



## What's Wrong with Current Chinese College English Assessment System? Reform or Not?

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### Abstract

The author expounds the *status quo* of college English assessment system in China and objectively points out some major problems that have negative impacts on college English teaching and learning. On the basis of pros and cons towards the issue, the author intends to come up with some effective countermeasures, including converting the idea to further strengthen English teaching reform, to reform teaching method, to establish and conduct multi-level English teaching system, and most importantly to establish reasonable assessment and evaluation system.

**Keywords:** College English assessment system, Classroom tests, School final exam, CET4/CET6, Reform

The issue of college English assessment system in China seems to be a controversial topic for decades. Many researchers have ever touched upon this topic, Zhao(2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b) stated that current Chinese assessment system is filled with imperfection and immaturity from the macro point of view and further strengthened that the reform should be under way; Jin(2008) stressed that the inconsistency between college English teaching and learning and that in primary and middle schools and put forward some solutions to promote the reform of English teaching and assessment; Cheng(2004) conducted the comparative analysis of the assessment practices used at universities in three different ESL/EFL contexts in Canada, Hong Kong, and Beijing, and found that Beijing is the place where the objective test items are mostly valued in assessment system.

So far few studies conducted have been specifically done with the problems of assessment system popular in Chinese context. Therefore, what I am concerned about in this article is the issue of assessment of English proficiency of college non-English majors in China. Nowadays, the popular assessment items for the college students consist of as follows: National Matriculation Entrance Test (NMET); classroom tests; school final examination; College English Test (CET4/CET6).

### College English Teaching, Learning and Assessing in China

With China hosting the 2008 Olympics successfully and developing itself as a powerful nation, a more modern educational system that prepares people to interact with global society is urgently needed. China's college English teaching has existed for more than twenty years in which it has witnessed several stages of development and now it comes to the stage of maturity and perfection. College English is a 2 year required basic course for non-English undergraduates in all the universities of China. Unfortunately, the truth is college English teaching is fairly lengthy and learning is fairly painstaking. The teachers mostly adopt the spoon-feeding method, which dominates the whole class from the first minute of the class until the end, and oppositely the students are confined to remain their seats listening passively for decades. As a consequence, the students are found to be rather poor and undeveloped in oral English and communicative skills. The students' English proficiency in the aspects of listening, reading, writing, and translation is routinely assessed by the college final exam at the end of each semester and CET4 in the second year of college.

### Problems in Current College English Teaching, Learning and Assessing

The following are respectively the problems prevailing in current college English teaching, learning and assessing: imperfect education management system; unscientific teaching objectives; insufficient attention and input to English teaching; contradictory assessment system. What I emphasize on here is the contradictory assessment system, which is categorized into the types as follows: National Matriculation Entrance Test (NMET); classroom tests; school final examination; College English Test (CET4/CET6). NMET is a kind of national entrance exam required for all the high school students to attend so as to catch the chance and possibility of going to the college or universities. Frankly, NMET is a rather difficult proficiency test that all the students have to take painstaking efforts and energy for the preparation in order to achieve the satisfactory scores. But only the small numbers of them have the slim chance to make it.

As to classroom tests in college, it is always prepared by English teachers to check the students' mastery of book knowledge, which offers the valuable information for the students to improve their learning and teachers to promote

their teaching. What's more, the school final is designed for the students at the end of each semester, which covers mostly the majority of book stuffs plus some extra ability items. Finally, CET4 is a nation-wide test administered by the Ministry of Education for the purpose of testing the college students' overall abilities on listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

### Issue Problems

Thus, here arise some problems that need to be addressed with prudence:

How do teachers achieve the balance among classroom teaching, the school exam and CET test?

How much attention and time should the teacher spend in dealing with both school final and CET4 respectively in terms of time, energy and attention ?

How could we get ready for the CET4 perfectly without neglecting the classroom learning and final exam taking?

In what way should the students integrated abilities be valued and assessed? And what are the possible solutions for the above mentioned issues?

### College English

College English is a required basic course for undergraduates. The objectives are: to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking; to enhance students' ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality. The *Teaching requirements for college English curriculum(2004)* clearly defines the standards of skills in terms of vocabulary, reading, writing, listening and speaking in three respective levels, namely, basic level, intermediate level and advanced level. Each level is concerned with restrictive requirements in above aspects, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation.

And the course designing is listed as follows generally: classroom-based (2 periods per week, on reading and writing mainly); language lab-based ( 2 periods per week, on listening and speaking mainly). Teaching materials, such as textbook entitled New Horizon College English, or New Colleg English or other alternatives, are properly adopted.

### Assessment System

1. classroom assessment. Usually, classroom assessment is a class-size nonstandard quiz or test administered by individual teachers autonomously. Classroom tests, as a type of formative assessment, which occur from time to time, are always designed as a simple check-up of students' command of text knowledge in order to help the teachers get to know the students' weakness and improve their teaching.

2. School Final (take Shaanxi Normal University as an example). Generally speaking, school final is a unified school scale final exam at the end of each semester administered by the school of foreign languages. Also the school final is established by the university teachers and selected from the test bank at random and designed as an objective and accurate evaluation of the English proficiency based mostly on textbooks in order to check the students' command of language study and teachers' teaching outcome.

3. CET4/CET6. CET(College English Test) has been prevailing for decades among college students since English plays increasingly important role throughout the world. It is a large-scale standard examination, a national teaching-oriented examination administered by the National Ministry of Education. It needs to be clarified that CET4/CET6 is established by professors and experts from several top universities. No doubt the test is designed as an objective and accurate evaluation of the English proficiency of the college students so as to better inform the English teaching of non-English majors in the institutions of higher learning in China. Both CET4 and CET6 occur in June and December annually and presently the full score is 710, starting from January 2005. Those whose mark is above 220 will be awarded a transcript issued by the National CET-4 and CET-6 Commission on behalf of the Bureau of Higher Education of the National Ministry of Education. Even if CET 4 and CET6 are intended to better inform the English teaching of non-English majors in the institutions of higher learning in China, however, CET4 specifically is a matter of life and death regarding the students' successful graduation in that without passing the CET4 the students do have the problems of obtaining their bachelor's degree.

### Conflicts

However, it has been argued and debated about the issue of contradiction among in-class tests, school final and CET4 in the recent decades. In other words, in-class test focuses on coverage of textbook stuffs at regular intervals, which is a kind of formative assessments to judge the quality of students' achievement while the students are still in the process of learning. By comparison, as a unified school test, final exam always covers majority of language points and vocabulary from the text book that have been taught and instructed during the class. There is always a chance to include the test items of integrated ability, which usually provides the information for both teachers to improve their teaching and students to strengthen their learning. While last but not the least, CET4 is a completely proficiency test excluding the textbook at all. In other words, CET4 aims at testing the students' all-round ability, namely listening, speaking, reading,

writing and translation, which is totally irrelevant to what the students have been taught during in class on the basis of textbooks.

Therefore, the problem once again: should the classroom teaching and learning be geared to classroom test or school final or CET 4/CET6 ? And what could be the best proportion respectively for different tests in everyday teaching?

### Pros and Cons

Accordingly, there are pros and cons toward this conflicting issue: some people argue that these three tests are interrelated and complementary to each other; the fact is in-class tests and school final both serve the purpose of CET 4 and CET6; class time and attention should be paid to textbook teaching for better preparation of CET4; all tests stimulate and motivate teachers and students in the process of English teaching and learning. On the contrary, a large number of people maintain that the three tests are contradictory to each other, i.e. both in-class tests and final exam are textbook-oriented, while CET4/CET6 is the proficiency test irrelevant to textbook; some people even proposed that CET 4 should be abolished because it overburdens and worries the students. No doubt that everything the teacher does in class should cater for the CET4 to the largest extent, a test of life and death, because it matters the students' successful completion and graduation of college study. All these guaranteed the students' maximum possibility of getting a better job and a brighter future.

Thus, it is suggested that classroom teaching, learning and assessment, and all other test forms should be combined in terms of the students' all-round abilities, esp. some practical and communicative skills that are possibly applied in the near future after graduation.

### Discussions and Reflections

In order to solve the forementioned conflicts, I attempt to come up with some possible solutions, for instance, we'd better convert our ideas to promote English teaching reform, to further strengthen English teaching reform, to reform teaching method, to establish and conduct multi-level English teaching system, and to establish reasonable assessment and evaluation system.

It is true that Chinese Ministry of Education has been reforming the assessment system in recent years, such as the change of scoring system for CET4. There is no pass or fail standard in CET4 with the standard score focusing on the percentage tile relevant to the rest who attend the exam. Unfortunately, it is still seen that some universities enact their own passing score to restrain the students' English learning, thus the reform going back to the old track one again. Recently, the interview "University Head Zhu Qingshi Challenges Old Academic Ways" ( Newsmaker Interview, *Science*, 20 November, p.1050 ) highlights the vision of Zhu Qingshi, the newly appointed president of the planned South University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen (SUST), who intends to shake up China's old, widely-blamed education university system. According to Zhu, NMET will not be used in SUST's admission process and SUST will enroll students directly from grade two of high school. However, the truth is the selection criteria is still doomed to use test grades which is essentially no difference from NMET.

To sum up above mentioned, however, there are still some reflections personally based upon this controversial problem. Firstly, it is still a long way to go for Chinese college English teaching and learning reform. Next, all college tests should be consistent to each other on the basis of classroom teaching and learning. Thirdly, CET4 as a standard exam should produce the backwash effect in the way that it covers as much as it expects and tests the integrated language ability. Lastly CET 4 can continue to exist in the way it perfects itself in terms of contents, forms and objectives.

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