

Language Assessment Instrument Analysis: Scoping and Investigating the Writing Assessment of College English Test Band 4

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Abstract: The writing evaluation portion of the College English Test band 4 (CET-4) in China is the subject of this study. The goal is to evaluate the language evaluation tool utilized in this test and pinpoint its advantages, disadvantages, and prospective growth areas. The study uses a scoping and investigative strategy to fully comprehend the CET-4 writing assessment's administration, scoring, and design. The study makes a contribution to the field of language assessment by offering insightful information on how writing abilities are assessed in high-stake test and by outlining prospective directions for future study and research in this area.

Keywords: CET-4; Language Assessment; English Test; Writing Assessment.

1. Introduction of English Teaching and Learning in China

English as a subject takes a significant position in Chinese national education framework. Ministry of education in China have published a National English Teaching Guideline which covered both macro and micro aspects of English teaching for all level of schools in 2001. Lin (2002) unscrambles this policy and emphasis that English has become an integrated part through the entire national education system (Lin, 2002). In accordance with this teaching guideline, schools are required to arrange English lessons for students from primary grade 3 to university level (Wang, 2007). Obviously, issues of learning and teaching English involve each individual student and teacher.

An important thing needs to be reminded is the contemporary education in China is based on an exam-oriented system, which includes English. Thus, standardized test takes a higher position than authentic assessment from all schools' aspect. The primary mission of teachers and students is to achieve a better score or pass various exams rather than improve English proficiency. Indeed, English tests can be found in various aspects such as different levels of school entrance exams, and English test for specific purposes like tourism English test etc. This paper will mainly discuss and have a depth view of College English Test in China regarding the aspect of language learning and ethical issues.

2. General Description about College English Test

2.1. History, Purpose & Use of College English Test

College English Test (CET) is regarded as a national English as a foreign language test in the People's Republic of China, which held by Tertiary Education Department in Ministry of Education. It is a national unitary monotechnic and standardized language test. CET was formerly named "College English Standardization Test band 4 & 6" before

1993. It was initiated in 1987 and governed by Committee of College English Test. After over 30 years development, now CET has become one of the most important tests for all tertiary level students and brings tremendous social and academic impact.

In educational policy's aspect, the main purpose of CET is to facilitate the implementation of National English Teaching Guideline; to measure English proficiency and ability of university student in standardized and objective method; to enhance the teaching quality of university English lessons, and provide statistics for National College English Teaching Syllabus (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). The National College English Teaching Syllabus also states curriculum of college English must constitute 10% of student's total credit in their undergraduate studying. CET is implemented to test student's English learning outcome of their college studying period.

As a large-scale standardized test, CET is not only adopted by universities but also public to evaluate test-takers English proficiency and learning outcome (Yan, 2006). In fact, in labor market, many companies would like to count CET s a job criterion; and students also highlight their CET scores in their resume in order to reach job criteria and illustrate English ability.

The test object of CET is the non-English major undergraduate and postgraduate university students in China only. Students in English relevant majors are allocated to attend the Test for English Majors (TEM). Students who complete the curriculum of college English are permitted to take CET test.

In addition, CET contains two levels: CET band 4 (CET-4) and CET band 6 (CET-6). Bee (2006) clarifies that as a non-professional level certificate, CET-4 still counted as one of the most important tasks for university students because those who failed to pass CET-4 are ineligible to get bachelor degree (Bee, 2006). Therefore, passing CET-4 is an obligatory in all schools. Compare with CET-4, it is optional for students to participate CET-6 and its only purpose is to examine student's English learning achievement in their college. CET-6 has a similar nature with CET-4 but the level text content is higher. The prerequisite to participate CET-6 is get a passing grade of

CET-4.

Hughes (2002) mentions criterion-referenced language testing measures students' performance based on their mastery of language skills and the norm-referenced language testing measures student's performance based on the comparison of student's achievement by the same assessment (Hughes 2002). CET-4 can be categorized as the criterion-related norm-referenced test which includes both characteristics of criterion-referenced and norm-referenced at the same time. Through CET-4, students' English proficiency and language skills will be tested, and their test score will be calculated in a normal scoring system, which based on their ranking of entire test-takers.

Generally, achievement test is used to evaluate how student's learning outcome of a subject after a period and proficiency test measures student's overall skill in language (Gronlund 1998). According to the National College English Teaching Syllabus, CET is aim to test student's language learning outcome after they complete college English curriculum. Student are required to get a passing grade of CET-4 in order to get graduate. As a syllabus-objective achievement test, CET is also highly similar to a proficiency test because they both measures the ability to use language for particular communicative purposes (Zhixin, 2006). In this case, English proficiency as a communicative purpose is also being tested in CET. Therefore, CET actually has the dual standard of both achievement test and proficiency test due to its distinctiveness.

Amreim (2002) indicates one of the major concerns of high-stakes test is the direct consequence of failing or passing test. Although failing CET would not affect student's academic records, nevertheless passing CET is given significant weight as a prerequisite to get bachelor degree. As a high-stakes test, CET's signification is more than a language test, which pushes student strive hard to pass it.

There are two CET-4 and CET-6 tests available for university students to participate in each year. The test time is allocated on the third Saturday in June and December. Students who complete the college English curriculum are allow to participate CET by registering online. Basically, a student would have more than six times to attend this test in their university period. The CET test fee is ranged from minimum 9 RMB to maximum 50 RMB based on regional differences, which converted to Australian Dollars is approximately from 2 dollars to 10 dollars. Test fee is reasonable and affordable to each individual student.

2.2. CET-4 Test Format and Score Distributions

Similar with other language tests, CET-4 includes four main skills of language learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing. One thing needs to mention is these four main skills are divided to two sections: speaking assessment section is segregate with other three assessments. Student who gets a passing grade of the main test section, which includes listening, reading and writing, will get the qualification to attend the speaking section. The main test is formed by four major components: 15% of writing, 35% of listening comprehension, 35% of reading comprehension and 15% of translation. The entire test duration is 130 minutes; in specific, writing test takes 30 minutes, listening comprehension takes 30 minutes, reading comprehension takes 40 minutes and translation takes 30 minutes. Students are required to complete these four in restricted given time.

The CET score system adopt the normal scoring system on a one-hundred-point scale with the mean being 72 and the standard deviation 12. As a norm-referenced test, the highest cumulative score is 710 and the lowest cumulative is 310. Final score indicates how well test takers done in relative group. Besides, there is no specific score threshold that divides passing from failing but most of the universities and employers consider 425 as the facto passing grade (Gu, 2019).

3. Investigating the Writing Assessment in CET-4

3.1. Introduction of Writing Assessment in CET-4

The writing test in CET-4 is a proficiency test designed to assess student's writing ability in English. The theoretical construct is to evaluate student's language productive skills to produce difference types of English writing in limited time in accordance to the syllabus. As a complete writing test, the content should include function, genre, object, subject matter. Function of writing refers the purposes of writing and the expressing information should be applied in the real-life scenario (Hughes, 2000). Genre refers the types of writing format, such as argumentation, description, exposition and narration (Czarniawska, 1999). According to the CET syllabus, writing test should choose subject matter that test-takers are familiar with. The text content is various in topics that related to subject matter: topics includes history, technology, culture, society and general life, employment etc.

Writing test focus on evaluating student's ability to express a particular meaning in grammatical framework. Writing assessment also emphasize the writing logic, cohesive, and coherent within the communicative functions. Word requirement of CET-4 writing is from minimum 120 words to no more than 160 words. The scoring criteria scales from minimum 0 point to maximum 15 points.

3.2. Language Review & Learning Underpinning the Writing Assessment

While reviewing CET writing assessment, an important term mentioned in the National College English Teaching Syllabus is "communicative purposes and function." Indeed, the Committee does not want to see CET writing assessment laid on grammatical aspects only. Canale and Swain (1980) produced the "communicative competence" language model which composed by two components: the first one is communicative competence includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic knowledge and strategic competence; the second one is actual communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). In this context, grammatical competence refers the ability in linguistic elements such as grammar, lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonology and semantics etc.; students should be able to complete the entire writing test with their grammar skills.

Sociolinguistic knowledge requires students to comprehend the sociocultural rules of language use and rules of discourse; for demonstration, the variety of writing formats and topics is the implementation to evaluate student's understanding of sociocultural rules in language using. Strategic knowledge emphasizes the knowledge of how to deal with the difficulties in communication, and this is what exactly writing assessment evaluate student's strategy in actual communication.

Cummins (1979) brings the notion of cognitive academic

language proficiency (CALP), which focus on the proficiency in academic language or language used in classroom in various content, which can be characterized by being abstract, context reduced and specialized (Cummins, 1979). Chinese students start to learning English from their third grade, which means they have about 10 years English leaning to develop their basic interpersonal communication skills. Therefore, cognitive academic language proficiency language teaching and learning underpins the design of CET testing assessment. Specifically, teachers adapt context-reduced language as the main strategy in teaching such as confirmed textbooks or preparing lectures for students. The implementation of context-reduced language is also related with the exam-oriented system and the form of English tasks, as it is a common perception of English teachers in China (Jiang, 2014)

3.3. Issues in CET-4 Writing

3.3.1. Validity

Face validity indicates the test is being subjectively review by covering the content that is supposed to be measured. CET-4 writing assessment is aim for students' writing ability and communicative competence. So, the CET-4 writing assessment is addressed aporetically and there is no doubt that the face validity is valid in CET-4 writing test.

Content validity measures knowledge of the content domain, in other word, it requires adequacy of the test items. Range and topics of CET-4 writing test are selected from college English curriculum and prescribed textbooks. Authenticity and interactivity are two importation notions in writing task: authenticity refers students are capable to compose the writing task with their own thoughts rather than adapting writing formula and patterns (Wu, 2001) and interactivity stands for the writing task topics should be interactive for students and give them to apply their real-life experience to writing task. Lili and Xiaorui (2017) investigate the authenticity, interactivity in CET-4 writing test and the result reveal that CET-4 writing is sufficient in authenticity but lack of interactivity and suggest that CET-4 should strength interaction and improve interactivity for students to apply their real-life experience into writing test.

Construct validity considers whether the test actually tests the abilities that supposed to be measure, and it is associated with the model of language use. CET-4 adopts the language model communicative competence, which provides an accurate reflection of this model by testing student's language ability for communicative purposes.

Discussing the criterion-related validity, it is not compatible to compare CET-4 writing assessment to the other test such as TOFEL or IELTS. Although CET-4 writing assessment has various types of genre, however due to teacher's teaching method, especially under an exam-oriented testing system, student's critical thinking could not be reflected in the writing assessment. Critical thinking is a crucial part in academic and it seems CET-4 writing assessment is lack of requirement of this particular part.

Research by Wang (2008) indicates large portions of students in university motivated to study English hard for pass CET-4, which can be consider as external driven factor (Wang, 2008). Besides, for most of the students, CET-4 is the final English test in their college period. Thus, the predictive validity seems not valid enough to predict test-takers future English ability and proficiency.

Indeed, there are many criticisms about CET. One of the most common issues being discussed is the washback effect.

Washback effect can be considered as the consequential validity that influences teachers and students to do things they would not otherwise necessarily do (Messick, 1996). In this case, CET-4 brings negative washback effect to teachers and learning and present in a loop. If students are not capable to pass CET-4; they would not be able to get the bachelor degree; the priority of English learning in university is to pass CET-4 rather than enhance their language ability and proficiency. In teaching practice, teachers prefer to teach students skills of passing test that limits the language itself. Under the influence of this high-stakes test, teaching and learning English has become utilitarian with one purpose which is getting a pass.

3.3.2. Reliability Fairness, and Particularity in CET-4 Writing Assessment

Spolsky (1995) refers the term reliability as obtained by arranging the same test twice in a certain period of time to a group of individual test-takers (Spolsky 1995). Research done by Huizhong (2006) shows that the CET marking reliability is 0.87, which is supportive for the indication of test-taker's writing ability by using CET-4 writing scores (Huizhong, 2006).

CET-4 is regarded as a language test in national aspect; thus, the design of this test is fully considered the components of particularity. Test locations are allocated in university campus, which is convenient for the test-takers to participate. The test fee is obvious obviously affordable to each individual student – condering the test fee is cheaper than the cost a regular meal. The CET-4 test guideline/material/resources can be download either from CET official website or another channel for free. Test raters are the college teacher from various university. Student use answer sheets to complete the entire test, which ensures their names and identifications would not be showed up in marking section. Considering the confidentiality, student's score will be distributed via internet or mobile phone text.

4. Conclusion

In this discussion of a national wide foreign test, CET-4 is a criterion-related norm-referenced test in design, also as a syllabus-objective achievement test playing a crucial role for each individual student in college. In further discussion, the writing assessment of CET-4 is sufficient in authentic content but lack of space for students to apply their real-life experience in it. Indeed, CET-4 is limited and restricted but it is still the best instrument to evaluate English proficiency of university students.

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