



# Language Teaching Research Quarterly



2019, Vol. 9, 1–22

## A Study of IELTS's Affective Washback on Chinese Students' Learning Goal, Motivation, and Anxiety

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*Received 07 October 2018 Accepted 15 January 2019*

### Abstract

Currently, there are a vast number of Chinese students taking IELTS each year, but there are scarce studies regarding to how this high-stakes test affects Chinese students. From the perspective of test impact and second language acquisition theories, this study investigates Chinese students' perceptions of IELTS's affective impact in their preparation and test-taking experiences, with particular focus on how IELTS affects students' learning goal, motivation, and anxiety. Due to the complexity of test impact and second language acquisition, this study adopted a mixed-method research, including questionnaire survey and interviews. Seventy-six students who had taken IELTS more than once were invited to complete online survey, and ten out of those surveyed were invited to attend semi-structured interviews. Both quantitative data and qualitative data were analysed. As shown in the findings, the most important affective impact of IELTS was its influence on students' short-term learning goal. Also, IELTS had an influence on students' motivation but did not affect students' anxiety to a large extent. Moreover, IELTS's influence on students' learning goals was greater than its influence on motivation. Besides, because students clarified their learning goals, specifically short-term learning goals, they were motivated and their anxiety was reduced. However, in accordance with the findings, IELTS might potentially have negative impact on students' long-term learning goals, but the data from the research in the study are not possible to enable me to say anything specific about how much it could negatively impact long-term learning goals. In the future, it is suggested that the impact on students' long-term learning goals be researched on.

**Keywords:** *Chinese Students, Perceptions, Affective Washback, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)*

## **Introduction**

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most popular English proficiency test: more than 2 million IELTS tests are taken each year (Britishcouncil.cn, 2015). IELTS is “designed to assess the language ability of candidates who need to study or work where English is the language of communication” (IELTS Handbook, 2007, p.2). In the UK, IELTS scores are required and accepted as English proficiency proof by almost 1,476 universities and institutions (Gov.uk, 2014). Most of candidates took IELTS for academic purposes: if an international student is planning to study in a UK university, he or she needs to achieve the IELTS scores that the university considers appropriate (IELTS.org, 2015). In term of the origin of the international students in the UK, almost 32% of them are from China (UKCISA, 2014). In order to obtain the particular scores, Chinese students spent time and money, and spared no effort in preparing for and taking IELTS (Green, 2007). Due to the vast number of Chinese IELTS test-takers and every effort they made, there is a need that their voices should be heard.

In terms of language testing theories, IELTS, as a high-stakes test, may affect learners and learning, which is called test’s washback (Hughes, 1989; Wall, 1997). For example, IELTS may affect what learners learn and how learners learn. However, it is found that there has been a dearth of recent empirical evidence regarding IELTS’s washback on learners’ emotional conditions, which is called the affective washback. In the view of language testing and second language acquisition, this study sets out to investigate Chinese students’ perceptions of IELTS’s affective washback, in their individual experiences, with a particular focus on how IELTS affects students’ language goal-setting, motivation, and anxiety.

## **Organisation**

Following Introduction, the remaining part of the study proceeds as follow. Section 1 gives an outline of literature regarding washback and affective washback, then proposes research question. Section 2 is concerned with how the research in the study is designed. In Section 3, data captured in questionnaire survey will be illustrated in detail. Findings from the transcripts of interview data will be demonstrated in Section 4. Combining and integrating the previous chapters, Section 5 will begin to discuss the research findings and to find answers to the research question. At the end of Section 5, a brief summary of the findings into the research questions will be presented. In Section 6, I will describe the suggestions based on the discussion and research findings. Finally, I will conclude the study.

## **Washback and Affective Washback**

Hughes (1989) coined the term “backwash”, which is frequently used as washback now, and defined it as the effects of testing on teaching and learning. Alderson and Wall (1993) expanded this definition by proposing a series of washback hypotheses including a test’s washback on what and how teachers taught, what and how learners learnt, the rate and sequence of teaching and of learning, attitudes to the content and method of teaching and of learning. In the washback trichotomy, Hughes (1993 cited in Bailey, 1999) identified three mechanisms, which were

participants, process and product. Participants include teachers, learners, administrators, material developers and publishers. In this study, the focus was on teachers and learners. Hughes (1989) argued that participants' perceptions, together with their attitudes in turn might affect what the participants did in carrying out their work, classroom teaching or learning (the "process"). The outcome of teaching and learning was represented by the "product".

Based on the above theories, washback is a term often used in connection with teaching and learning (the "process"). But in reference to a test's influence on individuals, such as teachers, learners and other stakeholders, washback is not commonly used. Instead, another term "test impact", which is broader and more general than washback, is often used in relation to a test's effects on individuals, practices, policies and educational and societal system and so on (Wall, 1997; Leung, personal contact). In this study, "impact" only refers to test impact. Bachman and Palmer (1996) reinforced the importance of impact by including it in their test usefulness framework. In this framework, test impact on individuals (mainly teachers and learners) was named as the micro level of impact, and the macro level of impact was test impact on educational and societal system. In addition, test-takers' experiences of preparing for and taking tests were part of the impact on individuals (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Taking into account the similarity and difference between washback and impact, I need to clarify three points regarding the usage of these two terms in the present study. For one thing, "washback" and "impact" are mostly used interchangeably (Andrews, Fullilove and Wong, 2002). For another, when it is in reference to individuals, only the term "impact" will be used. Moreover, the main focus of this study will be the micro level of impact (Bachman and Palmer, 1996), with particular focus on test impact on learners and learning, reasons for which will be explained below.

It has been widely held that high-stakes tests, particularly for selection and accreditation purposes, have a great impact on what happens in education (Wall, 2005). In recent years, language testing researchers have conducted numerous studies on the topic of high-stakes tests' washback. For example, new English test in Sri Lanka (Alderson and Wall, 1993), the old and new Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations (Cheng, 1998, 1999, 2005), National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China (Qi, 2007), and Test of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL (e.g. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Wall and Horák, 2006) and IELTS (e.g. Green, 2005, 2006; Dong, 2018). In addition, thus far, according to "IELTS Research Reports", few studies have attempted to evaluate IELTS's affective washback on learners and learning in China (Hawkey, 2006). But, the number of Chinese IELTS test-takers is vast and their performances are lower than intermediate. Hence, it is necessary that Chinese student's voices should be heard and their perceptions of IELTS should be known. In this sense, this study sets out to address how the preparation for and taking IELTS affects Chinese students throughout their learning experiences, with a particular focus on the test's affective washback on test-takers. The affective washback will be illustrated in terms of "effects of tests on students" in an extensive literature review (Kirkland, 1971) which suggested tests' effects on students' affective conditions. Three effects, learning goal, motivation and anxiety, will be used in this study

because they are closely related to language learning (Kirkland, 1971; Pintrich and Schunk, 1996).

### **Affective Washback**

#### **Effect 1. Learning Goal**

As noted by Pintrich and Schunk (1996), learning goals are able to provide students with the direction, the stimulus, and the purpose for engaging in learning activities. Additionally, Buck (1988 cited in Bailey, 1996) suggests that a test's washback on learning can be positive if the accomplishment of learning goals held by learners has been promoted. Furthermore, Locke and Kristof (1996 cited in Dörnyei, 1998) suggests that clear and specific goals can lead to higher performance and more positive motivation than vague goals do. Therefore, in order to promote beneficial washback on learning, students should clarify their learning goals, and the goals should be maximally achieved in the learning process. However, Bailey (1996) argues that a difficulty could emerge when students have an immediate goal, which is to achieve a given test score, and at the same time, a long-term goal, which is to improve their language proficiency. The long-term goal also serves as the ultimate product of beneficial washback on learning (Hughes, 1993). The two goals can be viewed as competing because students might view the steps leading to these goals as different (Bailey, 1996). Therefore, if students prepare for and take IELTS with particular focus on the immediate or short-term learning goal (achieving the certain score), their long-term learning goal (enhancing language proficiency) might not be achieved maximally. Thus the ultimate product of beneficial washback on their learning could not be promoted.

#### **Effect 2. Motivation**

Language learning goal is often connected to motivation, which is defined as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996, p.4). In the present study, motivation mainly refers to how much effort, both physically and mentally, the students have put in their preparation for IELTS and test-taking (Li, Zhong and Suen, 2012). If the learning goal is initiated, maintained and accomplished, the students will be positively motivated (Kirkland, 1971). Moreover, as noted by Dörnyei (1998), greater incentive of the learning goal can lead to higher degree of the individual's positive motivation. Therefore, in students' IELTS learning experiences, motivation can be closely connected to their learning goals. On the other hand, as noted by Kirkland (1971), the expectations of the success or failure in the test could affect students' motivation. Expectations of success in the test may motivate the students positively. On the contrary, expectations of failure in the test may cause negative motivation.

#### **Effect 3. Anxiety**

Defined as the “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, p.1), anxiety is an

important aspect of a test's affective impact on students. In light of Kirkland's "effects of tests on students", the following factors can be connected to students' anxiety. First, students who anticipate encountering difficulties in the test or in the preparation may experience more anxiety than those who do not. Second, between level of anxiety and level of language ability, there is a negative relationship. The lower language level the students have, the more anxious they will feel in a test. And the improvement of language ability is able to reduce the degree of anxiety. Third, a certain level of anxiety may promote learning and can also have beneficial washback on learning, but a high level of anxiety may impair learning and cause negative washback on learning.

### **Research Questions**

Among the three affective washback effects: learning goal, motivation, and anxiety, this study will find out what students consider to be the most important affective washback of IELTS, and why? Also, three sub questions are:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Does IELTS affect students' learning goal?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Does IELTS affect students' motivation?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Does IELTS affect students' anxiety?

### **Method**

This study adopted a mixed methods approach, consisting of questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview. In this section, I will first demonstrate the rationale behind the chosen method. Then, I will present the design of questionnaire survey and its findings. The design of semi-structured interview and its findings will be illustrated afterwards. There were two reasons why a mixed methods approach was adopted: the nature of research question and the complexity of test impact. Firstly, as presented at the end of Chapter 1, the research questions were hybrid questions ("what and why" questions), investigation into which required both numerical and qualitative data. Hence, a mixed methods approach was applied (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Quantitative data collected from questionnaire survey could provide an indication of the extent of the problems, which was the answer to "what"; qualitative data collected from interviews could provide an indication of a range of reasons for the problems, which were the answers to "why" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In this study, the analysis of the quantitative data from questionnaire survey was able to suggest "what" were the most important academic impact and affective impact of IELTS perceived by students; interview data were capable of providing the reasons "why" the relevant impact were considered to be the most important. Secondly, Turner (2001) suggests that there is a need for both qualitative and quantitative approaches to be employed in impact studies because test impact is of complex nature. And the mixed method approach has been used in previous impact studies (e.g. Kellaghan, Madaus & Airasian, 1982; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Watanabe, 1996; Cheng, 1997).

## **Design of the Survey Questionnaire**

In this study, the design of survey questionnaire consisted of three stages: constructing the questionnaire, recruiting participants and processing questionnaire data (Dörnyei, 2009).

### *Constructing the questionnaire*

Prior to undertaking the construction of the questionnaire, ethical approval was sought from ethics committee. On obtaining the ethical approval, I started constructing the questionnaire. I began with the designing of general features. Then, I designed the structure and the question types. Next, I designed the main part of the questionnaire, which was the Likert scales questions. And lastly, I conducted the piloting (Dörnyei, 2009).

### *General features of questionnaire*

Regarding questionnaire's layout, SurveyMonkey was used to carry out the survey, and there were three reasons for applying this online survey tool. For one thing, the online survey's design and layout were attractive and professional (Sanchez, 1992). For another, online survey could be convenient for survey participants because most of them might be in China. Meanwhile, it was time-saving to use online survey, particularly for data analysis. Moreover, in respect of anonymity, prior to data collection, all the potential respondents received an explanation of the research via email or instant messenger. By doing online survey, participants' identity would be well protected because they did not need to provide any personal information (Acquisti and Grossklags, 2005).

### *Structure of the questionnaire*

The questionnaire's structure consisted of title, instructions, questionnaire items, and final "thank you" (Dörnyei, 2009). First, the survey was entitled "Chinese students' perceptions of IELTS's impact", being displayed on every page of the questionnaire. Second, a concise general instruction was provided on the first page. This instruction demonstrated the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality (Gliksman, Gardner and Smythe, 1982; Kearney et al., 1984). Necessary instruction was also provided to relevant questions, enabling those surveyed to respond appropriately (Gillham, 2008). Moreover, in order to suggest the importance, the characters of all instructions were shown in bold type and in red colour (Cook, 1989).

### *The chosen question types and question order*

The questionnaire items yielded three types of questions. First, in order to collect respondents' educational and biographic information, factual questions were used. In this survey, there were two groups of factual questions: 1). educational information questions, including study or work status, English levels, length of preparation time, reason(s) to take IELTS and IELTS scores; 2). biographic information questions, including age and gender (Dörnyei, 2009). In the questionnaire, educational information questions were placed at first, but biographic information questions were left at the end because they tended to be off-putting and might be difficult to

rekindle participants' enthusiasm if they were the first few questions to answer (Oppenheim, 1992). Second, in order to gather information regarding respondents' IELTS experiences and their perceptions of IELTS, behavioural questions and attitudinal questions were employed (Dörnyei, 2009). Meanwhile, for the behavioural questions and attitudinal questions, a Likert scale was used; for the factual questions, multiple choice and single textbox were mainly used (Dörnyei, 2009). Detailed designing of the Likert questions will be presented as follow.

#### *Likert questions and piloting*

Likert questions were designed to collect information of respondents' experiences and perceptions of IELTS. In order to obtain more accurate and unbiased responses, a six-point Likert scale was applied (Dörnyei, 2009). The scales were "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Slightly disagree", "Partly agree", "Agree", and "Strongly agree". The questions were short in length, written in a simple, clear, concise, and natural language (Ellard and Rogers, 1993; Brown, 2001). In terms of Ellard and Rogers (1993), in the questionnaire, questions transmitting a bias or emotions were avoided, and there was no excessive use of negative terminology. Moreover, the questions were written in both English and Chinese, in order for respondents to understand better and to respond efficiently (Dörnyei, 2009).

As part of the initial piloting, I informally contacted three Chinese college students. They all had taken IELTS and were studying in London. After doing both online and paper-based versions of the questionnaire, they indicated that online survey was their preference because it was convenient and user-friendly. All of them finished the survey within 20 minutes, which suggested the acceptable completion time limit (Dörnyei, 2009).

#### *Recruiting participants*

The major method to recruit participants was opportunity sampling, that is, recruiting captive audiences in language school (Dörnyei, 2009). Because the participants in this study should have experiences of both IELTS preparation and test-taking, IELTS preparation course students were potentially the targets. In mid-June, I contacted two large language schools in one city in China. With permission, in late June, I sent the recruitment letter, the link to the online survey (the survey was opened at the same time), and the information sheet to their previous IELTS preparation course students via email or We-chat (a Chinese instant messenger). Before the survey was closed for data analysis, there were altogether 80 responses, but 6 invalid responses were deleted because either they were incomplete or the respondents did not take IELTS in the end.

#### *Processing questionnaire data*

Due to the usage of SurveyMonkey, the stage of processing questionnaire data was developed well. The data from the 74 valid responses were downloaded from SurveyMonkey, and then were downloaded into Microsoft Excel format for analysis. Illustration of the findings will be presented in the next chapter.

## Results

Due to the complexity of washback studies, the chosen candidates (74 in total) in the questionnaire survey, all of whom were Chinese students, share similar English levels, mainly intermediate or upper intermediate. In the questionnaire, 10 Likert questions were designed to investigate students' perceptions of IELTS's impact. Each Likert question was related to relevant sub-question(s).

### *Learning goal (Questions 1-3)*

The results obtained from the preliminary analysis of students' learning goal can be compared in Figure 1. When respondents were asked whether IELTS enabled them to have "clear goals in learning English", the majority (70%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement in Question 1. Hence, the overall response for this question was very positive. For Question 2, the overall response was generally positive, and around 52% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their major driving force and purpose were to get good IELTS. So it was the data from the overall response for Question 3 (51%).

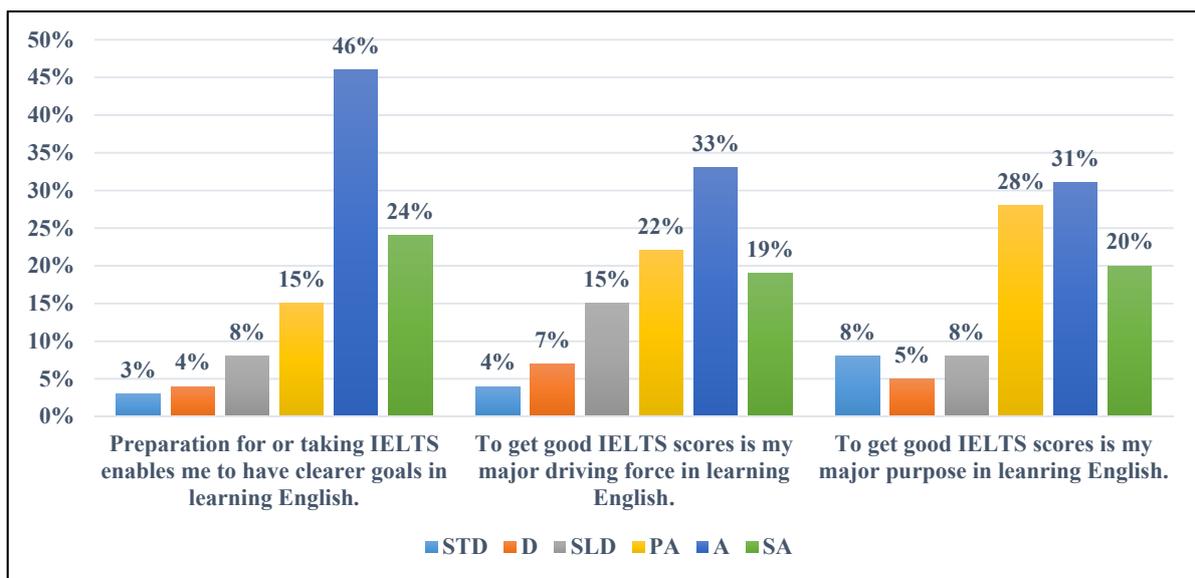


Figure 1. Learning goal (N=74)

\*STD=Strongly disagree, D=Disagree, SLD=Slightly disagree, PA=Partly agree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly agree

### *Motivation (Questions 4-5)*

Altogether six questions were designed to investigate how IELTS influenced students' motivation. These questions were related to students' perceptions of motivation in general learning (Question 4-5). The results of students' general perceptions of IELTS's influence on their motivation is presented in Figure 2. It is apparent that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were motivated in both IELTS preparation (64%) and test-taking (64%).

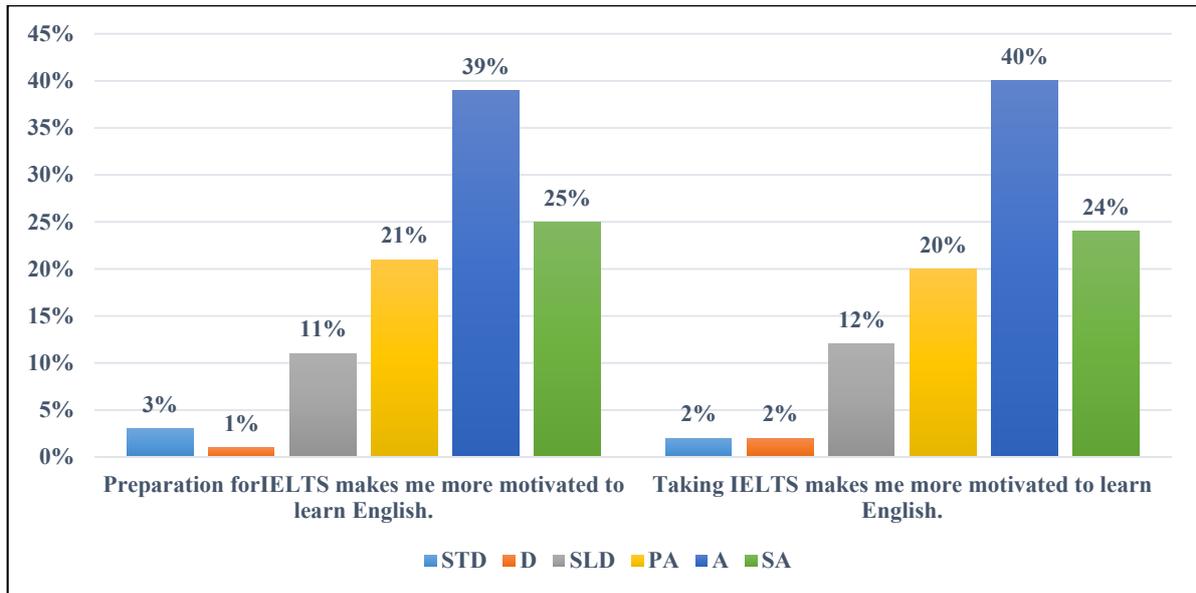


Figure 2. Motivation in general learning experiences (N=74)

#### Anxiety (Questions 6-10)

Five questions were related to the investigation into students' perceptions of their anxiety. Firstly, Figure 3 compares the summary statistics for students' general perceptions of anxiety in the preparation for IELTS (Question 6) and IELTS test-taking (Question 7). The overall responses for the two questions were not very positive. 47% of those surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that they felt anxious in the preparation and almost 44% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they felt anxious in their IELTS test-taking experiences.

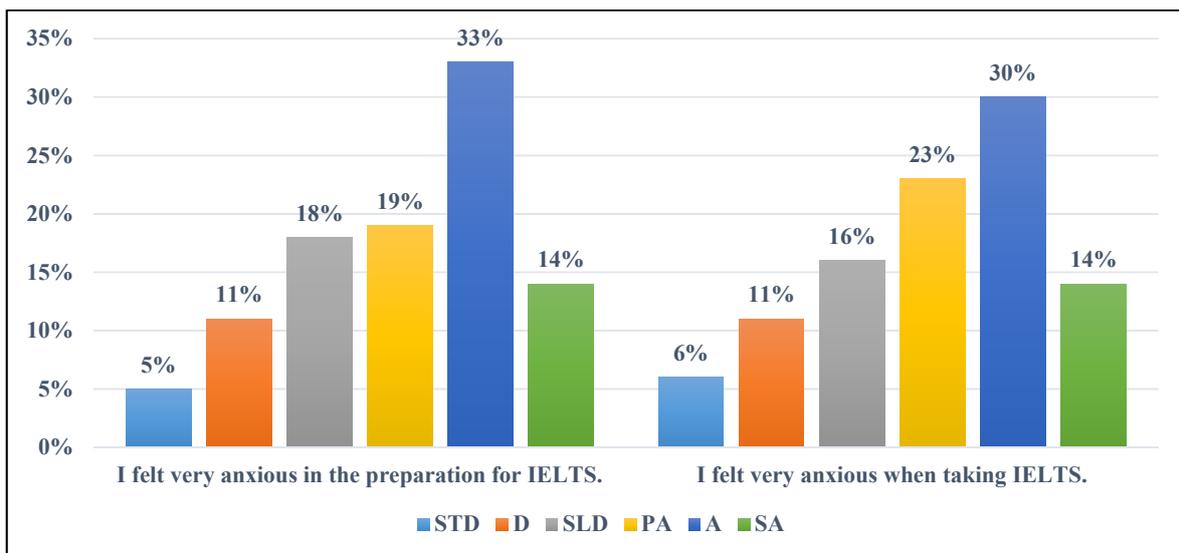


Figure 3. General perceptions of anxiety (N=74)

Secondly, the results of the other three questions (Questions 8-10) are summarised in Figure 4. The overall responses for all the three questions were generally negative. More than half of those surveyed (57%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that preparation and test-taking made them frustrated with learning English. And either regarding their experiences of preparation or taking account of their test-taking experiences, more than half of those surveyed did not agree that they had failed in their efforts to learn English.

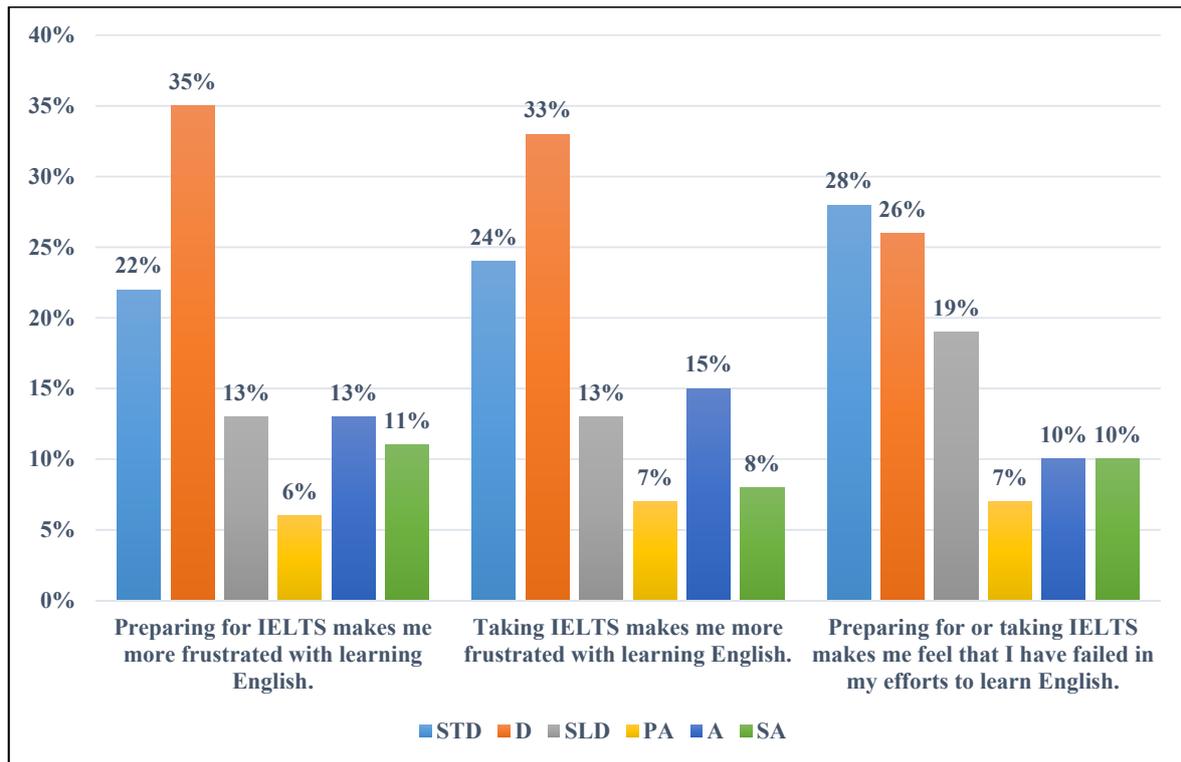


Figure 4. Detailed questions about students' perceptions of anxiety (N=74)

#### *Summary of the Questionnaire Findings*

Because all of those surveyed have previously taken IELTS preparation courses and all of them have taken IELTS test at least once, all respondents were suitable and responses could be seen as valid and complete. Hence, there was a good level of satisfaction with the above findings. As shown in the findings, learners believed that learning goal was the most important and positive affective washback. Motivation is said to be of general importance. However, learners did not believe anxiety played an important part in test preparation or test-taking phase. Hence, the most important affective washback is learning goal. Motivation is enhanced but learners' anxiety is relatively reduced. The first half of research (the question "what") has an answer. The next chapter, therefore, moves on to present the reasons behind the above data, which are the answers to find out the reasons to answer "why".

### **Semi-structured Interview**

All those surveyed were invited to the follow-up interview. And those who were willing to attend the interview would provide their contact Email. Altogether 16 respondents agreed to attend the interview, 7 male respondents and 9 female respondents. And they were all suitable participants because they all had IELTS preparation and test-taking experiences. Taking account of the balance between male and female, I chose 5 female and 5 male respondents to be interview participants. They were contacted by Email and were requested on their availability. All the interviews were conducted via We-chat or by phone.

#### *Design of the interview*

The interviews were semi-structured and there were two reasons for employing semi-structured interview. First, the questions in a semi-structure interview are standardised and the difference between interviews can be minimised (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Second, semi-structured interview is able to reveal participants' views, understanding, and experiences (Mason, 2002). All the ten semi-structured interviews were developed based on a pre-established interview guide: I first introduced myself, research purpose, and explained issues of confidentiality, and anonymity. Meanwhile, all the interviewees were informed that the interview would be audio recorded. Interview questions were mostly based on survey questions, including introductory question, follow-up question, probing question, interpreting question and specifying question (Silverman, 2006). The interview questions had been translated into an easygoing and colloquial form, in order to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions from the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

I did the first two interviews as piloting to try out an appropriate and reasonable style of questioning (Silverman, 2010). After the piloting, I changed two questions' order and the majority of the questions remained the same. The first interview took 45 minutes in length, which was longer than had initially intended. Taking into account the number of interviews, I spent time establishing a personal file for each interviewee, transcribing the recorded data and saving the transcript in the file immediately after the completion of each interview. The names were all anonymous, including file's name. Whilst I was transcribing the recorded data of each interview, I organised the transcripts, matched interviewees' comments to relevant sub-question and highlighted the comments that most interviewees had in common and the parts that might be useful for data analysis.

After sixteen days, the interviews were finished. All interview participants were thanked by email. The interviews ranged in length from 36 minutes to 50 minutes, and the average length was 42 minutes. A total of 16 respondents agreed to attend the follow-up interview. 5 male respondents and 5 female respondents were chosen to be the interview participants, due to the consideration for balance between male and female. All the interviews were conducted via We-chat or by phone.

*Interview themes*

Based on the transcripts of interview recorded data, I selected the themes shared by most of the candidates and that could help answer the research questions or provide useful insights into the research. These interview recorded data further reinforced, explained and extended the initial enquiry of the research. I will analyse the data in the order of the five sub-questions.

Note. All candidates' names had been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

**Does IELTS Affect Students' Learning Goal?**

The majority of the interviewees (8 out of 10) felt that because of IELTS, they had clear and specific learning goal, which was to achieve good scores. For example, Jin, Chen and Xuan had the learning goal in common, which was to achieve certain IELTS scores required by the universities.

**Jin:** *I must obtain good results. I was given a conditional offer which requires IELTS. (Specifying question: So you had very specific goal, right?) Yes, very positive ...*

**Chen:** *Yes, (I had a clear goal) I must get 5.5. And then I could go abroad (to study). So I thought I was not that difficult. So I was not very much worried.*

**Xuan:** *(Specifying question: Can I say that now, your goal to learn English is to get good IELTS results, right?) Yes, you can say that ... I felt so frustrated (that I did not understand the reading for the programme). So on the enrolment day, I withdrew the course ... I changed my goal, and I have a new direction ... I need four 7s (means that she must Band 7 for all the four sections) ... I think now I just follow the teachers. (Excerpt from interview transcript)*

Two interviewees (Wang and Yu) had more specific daily goals in their preparation phase. Both of them felt "positive" every day.

**Wang:** *... because of IELTS, I had goal and drive. So I learnt it well ... It's like when you really want something, when you have very clear goals, you will try your best to achieve it. (Specifying question: So you had very clear and specific goal?) Correct ... Throughout the preparation, I found I made each day count. Every day, I felt very positive. It was also very positive life. Every day, I had good goal.*

**Yu:** *... I set goal for my study. Like, in one day, I finished my objective very easily and fast, and I would feel motivated ... (Excerpt from interview transcript)*

The interviewee (Yu) expressed the belief that the strategies taught in the preparation course could easily mislead the students to the incorrect direction of learning. He felt that the strategies were not feasible or useful for his long-term learning goal, that is, the improvement of language proficiency. This view was echoed by another five interviewees.

**Yu:** *... we always learn some very big words, or good transitional words. But in UK university, my tutor told me that they did not like these kinds of words ... and these aspects may lead the students in a wrong direction. And they (techniques) were not very useful to improve English either ... (Excerpt from interview transcript)*

Hence, it can be summarised that students' have very positive learning goal, particularly the short-term goal to achieve good IELTS scores. Because of the goals, they have clear direction and know what they should do every day.

### **Does IELTS Affect Students' Motivation?**

The majority of the interviewees felt that they were motivated. But there were a few exceptions. Two interviewees (Jin and Wang) commented that they were motivated mainly because they must achieve the certain scores (their short-term learning goal). One interviewee (Hong) was always motivated in the learning. He had clear goals. When talking with him, I could sense that he had been positively motivated. Moreover, his personal characteristics also helped him keep motivated in the preparation and test-taking (Kunnan, 1995).

**Jin:** ... *I felt motivated, because I knew I must obtain good results. I was given a conditional (offer) which required IELTS ...*

**Wang:** *I felt very motivated. It's like when you really want something, when you have very clear goals, you will try your best to achieve it.*

**Hong:** *I was very motivated ... It was far more positive ... I changed ... sometimes I would learn the suffix and prefix ... after learnt IETLS, I no longer just watched the films or TV dramas ... (because of IELTS) I would read some sample essays and see how they wrote ... in preparation for IELTS, I would focus more on cohesion and coherence ...*  
(Excerpt from interview transcript)

On the other hand, three interviewees (Yu, Yi and Xuan) said they were partly motivated because of two reasons. First, they hoped that they could succeed in achieving the particular score. But secondly they also feared that they might not be able to get the scores after all the efforts. They were influenced by the fear of failure in the test and as a result, they said they were not motivated constantly.

**Yu:** ... *But sometimes, it's like, the time is very limited and we had a lot of work to do ... we need to work hard ... I was afraid that the final results would not be in connection with all the effort.*

**Yi:** *But the last time, I was nervous and anxious ... Before the test, I always thought what if, what if, what if (Specifying question: What were you thinking?) Well, simply, what if I did not get the good results. Not me, many students had the same thought, after all the money, effort ...*

**Xuan:** ... *I do sometimes feel lost. I am not a student anymore. I am planning to say here. But I sometimes think too much ... Just what am I going to do if after all the time of preparation, but I do not get what I want ...*  
(Excerpt from interview transcript)

One interesting finding was the comment of interviewee Yi. At the first time to prepare for IELTS, Yi felt that she “did not feel a thing (of taking IELTS)”, because she took it “for fun”.

This view was echoed by another two interviewees, Chun and Chen, who said that they could take a second test if they did not get satisfactory scores the first time.

**Yi:** *(I took IELTS for three times) I did not feel a thing the first time. I just took that test for fun ... Time was very limited. I applied to a programme. And that English requirement is very high and there is not pre-sessional course ... Otherwise, I would not get CAS ... I took the test positively. I did not take the test like the way I did when I was preparing for the test ... You know, I paid that much money. I must finish the test. And I was motivated. (Specifying question: So mainly because of the money?) Not exactly. After all, I took the test, and I needed to finish it ...*

**Chun:** *Not that much. Did not feel so much. Well, I did not know what the test was like. And I felt a bit nervous before the test. That is for sure. I was mainly thinking that the first was for me to try. And I could try another time. But I thought I should get good results. So it's just OK.*

**Chen:** *... Because I can take another time if I fail this time.*

*(Excerpt from interview transcript)*

Therefore, students are generally motivated, and the main reason is still the clear goal. However, two main factors affecting their motivation negatively are fear of uncertainty and the psychological perspective that they have another chance to take IELTS.

Does IELTS affect students' anxiety?

Based on interviewees' comments, their anxiety was affected by IELTS in two ways. In the first place, because of the fear of encountering "trouble", the majority of interviewees felt that they were particularly anxious before the first time to take IELTS. Trouble could refer to unfamiliarity with the test process and task types, as three interviewees (Wang, Yu and Hong) put it.

**Wang:** *... At the first time, I was a little anxious, because I knew nothing about the test. and I feared I might meet some trouble. But in the next three tests, I just felt Okay.*

**Yu:** *In the first test, I felt very nervous, because it was the first time. I remember that in the listening part, I did not know how to use the earphone and the sound was not very loud ... I knew I'd meet some trouble. But from the second time, I felt a lot less anxious because I knew what the process of the test was ...*

**Hong:** *...let me think. If I said I did not feel anxious, you won't believe, ha ... Well, in the first test, I felt a bit anxious. But in the next three tests, I felt less and less anxious ... I felt that I was more and more confident, because I knew some the trouble would not bother me anymore. I knew them.*

*(Excerpt from interview transcript)*

Moreover, as one interviewee (Pei) said, "trouble" was also related to the fear that they might not understand the examiners in the speaking interview. This view was echoed by another three

interviewees (Yi, Chun and Chen). These interviewees believed that the main reason was the fear of misunderstanding the accent, or the manner of the examiners, or the way they spoke.

**Pei:** ... *Anxious (laugh) ... in that case, (I felt the most anxious in) speaking ... how well you did pretty much depended on your examiner. So I felt really worried to have the examiner that I could not understand the accent ... that you were not familiar with their talking ... or their manners are not very good.*

**Yi:** ... *(I felt) the most anxious (in speaking), what if he does not like me (laugh) ... So, I stayed in an anxious situation ...*

**Chun:** *Mostly, I did not feel anxious. But I might feel a bit anxious in speaking part. Because I did not know what they would ask and I also did not know their accents ...*

**Chen:** ... *but I did not feel anxious when I was thinking about the interview. The examiner, I don't know whether we will understand him really well.*

*(Excerpt from interview transcript)*

In the second place, one interviewee (Hu) felt anxious in the preparation phase because he was studying all by himself. He felt isolated, afraid, tense and lonely.

However, when asked whether IELTS made them feel frustrated or whether they failed in their efforts to learn English, more than half of those interviewed reported negative responses. The main comments they had in common were as follow. First, the anxiety was not of high level and they learnt English with a positive attitude. Second, because of IELTS, they had clear learning goal and they felt motivated at the same time. Additionally, most of the interviewees' IELTS scores were satisfactory.

**Hu:** ... *I was all by myself. I was doing internship, and there were no other friends or peers around me. I prepared alone. I felt a little afraid and tense and lonely. The feeling was not good.*

**Pei:** ... *I did feel anxious sometimes. But not much, I did not mean I feel frustrated. They are not the same things. I think actually the anxiety made me a little more motivated.*

**Hu:** ... *No, I think it paid off ... I learnt a lot.*

**Wang:** ... *learnt well. I worked hard. I had to thank IELTS. It really helped.*

**Yi:** *Of course not. It's a test. And I did well in the end.*

**Chen:** ... *I don't think so. Actually without IELTS, I would not learn English that hard. And I think I did OK. I don't think I was that anxious.*

**Jin:** ... *I think I did feel anxious, but not that much. Only the speaking, too much. But most of the time, I felt good.*

**Xuan:** ... *I have a goal now. So, study is hard. But I don't think IELTS frustrated me. If so, I would have stopped long time ago.*

*(Excerpt from interview transcript)*

In summary, IELTS had an influence on students' learning goals and motivation, but did not affect students' anxiety. Moreover, based on the findings from the questionnaire survey, IELTS's influence on students' learning goals was greater than that on motivation. Also, it was found from interview that because they clarified their learning goals, specifically short-term learning goals, students were motivated and their anxiety was reduced. Hence, IELTS's most important affective impact is its influence on students' short-term learning goals. IELTS might potentially have negative impact on students' long-term learning goals, but the data from the research in the present study are not possible to enable me to say anything specific about how much it could negatively impact long-term learning goals.

## **Discussion**

### **Does IELTS Affect Students' Learning Goal?**

According to the questionnaire findings, the most important affective washback effect is learning goal: those surveyed clarified their short-term learning goal which was to achieve the required IELTS scores. Generally, those surveyed regarded this goal as their driving force and purpose in English learning. However, their long-term learning goals might not be maximally achieved. There was one explanation for this finding. As mentioned in literature review, immediate learning goal (short-term learning goal) and long-term learning goal together might confuse students (Bailey, 1996). The majority of the interviewees did have two learning goals: to achieve IELTS scores (immediate goal) and to enhance their English ability (long-term goal). Also, for the factual question "why did you decide to take IELTS" in questionnaire, 72% of the 104 responses reported that they aimed to achieve the score but only 35% aimed to improve their language proficiency. Therefore, affected by IELTS, the students were trying to achieve the immediate goal by, such as learning strategies in preparation course. But as more than half interviewees put it, the strategies could mislead students in the improvement of their language proficiency (long-term goal) or in Hughes's words, the ultimate product of beneficial washback on learning (1993). This finding was in line with previous research findings. For example, Green (2006) suggested that the narrow preparation strategies were not driven primarily by learner expectations, which was to improve language proficiency.

Also, in terms of IELTS for academic purposes, learners who have achieved required IELTS scores may be able to adapt themselves in the academic live in a university where English is the language of medium. Nevertheless, studies have shown that there are still many learners (who have good IELTS scores) struggling in their academic study in, for example, the UK, Australia and so on. Hence, whether IELTS may have beneficial or negative impact remains to be a question needed to be investigated. In here, I used "impact" instead of "washback" because washback does not exist after test-taking phase (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Anyhow, IELTS enabled students to clarify their learning goals in the preparation phase. Furthermore, as most of the interviewees said, during the preparation, they believed they were more focused on learning and had clearer direction and more stimulus in preparation for IELTS (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this part of the research was that students'

perceptions of IELTS's impact on short-term learning goal were very positive. Moreover, empirical research regarding IELTS's impact on students' language proficiency should be conducted in the future.

### **Does IELTS Affect Students' Motivation?**

First, students were positively motivated in preparation for IELTS and test-taking. Based on interview data, the explanation could be the relationship between learning goal and motivation. As mentioned in literature review, motivation was an activity directed by goals (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). Two interviewees said that they were positively motivated because they had clear and specific goal, which enabled students to achieve high performance and to be motivated (Locke and Kristof, 1996 cited in Dörnyei, 1998). It can therefore be assumed that students' motivation had been positively affected because of their clear and specific short-term learning goal. Second, there were also respondents who were not positively motivated in their IELTS learning experiences. Based on the interview data, one explanation was due to students' expectation of possible failure in IELTS test. Three interviewees expressed the fear that they might not achieve the certain IELTS scores, which was possible to cause negative impact on their motivation. This finding confirms the association between the degree of motivation and expectation of success and failure (Kirkland, 1971), as mentioned in literature review. Third, three interviewees felt that they could have a second chance to take IELTS, and therefore, their motivation was partly affected in preparation for IELTS or test-taking. This finding further supported the idea that there was little incentive to be motivated positively in the preparation for a test if the test was not seen to matter greatly (Dörnyei, 1998; Hughes, 1993 cited in Green, 2013). Therefore, it can be inferred that students' motivation increase mainly due to the clear learning goal. What is more, students consider the test score as the token of their language ability. That is, if the students spare no effort on preparing for IELTS, they need to have good scores in the end. Otherwise, the less satisfying results only indicated their less hard work, which might lead to their demotivation during the test preparation phase. Moreover, if some students always stick to the idea that there will be "another" chance for him or her to take IELTS, this student may not be able to work hard for the "current" test preparation for IELTS. Hence, these two factors (fear of uncertainty and the idea to take IELTS again) can jeopardise their motivation.

### **Does IELTS Affect Students' Anxiety?**

Compared with learning goal and motivation, IELTS's affected anxiety much less. On the one hand, almost half of those surveyed felt anxious in both preparation and test-taking phases. The major explanation was the fear of encountering difficulties in test, as the majority of those interviewed put it. Two difficulties that most interviewees mentioned were as follow. First, four interviewees feared they could not understand how the examiners spoke in speaking interview, such as their accent, their manners, which might cause anxiety in preparation and test-taking. This finding seemed to be in consistent with the findings in the extensive literature. Exner (1966

cited in Kirkland, 1971) suggested that if there was an aloof versus a natural manner on the part of the examiner, the test-taker's response might be affected positively or negatively, and the two different manners could eventually cause positive motivation or anxiety. Second, most of the interviewees also felt anxious because of unfamiliarity with the test, particularly before the first time to take IELTS. This could be related to the anticipation of possible difficulties in the test, as mentioned in literature review. The second explanation for being anxious was isolation in learning. One interviewee felt anxious because he was isolated and all alone when he was preparing for IELTS (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). In his preparation, this interviewee was feeling tense, lonely, worried, and nervous, which were all the key features of anxiety. On the other hand, more than half of the questionnaire respondents did not agree that IELTS frustrated them. Nor did they agree that they failed in their efforts to learn English. Three possible explanations could be found from the transcripts of the interview data. First, except their description of the speaking interview, it could be found that most of the interviewees used "a little" or "a bit" to describe their anxiety, which indicated that there was a certain level of anxiety in their learning experiences rather than too much anxiety. As two interviewees indicated, they did feel anxious but their perceived level of anxiety was not high. And they felt their learning had been promoted. This finding further supported the theory that a certain level of anxiety could promote learning but a high level of anxiety would impair learning (Kirkland, 1971). Second, interviewees felt that IELTS provided them with a clear learning goal and they were more motivated than were being anxious.

It can therefore be assumed that IELTS did not have a great influence on students' anxiety. As shown in the interview data, one major reason is that clear learning goal helped promote learning, which relatively reduce the learning anxiety. Hence, this finding also suggests the importance of learning goal in test preparation. Similar to what affects motivation, the students also suggest that they had fear during preparation. This time, the fear is mainly regarding the speaking section in IELTS. According to IELTS official data, Chinese students' speaking scores are lower than those in, e.g. reading and listening. Moreover, students' isolation in preparation phase also increases the anxiety. Hence, improving students' autonomy in speaking and their communicative learning may be of importance.

All in all, students' perceptions of IELTS's influence on their motivation were generally positive. The major reason might be the specific and clear learning goal whereby students could be motivated in their learning. On the other hand, negative motivation could be attributed to expectation of failure and lack of incentive in preparation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The first suggestion is how to conduct research on IELTS's impact on long-term learning goal: how to achieve the ultimate beneficial washback on learning. Based on the research findings, the short-term goal (to achieve required scores) is clear to the students. However, according to the students, in their academic life in a foreign country or region, they are somehow feeling struggling. Hence, in the future, research on how IELTS may affect students' language

proficiency needs to be conducted. In particular, answers to questions, such as whether a high-stake test can affect students' learning in the long-term or whether a test is able to change a student's learning style, should be found.

The second suggestion is the implementation of Nunan's learner autonomy approach in the educational context

According to the findings, during preparation phase, students feel isolated and often have fears regarding the uncertainty and speaking section. Hence, it can be beneficial for them if they study more autonomously. In this case, the implementation of Nunan's learner autonomy approach can be of help (1997). Recent studies suggest the merged framework of learner autonomy and self-assessment can promote students' learning in TOEFL preparation (Dong, 2018). In this sense, relevant studies regarding IELTS also needs to be done, for the sake of improving students' learning motivation and reducing their anxiety.

### Conclusion

The present study was designed to investigate Chinese students' perceptions of IELTS's affective washback. The key findings that have been identified are as follow. IELTS had a positive influence on students' immediate learning goals and affected students' motivation. But its influence on anxiety was less significant. The general conclusions drawn from the research findings are: first, the most important affective washback of IELTS was the influence on students' short-term learning goals. Furthermore, in order to promote beneficial washback on learning, this study proposed two suggestions: future research regarding IELTS's impact on language proficiency in the long-term, and the implementation of learner autonomy.

However, the generalisability of the findings from the present study is subject to certain limitations. The first limit is that there were more female respondents in the survey. Whether gender difference may be attributed to differences of test-takers' performances has remained a question (Crandall, 1969; O'Loughlin, 2002; Brown, 2003, 2005 cited in McNamara and Roever, 2006; Lin and Wu, 2004). Due to limited time to do the research, I did not recruit more participants. Second, the participant recruitment did not proceed exactly according to my initial plan. Initially, in addition to recruiting students, I was going to recruit up to five IELTS teachers as interview participants. However, in June and July, the preparation course teachers were extremely busy, and the language schools were not able to reschedule the teachers' timetable. It is unfortunate that the study did not include teachers. Third, it is not possible to generalise from the research findings because the present study was limited to a particular group of participants, a particular setting at a particular time. The participants were previous preparation course students and the setting was two language schools in one Chinese city. The findings might be more generalisable if similar studies were conducted in a few more cities in different parts of China.

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