

IMAGINED COMPETENCIES



A Multi-Case Study of Washback in regard to Student Attainment, Teaching Practice, and Language Ideology from Standardised Testing at Public Universities in Oaxaca, Mexico

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THE TOEFL ITP

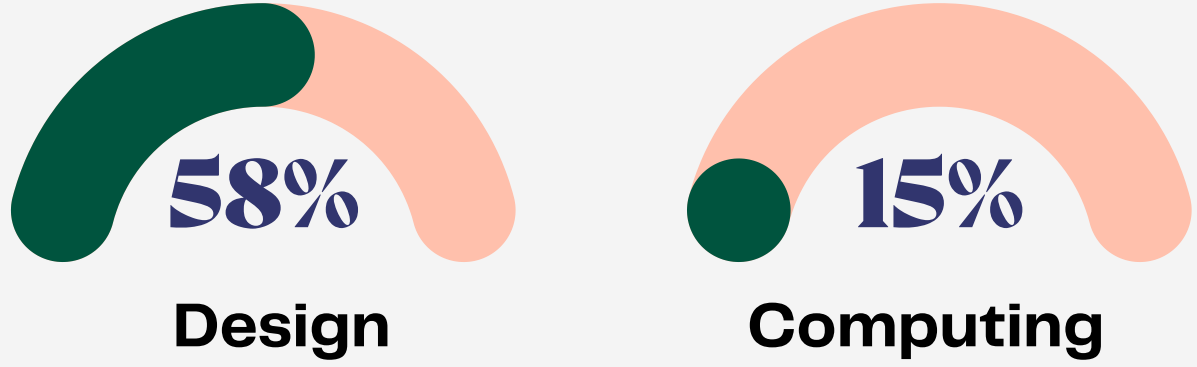
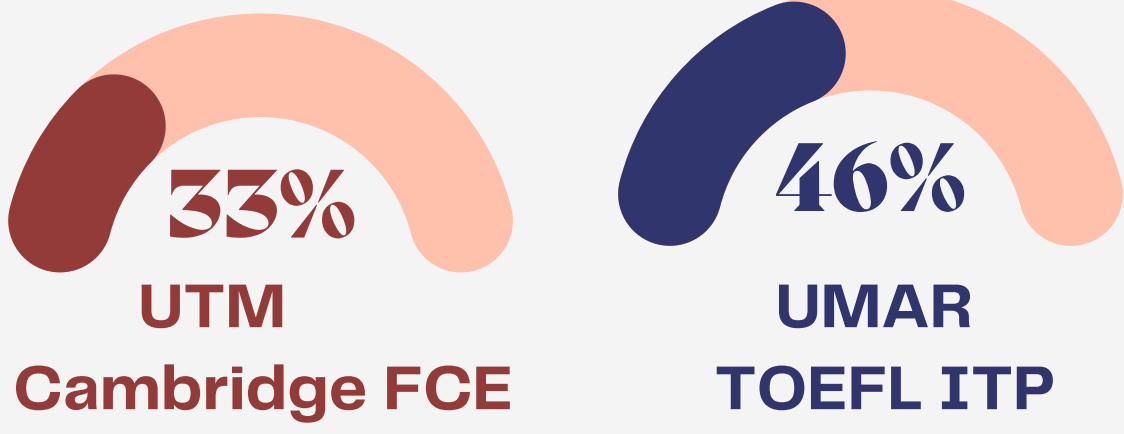
- historical pre-cursor to the TOEFL iBT, designed by for-profit educational corporation, ETS, in the 1960s on structuralist principles and initially called the "Paper Based Test" (PBT) (Hernandez, 2021) now known as the "Institutional Testing Program" indicating its primary use and suitability for internal use as a placement test (ETS, 2017)
- consists of multiple-choice questions purporting to assess reading and listening comprehension, as well as grammar, vocabulary, and "written expression" (ETS, 2017, p. 3) with no credible evaluation of productive skills
- the most common exit requirement for public universities in Mexico (CONACYT, 2022) as in many parts of the world (Kachru, 1985) – all undergraduates are required to score either 450 or 500 points to graduate (UMAR, 2016; Lopez-Gopar, 2021) with cut scores of 550 points required for post-graduate funding (CONACYT, 2022)
- growing criticism from students, teachers and academics in the region due to apparent impact on student achievement, teaching practice, and language attitudes (Clemente et al, 2007; Lopez-Gopar, 2021) even featuring as a promise in a recent local electoral campaign (Planilla Fucsia, 2022)



"The TOEFL ITP® or any other 'international' test is not the best option to judge English proficiency [...] Collaborating with critically oriented language testing citizens in order to develop our own, local, language-proficiency-based, exit-requirement assessment practices, tests, or tools, which are ethical, valid, and fair, is not only necessary, but also the decolonizing thing to do."
(López-Gopar, 2021, p.651)

STUDENT ATTAINMENT

High numbers of students fail their final exam, though particularly on the ITP



Significant disparities also exist in rates of failure between degree programs

TEACHING & LEARNING

Teaching and learning reportedly centre entirely on exams. Consequently, teachers typically focus on exam skills, though more experienced teachers often refuse to teach the TOEFL ITP

"Not all but most student motivation is extrinsic [...] They're learning to pass exams so everything is geared towards the exams."
Teacher #2 UTM (Cambridge FCE)

"We have no goals here apart from exams. The exams don't measure anything useful so I made a conscious decision some years ago to ignore the exams"
Teacher #12 UMAR (TOEFL ITP)

Those teachers preparing students for Cambridge exams adopted a largely communicative and monolingual approach to teaching. Teachers working towards the TOEFL ITP often favoured a grammar-translation approach.

"My most successful classes have a grammar focus"
Teacher #8 UMAR (TOEFL ITP)

"If my students are communicating and using the language in a 'natural' way, that's just amazing. I want them to be speaking as much as possible in class"
Teacher #1 UTM (Cambridge FCE)

While recently recruited teachers were reluctant to offer criticism of either examination, more experienced teachers were forthright in their criticism of the impact of the TOEFL ITP examination on teaching and learning.

"It's not communicative if it doesn't measure actual communicative English skills. There's no speaking, there's no writing."
Teacher #6 UMAR (TOEFL ITP)

"Most of the exams rely on multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank. Those are not communicative skills. At no point in my life has anybody ever come up to me and said a sentence with a few missing words and then given me four options to choose from, to complete on my own. That's never been something that's happened."
Teacher # 12 UMAR (TOEFL ITP)

Though student motivation was never cited as a concern for teachers working towards the Cambridge FCE, teachers were nevertheless resentful of the perceived increase in workload associated with exam preparation.

"The way the Cambridge system is there, you don't have any time to do anything except get [the students] ready for exams."
Teacher # 3 UTM (Cambridge FCE)

"I think everyone feels stressed and there's so many students and so much marking to do [...] It'd be interesting to know about how to improve teacher motivation as well – as well as student motivation. There is the student motivation we're always trying to think about, but also teacher motivation."
Teacher #4 UTM (Cambridge FCE)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

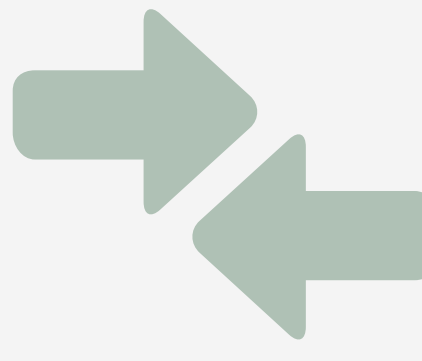
- 1.What impact to gate-keeping examinations have on graduation rates at public universities in Oaxaca?
- 2.What forms of washback do these assessment systems have on teaching and learning?
- 3.Do these assessment systems lead to meaningful forms of washback on language attitudes?

METHODOLOGY

This study compares two public universities with similar profiles which use two different examination systems: the TOEFL ITP and the Cambridge FCE.

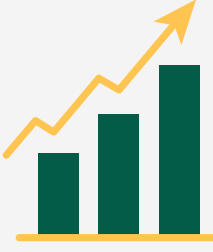


UTM
Cambridge FCE



UMAR
TOEFL ITP

Research methods included:



(i) statistical analysis of secondary data on student pass rates on completion of studies over the past ten years (n=8000)



(ii) semi-structured interviews with teachers and document analysis of syllabi to identify teaching styles (n=12)



(iii) online self-completion questionnaires from students entering and exiting the university on their language attitudes (n=280)

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

Data collection for this phase is still incomplete, but preliminary findings suggest:

- Cambridge Exams inculcate a strong preference for 'native speaker' teachers in this sample but an increased appreciation of the role of indigenous languages
- Graduates express regret at not focussing more on oral skills (speaking and listening)

Most graduates would have preferred less exam focus in classes



Most graduates felt their exam was not an accurate reflection of their English skills



FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While still in the data analysis phase of this project, there are already further plans in place for a second phase of research incorporating a strong participatory element including:

- a conference on assessment in Oaxaca in 2023 with travel scholarships available
- a special issue of MEXTESOL journal or standalone publication on alternatives
- a Community of Practice group meeting regularly online
- teaching materials and graphics to share research findings with practitioners in the field

PODCASTING AS ASSESSMENT TOOL

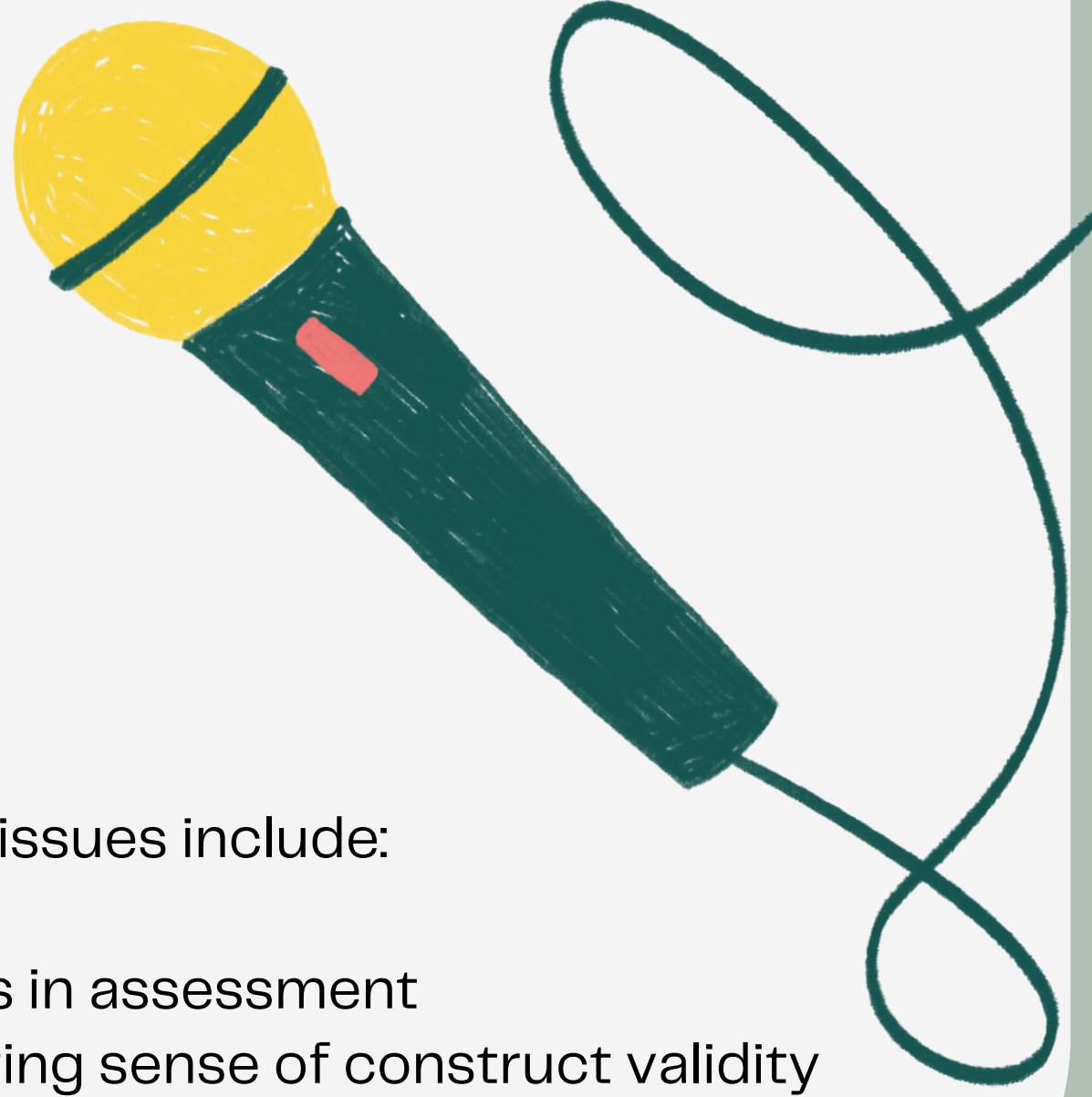
One interviewee suggested the importance of "passing the microphone" to students as a key element in teaching academic and digital literacies through a humanising pedagogy. Following a successful pilot project, one possible future direction for the second cycle of this research project.

Benefits include:

- legitimising student voice
- appropriacy to contexts of digital poverty
- focus on productive and oral skills, as well as mediation and interaction skills
- increased student & teacher motivation through multimodal format

Potential issues include:

- fairness in assessment
- promoting sense of construct validity
- lack of research in this area



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BALEAP

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