

Reviewing the Empirical Studies on CET4

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Abstract. Having a long history, testing has played an important social and educational role in China. Nowadays, there are many large-scale English tests designed locally, including the College English Test (CET), the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), the Test for English Majors (TEM), the Graduate School Entrance English Examination (GSEEE), the Public English Testing System (PETS), and so on. Among all those tests, CET4 is the most influential one for its large-scale participators. It exerts great impact on teachers, learners, and even the whole society. However, compared with the flourished theoretical and empirical studies abroad, the study in China has been lagged behind by western countries. In this article, it makes a brief review about empirical researches on CET4, intending to inspire more such work and studies about it, in the wish of more and more researches flowing out concerning different aspects of CET4 in the near future.

General Background

The College English Test Band 4, known as CET4, is a nationwide standardized English Test for non-English majors. Administered by the National College English Testing Committee and sponsored by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China [1], the test started in 1987. The CET4 test is a test battery, which comprises the written test and the CET spoken English test (CET-SET). The written test, which is investigated in this study, is held twice a year, in June and December. The reported score of CET4 indicates the percentile position of a candidate in the norm group, which consists of about 10,000 college students from the top six universities in China. The CET-SET, first introduced in 1999, is conducted twice a year, in May and November, only available to students whose CET4 scores are 80 or above, and CET6, 75 or above.

CET4 credit is regarded as an authoritative evidence of English proficiency level. The educational administrators regard it as important information to evaluate the overall teaching quality of universities; employers consider it as one of the criteria to employ graduates; and many universities take it as a necessity for students' academic degree. When decisions about "admission, promotion, placement or graduation" are directly dependent on the test scores, this test is a high-stake one [1]. In this sense, CET4 has become a high-stake test in China.

The Reliability and Validity Studies on CET4

Reliability and validity are two critical qualities for tests, and are essential to the usefulness of any language test, because they provide the major justification for using test scores--numbers--as a basis for making inferences or decisions [3]. Reliability is often defined as consistency of measurement, is the consistent degree to which an instrument measures the same way each time it is used under the same condition with the same subjects [4]. Validity in general refers to "the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measure of what it is purported to measure" [5]. Reliability and validity are by no means isolated from each other. In order to be valid a test must provide consistently accurate measurements, and thus to be reliable.

The reliability of CET has been studied by many researchers [1, 6, 7]. Their studies almost arrive at a similar conclusion that CET4 is a test with high reliability. According to their research, the high percentage of multiple choice questions, which is of high reliability [8, 9], make primary contribution to the guarantee of high reliability of CET4. Other factors include the adoption of discrete-point exercises to measure four language skills separately for the stability of the test, the

large number of tasks to be performed in a fixed time, the aid of machine' grading the papers, and the data processing of scores by computer.

The National College English Committee with the British Council conducted a 3-year project to study the validity of CET, and concluded that CET was with high reliability and validity [1]. However, the validity of CET was challenged by many other experts [10, 11, 12], and CET was even criticized as "pursuit of high reliability at the cost of validity" [13]. Han et al [13] conducted a survey among 1194 English teachers in 40 colleges and universities, and found teachers' doubtful attitudes towards the validity of CET. The finding indicated that most of the teachers did not think CET could promote teaching and help students have a good command of basic language knowledge; they did not agree that CET could improve overall CE teaching and learning; they did not accept that CET certificate could reflect students' English communicative competence.

Washback Studies on CET4

CET4 has been put to use for more than 20 years since 1987, which has exerted great influence on CE teaching and learning in China. Many articles [9, 10, 11, 12] discussed the washback effects, but only a limited number of empirical studies [13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20] were conducted on the washback of CET4 on CE teaching and learning. Among the available few studies, only Tang (2005) focused special attention on CE learning.

Ye [14] surveyed 74 teachers and 174 students on the washback of CET on teaching and found more positive effects. First, CET had encouraged teachers and students to combine their efforts to pass the exam and motivated the enthusiasm of both parties. Second, CET4 triggered students' learning autonomy to enrich learning contents and enlarge knowledge scope, and encouraged teachers to shorten the gap between textbook and test contents through fertilizing the teaching contents. Third, CET4 influenced the English curriculum including the shift in teaching focus and teaching methods. For example, reading comprehension occupied the highest proportion, consequently the emphasis of classroom teaching and students' extracurricular learning were laid on reading practice; oral English was not the compulsory part in CET4, as a result, teachers did not give students more chances to practice it, nor did students have an active participation. Fourth, CET4 increased students' enthusiasm to learning English after class. Students spent more time and energy on CET4-related materials and adopted various learning methods such as listening to English radio, watching English movies, and reading English newspapers. Fifth, CET4 promoted the improvement of teaching facilities to some extent. To meet the need of CE teaching, some necessary and relatively advanced equipment were installed in some universities. Sixth, CET4 could provide abundant information feedback to CE teaching. Through the analysis of CET4 paper, both teachers and students could find their weaknesses, and made up for the shortcomings on the basis, performing the strengths to promote future CE teaching and learning. But, some negative washback also deserved our attention. The overemphasis on CET4 led to teaching and learning to the test. Students only care about the contents close related to CET4, and ignored those activities which could not increase CET4 scores on the short-term basis but can cultivate students' communicative competence in the long run.

Ye [15] distributed questionnaires to 55 teachers and 480 students to explore the washback of CET on CE teaching, and found similar positive effects to Ye's [14] study but more negative ones. First, the overemphasis on the CET4 passing rate resulted in the decrease in teachers' teaching zeal and students' learning interest. Pressure from the test led to teaching and learning to the test. Second, the tie between CET4 score and diploma gave students negative affective pressure. Students felt greatly pressed. Third, students paid more attention to this test but less to basic knowledge. The teaching activity students favored was doing previous CET4 papers. The teaching method in which students were interested according to teachers' perceptions was the explanation of CET4 papers. Many students even considered "help in CET preparation" as the primary standard of qualified teachers. Fourth, CET cannot be in accordance with students' communicative ability. 80% of the teachers thought CET were not an overall reflection of students' ability in language use, but

reflected CE teaching to some degree. 64.1% of students also admitted the CET holders did not necessarily have a good command of English.

Jin [16] explored the washback effects of the CET-SET on CE teaching. Questionnaires were distributed to 358 students who took the test in May, 1999, and 28 teachers who worked as interviewers in this test. 79.6% of the students took the test in order to evaluate their English communicative competence. Most of students and teachers value the importance of oral test. All teachers anticipated that this test would have a great effect on CE teaching and would promote students' ability to use English for communication. The teachers and students evaluated the test design positively in term of test method, test format, test task, time allocation, the reliability of the test and the rating scale.

Gu [17] explored the washback of CET on CE teaching and learning. The study involved about 4,500 CET stakeholders including administrators, teachers and students. Various research methods were employed, including classroom observation, questionnaires and interviews etc. results indicated that most of the CET stakeholders thought highly of the test, especially its design, administration, marking and the new measures adopted in recent years. They believed that the positive washback of the test is much greater than the negative washback, and that the negative washback was primarily due to the test users' misuse of the test rather than the test itself. Nevertheless, some CET stakeholders were dissatisfied with the overuse of the multiple-choice format in the test, the lack of direct score reports to the teachers, the incomplete evaluation of the students' English proficiency without a compulsory spoken English test, and the use of the test as the sole means in evaluating the quality of CE teaching and learning. The author concluded that the issue of the CET washback was more complicated than has been previously supposed. The CET was part of a complex set of factors that determined the outcome of CE teaching and learning.

Tang [18], via students' questionnaires and interviews, explored the washback of CET4 on CE learning. She found CET4 affected CE learning in many aspects. In term of learning attitudes, those who passed CET4 thought this test promoted their learning motivation, and those who failed felt an increase in anxiety and pressure. In term of learning contents and learning methods, students took CET4 as their priority, and tactically adjusted their English learning activities accordingly. They considered test contents as their learning contents, and adopted doing former CET4 papers as their learning methods. What's more, CET consumed students so much energy that it disturbed their plans for major study. Most students adjusted their extracurricular study plans in accordance with CET4. Only a few female students who were really interested in English learning stated that CET4 would not interfere with their extracurricular expanded English learning.

After the announcement of the Requirements (2004) and CET4 reform (2005), two studies [19, 20] were conducted to explore the washback of the reformed CET4. Yang and Tan [19], by means of students' and teachers' questionnaires, examined the washback effects of CET4 on CE teaching and learning. The results showed that: in the regular classes (mainly in the first three and half semesters), CE teachers could basically develop students' competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing under the guidance of the Requirements (2004), and the influence of CET4 on CE teaching was not very great; in test preparation classes, the skills trained, activities conducted and materials used were solely consistent with those required in CET4 and the normal teaching was broken; in accordance with the implementation of the Requirements (2004) and CET reform, there was an obvious increase in the time spent on listening, speaking, reading and writing in classes, especially on listening and speaking. He concluded CET4 could, to some degree, promote CE teaching and learning.

Zhou and Liu [20], through teachers' questionnaires and interviews, investigated how college English teachers perceived the impact of CET4 on their curricular planning and instruction. Findings indicated that CET4 had an influential impact on teachers curricular planning and instruction. Due to the new testing objectives, teachers were motivated to integrate listening and speaking into their classroom teaching, especially listening, instead of only teaching reading and writing as before. Teachers shifted from grammar-based teaching toward more communication-oriented teaching and considered students' interests and needs. However, what

teachers would like to change will not necessarily be the same as what they would actually do in their classrooms, which needs further exploration to verify by classroom observation.

Conclusion

To sum up, the previous research on CET4 washback on teaching and learning has identified some interesting findings which deserve further exploration to verify. Before conducting any similar studies, there are some problems which earn our special attention.

In term of research focus, they either focus on teaching or deal with learning from teachers' perspectives, insufficient attention is on learning from learners' perspectives. In term of instrument, most of them adopt questionnaires, through which we can only get the general picture of student learning, but cannot know the in-depth reasons behind the superficial phenomenon, nor can we know whether what students said is in accordance with what they actually did. In term of the procedure washback takes place, the previous studies only limit to the period of exam preparation, no empirical studies are conducted to demonstrate a comprehensive picture of learners' learning process before, during, and after the exam. The issues summarized above cast a light to the conception of further study.

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