

The Prospect of CET in China

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the problems that the college English test in China has brought about and introduces its recent reform both in the test contents and the management system.

Keywords: CET; reform; management system

I. Introduction

The College English Test (CET) administered by the Ministry of Education of China is a nationwide standardized test, aiming at an objective assessment of English proficiency of Chinese college students and an effective feedback for college teachers to improve their classroom teaching. It is divided into two kinds for the convenience of grading teaching: CET4 and CET6, each being held twice each year. As a criterion-related norm-referenced test, it has been playing an active role in the improvement of English proficiency since the execution of the first CET4 in Sept., 1987 and the first CET6 in Jan., 1989. According to a survey made by the Ministry of Education (Yang, 2003), only one third of the college graduates, in the beginning of the 1980s, could meet the reading requirement set by "Teaching Syllabus of College English", i.e., 17 words per minute. However, the great progress has been made in recent years. 62.4% of Grade 98 college graduates (in key universities 76.7% on average, but in some 100%) have met the present reading requirement, i.e., 70 words per minute, and passed CET4 upon graduation.

The development of CET also witnesses its rapid increase in the number of examinees. It is reported by Wu (2005), the vice minister from Ministry

of Education, that only about 100,000 students sat for the examination in 1987, while the number of both CET4 and 6 examinees has been up to over 11,000,000 in 2004, being the largest one in participating in a single test in the world. The rise of the examinees should be attributed to many factors, among which two of them play a leading role. One is the compulsory policy adopted by most of the universities and colleges in China. They laid down a rule that failure to pass CET4 means that a college student cannot get his/her bachelor degree and failure to pass CET 6 means that s/he cannot get her/his second bachelor degree or master degree. The other, the more important one, is that its certificate has become a necessity in one's application for a job. Lots of companies and factories take it as one of the prerequisites for one to be employed, even though English is not in use there (Chang, 2005).

The overstress of CET from society, therefore, brings forth some negative effects. This paper will discuss these problems and measures to be taken by the Ministry of Education in the near future.

II. The Problems that CET has brought about

The importance of the CET certificate puts college students under the great pressure and forces them to take the lion's share of time for its prepara-

tion. A survey to 4000 college students made by China Foreign Languages Education Research Center (2004) shows that 19% of them spend nearly all their spare time in learning English, 56% most of their spare time, 16% only class hours and 9% less time. To make the things worse, college students, in their preparation for the test, are interested in only some skills how to get high marks rather than how to improve their linguistic competence, being indulged in all kinds of simulation tests and training classes. On the contrary, there are still some others who rack their brains in scheming how to pass the examination by some illegal means. Hence, many professional test substitutes come into being and become flourishing in their business.

Nowadays it is a common phenomenon for a person with a good command of English to be badly needed when the CET is at hand. S/He is either hired to enter for the exam in place of the real examinee or send a message through a mobile phone (correspondingly, some illegal trades emerged such as forged identification cards and wireless earphone). Some professional substitutes even openly announce their addresses, phone numbers and offer the price of being hired. It is reported that before the examination was held in Jan., 2005, a special message was posted in public in Ningxia University Forum at Sohu website (Chang, 2005): the answers to the selected items will be sent to you through a mobile phone in 55 minutes after the exam starts, and the correct rate for CET4 is ensured to be up to 95% and that of CET6 90%. Pay 600RMB or so in return.

In recent years, it is frequently reported that the test paper is disclosed and the people concerned are punished and sentenced to imprisonment. Seven hours before the CET4 starts in June, 2004, its test paper has been published through internet in Nanning, Guangxi; a day before the examination in Jan., 2005, two people from Oriental University disclose it in its training class and on its university net after they steal it; since June, 2002, test papers and their answers have been frequently sold on some universities' campuses in Chongqing when the examination is approaching, and they are proven later to be 85% right.

All kinds of cheating are so rampant that they disturb the test itself, ruin its reputation and destroy its justice and fairness. Therefore, the Ministry of Education held a conference on Feb., 23, 2005, announcing a series of measures and plans to reform the test itself and its management system.

III. The Recent Reform of CET

In order to overcome the negative effects of CET such as test-oriented learning, cheating and irrational hooking between one's test certificate and diploma, the recent reform is chiefly, first, focused on the management system, i.e., scoring and test-report. The present scoring system used in CET is 100 as full mark and 60 as pass, and two types of certificate are awarded: fair (60 to 84) and excellent (85 and above). New scoring system, starting from June, 2005, is 710 as full mark, ranging from 290 and 710. No pass mark is set to change the present situation that teaching or learning is assessed simply by passing-out rate. No certificate with fairness and excellence is awarded, but instead each examinee will receive a test report ranging from 290 to 710 and his/her corresponding mark of each section. The reform on the scoring and test report will facilitate teaching, changing the present situation of unreasonable comparison between different colleges, and facilitate learning, helping students out of the pressure from the job market and graduation.

The second reform is reflected on the contents of the test itself. Compared with the present test, the new one will increase the proportion of listening comprehension and non-selective items, and fast reading will also be added.

The new test consists of four sections: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, comprehensive testing and writing (Jin, 2005). The proportion of the first section will be increased from 20% to 35%, whose listening materials are chosen mainly from some authentic dialogues, lectures and broadcast or TV programs. On the contrary, the proportion of the second section will be decreased from 40% to 35% since the basic requirement of "College English Teaching Syllabus" has shifted its attention from

Table 1 The present CET4 and 6

components	contents	types of questions	proportion
section 1: listening	dialogues short passages: comprehension or dictation	multiple choice multiple choice dictation	20%
section2: reading	reading comprehension	multiple choice	40%
section3: vocabulary & structure	vocabulary comprehension & grammar structure	multiple choice	15%
section4: comprehensive testing	cloze or error correction or questions-answers or translation	multiple choice error correction questions-answers English to Chinese	10%
section5: writing	writing	writing	15%

Table 2 The pilot CET4 and 6

components	contents	types of questions	proportion
section 1: listening	dialogues: shorter & longer short passages: comprehension or dictation	multiple choice multiple choice dictation	35%
section2: reading	careful reading: comprehension & vocabulary fast reading	multiple choice blank-filling true/false or others	35%
section3: comprehensive testing	alternating: cloze or error correction alternating: questions-answers or translation	multiple choice error correction questions-answers Chinese to English	15%
section4: writing	writing	writing	15%

reading-centered learning to listening and speaking. The third section (15%) is composed of two subsections: cloze or error correction, and questions-answers to a short passage or translation from Chinese to English. The last section, writing, remains unchanged both in its proportion and requirement. Table 1 and table 2 are the comparisons between two tests before and after reform in terms of the tested contents, types of question and proportions.

Such a nationwide, standardized test involving more than ten millions of examinees each year can never be more scientific without a pilot test. Therefore, the new test of CET4 will start its experiment in Jan., 2006 and that of CET6 in June, 2006 at 180 uni-

versities. After a new norm, test syllabus and test sample for each has been established, the final formal nationwide test will be held in Jan., 2007 for CET4 and in June, 2007 for CET6 respectively.

IV Conclusion

There is no doubt that the CET reform will change the traditional monotonous way of teaching-teachers' dominating the classes explaining the language points leaving students no chance to speak, and partial pursuit of pass-out rate from the colleges and over-emphasis from the job market. However, as we know, CET is a summative test (Zhang, 2005), reflecting, to some extent, the result of teaching rather than its whole process or global view. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to the formative test, such as self-assessment from students and diagnostic tests at the various learning periods, so that the teaching plans and methods can be adjusted in time.

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