learners' topic-specific background knowledge and vocabulary can directly enhance their confidence and real-world listening competence, a strategy particularly relevant for tests featuring thematic content.

While the mixed-methods design offered valuable insights, the study's reliance on a context-specific sample and a limited number of interviewees suggests caution in generalizing the results. Future research should involve participants from diverse institutions and employ mixed methods, including classroom observation, to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of behavioral washback in authentic learning contexts.

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