

Washback on Chinese learners: An impact study of the College English Test Band 4

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Abstract: Washback on learners was a topic seldom discussed in 1990s and has gotten more attention from the researchers since the 21st century. The argument that the quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system has been widely accepted. The impact study of the College English Test Band 4(CET4) in Mainland China challenged that idea. The CET4 is a large-scale national examination with high stakes at tertiary level and it has experienced the latest reform since 2005. The test designers hoped the current examination would change students' language learning in a deep way. The study examined the washback of the CET4 on Chinese undergraduates by investigating six cases from their first day of college study to the day before they sat the CET4. The results of the study seem to indicate that only if the student studies towards the exam, the intended qualitative learning will hardly occur, especially in the period of exam preparation.

1. Introduction

In language education, the paradigm of learning has shifted from behaviorism to cognitive constructivism. Language learning should be conceptualized qualitatively as a process of making sense of an unfamiliar environment rather than quantitatively conceptualized as a process of collection, absorption and assimilation of things (grammatical concepts, word pattern, etc.)(Beson&Lor,1999). The belief that 'the quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system'(Elton and Laurillard, 1979, p.100, quoted in Tang and Biggs, 1996:159) has been widely accepted. The use of assessment as a means of promoting curriculum change has become increasingly common in language education (see, for instance Wall and Alderson, 1993; Cheng, 1997,1998; Andrews et al. 2002). However such a reform strategy has been oppugned by some researchers (e.g. Wall & Alderson 1993; Andrews1995, 2002). Andrews (1995) points out "As a tool to engineer curriculum innovation, ... washback seems to be a very blunt instrument, on which may have relatively predictable quantitative effects on, for example, the time allocated to different aspects of teaching and on the content of that teaching, but rather less predictable qualitative effects upon the teaching-learning process and what actually takes place in classroom"(p.97).

The current study is situated within this line of debate. In the context of Chinese EFL, there is a criticism that the College English Test Band 4(CET4) leads to quantitative English learning at tertiary level. The undergraduates have been claimed to learn English by rote and be unable to use English for communication in real life (Jin, 2006). An obvious corollary is that if the CET4 begins to use other types of test format and content to assess students' overall proficiency of using English for communication, then students will also learn in a qualitative way. However the idea that the CET4 reform can encourage student learning in a qualitative way has yet to be attested empirically. The purpose of this research, which is part of a larger study by the author into washback effects of the latest CET4, was to examine the power of the CET4 over what took place outside the classroom, with special reference to learning behavior. An attempt was made to address this issue by talking with the students and reading their diaries. Before proceeding to the main research topic, it will be useful to describe the context in which the CET4 takes place.

2. The context

The College English Test Band 4

The CET4 is administered by the National College English Testing Committee on behalf of the Higher Education Department, the Ministry of Education, P.R. China. The CET4 is a test battery, which comprises the written test and the CET spoken English test. The written test, which is investigated in the study, is administered annually twice respectively in the months of June and December. The CET4 is designed to assess undergraduates' English proficiency in accordance with the requirements of the National College English Teaching Syllabus at the basic level. The reported score of the 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.

Although the primary purpose of the CET4 is to improve the quality of College English instruction, people attach more and more extra functions to it. The educational administrators use it as important information to evaluate the overall teaching quality of universities; employers regard it as one of the criteria to employ graduates; and most of the universities take it as a necessity for a college diploma. In short, the CET4 has become a high-stakes test in Mainland China.

The CET4 has strong influence on the English language teaching and learning at the tertiary level in China. The CET4 committee is conscious of the fact and has made efforts to improve the test to maximize its positive washback on teaching and learning. Measures taken in the latest CET4 reform are listed as follows:

- to develop new item formats to measure the candidate's ability to use English for communicative purposes;
- to adjust the test content to include more communicative skills like expeditious reading
- to increase the percentage and weighting of constructed response items(Jin &Yang,2006, p.35).

The learning of English at the tertiary level in Mainland China

The College English (CE) course is a compulsory subject for all the non-English majors in their first two years. Undergraduates usually have 4 hours of English classes each week. After two years of study, they are supposed to at least pass the CET4 to achieve the basic requirements of the CE course.

In recent years, China's further opening up to the outside world and its entry into the WTO delivered a heavy hint of the need for English talents with high English proficiency, especially the ability to use English for communication. To meet these new needs, a new set of guidelines of CE courses was officially announced in 2004. Unlike the past CE requirements, the new guidelines emphasized the ability to use English for oral and written communication as well as the cultural quality. In order to promote the new curriculum, the CET4 was modified in 2005 based on these new CE requirements and the new one was first held nationally in 2007. The CET designers have hoped that the new CET could drive students to learn English in a qualitative way. The undergraduates are expected to practice their listening and reading skills by exposing themselves to authentic English and learn vocabulary in the discoursal context (Jin, 2006).

3. Research design

Hypothesis

A key question to be addressed in the process of the latest CET4 reform was whether and in what way learners would benefit (Jin, 2006). Therefore a research was set up to measure empirically the effects of the latest CET4 on student learning. The study focused on Alderson and Wall's hypotheses on learning: a test will influence what and how learners learn (1993, p.120). In relation to that hypothesis a specific research question was selected for investigation: Does the intended effects of the latest CET4 on learning take place in students' real study?

Methodology

The study was conducted in X University in Jiangsu province. Six students from different majors were selected on a voluntary basis for case study. They were required to write diaries about their English learning outside the classroom at least once a week from the very beginning of the first term to the end of the second term in their first academic year. The rationale was that the author wanted to investigate the whole learning process where the undergraduates entered the university, studied the CE course and sat for the CET4 in order to see whether the effects of the CET4 varied across time. The diaries in the study were ones 'commissioned for research purpose' in which, 'although the diary remains a personal account, the domain is quite tightly specified by the researcher...' (McDonough and McDonough 1997, p.122). The main guideline of diary keeping in the study was that the informants were required to touch upon their learning outside the classroom including content, activities, methods and feelings as well as the reasons for their decisions on learning. The diaries were collected periodically.

Gosa (2004) thinks that diary study seems not to be the best means of ascertaining the presence or absence of washback since diary study is basically uncontrolled. It might be better to complement this uncontrolled method with other 'more controlled' methods (p.237). In order to avoid the problem proposed by Gosa, the author conducted post-diary interviews to each case after each collection of diaries to clarify some uncertain things written in the diaries and supplement the data wanted by the author but missed in the diaries.

Data analysis procedure

The author has collected 230 diary entries and conducted nine post-diary interviews to each case. All the data have been transcribed. The researcher used content analysis to analyze the obtained data. In the analysis of students' learning outside the classroom, a decision was taken to focus on two sets of features: 'what' and 'how' (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In 'what' category there were three sub-items: content, material and task. The subcategory of content referred to skills and language knowledge. The author decided to look not only for the four basic skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) generally associated with language learning but also for other non-communicative ones, such as test-taking and test management skills and memorizing skills. The language knowledge included vocabulary and grammar rules. Material meant any material which was used by the students outside the classroom. Task referred to any activity designed to engage students in language-using work. "How" involved learning degree and time allocation as well as learning methods. Learning degree was related with learning rate and intensity. Time allocation meant how certain time was allocated to different aspects of English learning. Learning methods meant sets of techniques used by students to learn English. The analysis was at last compared with the intended washback of the CET4 by test designers to see whether the intended washback occurred in students' real study.

4. Results

Due to time restriction and the limitation of the paper length, two cases' stories are discussed in this section in order to show the possible washback effects of the latest CET4. Before proceeding, it is worth pointing out that both of these learners are not representative of the wider Chinese undergraduate population and are exceptional in a numbers of ways: firstly, high-level English proficiency (high marks both in National Matriculation English Test (NMET) and in University-based Entrance English Examination); Secondly, experienced English teachers (associated professors, teaching nearly 20 years); Thirdly, good learning equipments (language lab rooms). Because the study investigated the learning process under the CET4, it would be better to discuss the results according to time line. The author cuts the time line into three distinctive periods: the period of accommodation to College English learning, the period of normal College English learning, the period of preparation for the CET4.

Alma's story

Alma was born in a country. Her father often told her the importance of study effort by reference to his own story. Her father failed in national college entrance examinations because of laziness in study, therefore didn't get a well-paid job. Alma liked English very much when she got to learn English in primary school. She had examination-oriented high school learning experience. She held neutral attitude towards examination. She evaluated her English proficiency as middle-level although she got very high marks in the NMET.

4.1.1 The period of accommodation to College English learning

Alma had lots of anticipation of her English learning when she became a university student shown as below: *I had lots of expectations of my English study in the university. I would have had a diverse and interesting learning experience. I would have tried many things I never tried in high school. I got plenty of free time after class. Therefore I could do everything I would like to do* (Extract 1, from Alma's retrospective diary, 27th June 2008). Alma thought that the most important English learning objective at tertiary level was to "*understand what people say in English and talk my idea in English clearly*" (Extract 2, from Alma's general diary, 8th Nov. 2007).

At the beginning of her college life, she was enthusiastic about practising her speaking skill and believed that speaking and listening should be the major learning content in her study. She attended a lecture on how to improve spoken English and made full preparation for her individual presentation in class.

In the period of accommodation to College English learning, the word 'CET4' never appeared in her diaries and when the author asked her about the relationship between her study and the CET4, she responded in that way: *Now I study English out of my own interest rather than for passing the CET4. I think real English proficiency is much more important than a certificate of the CET4*(Extract 3, from Alma's post-diary interview, 21st Nov.2007).

4.1.2 The period of normal College English learning

After Alma accommodated to her new College English learning, she began her normal learning in a 'normal' way as she concluded in her retrospective diary: *I have accommodated to College English learning and never try new things again. I have done the things a primary school student even would do. That is to follow teacher's instruction* (Extract 4, from Alma's retrospective diary, 27th June 2008). By analyzing Alma's diaries the author found she actually danced to the teacher's baton.

She always used a set of textbooks and related workbooks offered by the university as her learning materials. The vocabulary emphasized by the teacher was the major content in her daily learning. Rote reciting vocabulary, doing homework assigned by the teacher, doing text-related exercises and reading texts aloud composed of her learning routine.

Her learning routine appears to be broken by the University-based College English Examination (UCEE). The students are required to take the mid-term and final-term UCEE to get credits. More than 40% of the test content comes from students' integrated English textbook and some tested questions even never change the order of choices.

Alma's daily learning was affected by the UCEE to some extent and the extent of effects reduced when Alma got more familiar with the UCEE and the CET4 approached closer. When Alma took her first UCEE, she made preparation for it a week before the date of exam. She wrote the details in her diary as followed: *Next week we will have our first mid-term examination. The teacher told us the range of the tested content. Therefore I can revise on target. One section in the exam is Cloze. It comes from some paragraph in the textbook. I should have recited these paragraphs earlier. I shouldn't recite them until the teacher said these might be tested in mid-term examination. ... The teacher also told us that translation exercises in the textbook might be tested. I have to complete these translation exercises and recite the model answers. Maybe what I am doing is to deal with the exam, but only the exam can make me to learn what I don't want to learn in the day's study* (Extract 5, from Alma's diary, 23rd Nov. 2007). The above extract showed Alma focused on the content possibly tested in the UCEE and memorized paragraphs and translation exercises by rote, which she didn't like to do in her daily learning. Alma got high marks in her first UCEE but she thought she didn't do quiet well in the part of reading comprehension. Therefore she decided to do reading exercises in her comprehensive reading workbook to practise her reading skill. She recorded her reading practice once when she got the result of the UCEE. After that she seemed to neglect reading practice which was not emphasized by the teacher and returned to her learning routine again. When the second and third UCEE came, Alma became more familiar with the exam. She felt calm and knew how to prepare for the UCEE. She did almost the same things as she had done for her first UCEE but spent less time to prepare than before. When the CET4 came closer the fourth UCEE also drew closer. When the author asked Alma about how to balance two examinations in her learning. She responded like that: *I want to get high marks in both of exams. But I spend more time and energy in the CET4. The final-term examination is much easier than the CET4. It just takes me a couple of days to recite passages and translation exercises. That is enough for me to get high marks* (Extract 6, from Alma's post-diary interview, 11th June 2008).

4.1.3 The period of preparation for the CET4

Alma's learning in first term was hardly affectedly by the CET4. Her learning was mostly controlled by her English teacher. Alma was notified of getting the CET4 qualification at the beginning of the second semester. She was confused about how to prepare for the CET4 at that time. Her puzzle was illustrated as follows: *I don't know how to prepare for it (the CET4). Blank-minded. For the moment Mrs. Li (her English teacher) never mentions that to us in class. At least she should tell us what content we need to focus on or whether we need to do large amounts of test papers. I am unable to do what I hope to do* (Extract 7, from Alma's post-diary interview, 12th Mar.2008).

Alma didn't take any actions to prepare for the CET4 until the end of March. Her learning was certainly affected by the CET4 to some extent. The findings were discussed in two aspects of 'what' and 'how' as follows.

In the aspect of 'what', the obvious changes in Alma's learning content were that The CET4

words replaced the words in textbook as the major learning content and listening and reading skills were practiced more frequently than before. Alma used the CET4 past papers in place of the textbooks. She substituted the activities of doing the CET4 past papers, reciting the CET4 vocabulary for the activities mentioned above in 4.1.2.

In the aspect of 'how', there was no obvious change in Alma's learning methods. She always adopted traditional methods like memorization, copying model answers and repetition. However Alma admitted that the CET4 affected her learning degree demonstrated below: *Without the CET4 I would study English at low speed. I would read one page of the vocabulary book in two days. My progress would be very slow* (Extract 8, from Alma's retrospective diary, 27th June 2008) and she also thought the CET4 influenced time allocation in her English learning outside the classroom shown as follows: *I spend more time on doing listening and reading parts. I allocate learning time according to the weight of each part in the CET4. You know listening and reading are the largest parts of the CET4* (Extract 9, from Alma's post-diary interview, 22nd May 2008).

It was worth mentioning the effects of the CET4 on Alma's learning occurred step by step and more and more strongly with the CET4 came closer. Alma experienced from blank-minded phase to action phase. The key words "the CET4" appeared more and more frequently in her diaries. The extent of the CET4 washback on Alma's learning reached its maximum a week before the date of the CET4. She did nothing else except for reciting the CET4 words and doing the CET4 past papers.

Lee's story

Lee was born in a city. His parents were government officers who seldom gave guidance on his English learning. Lee had very painful experiences of learning English in his Senior III. In order to get high marks in the NMET he had to do hundreds of English tests. He had an antipathy to the NMET but he admitted his knowledge of English was improved by studying towards the exam. Lee evaluated his English proficiency as middle level but he believed he was weak in using English in real life.

4.2.1 The period of accommodation to College English learning

Lee thought that College English learning should be different from English learning in high schools when he started his college life. He expressed the idea to the author in his first post-diary interview shown as follows: *In college we should talk with our classmates and the teacher in English as possible as we can. We shouldn't do a great number of test papers again in college. We should listen to some radio English programs and do some extracurricular reading in English* (Extract 10, from Lee's post-diary interview, 20th Nov. 2007). Lee had two major English learning objectives, a 'realistic' objective and an 'ideal' objective as he called. He intended to pass the CET4 in the first academic year and meanwhile he wanted to use English in real life.

Lee seemed to like following teacher's instruction at the beginning. He thought it was safe way for him when he didn't know much about College English learning. He bought the book on a collection of the CET4 past papers and did some test sections. When the author asked him why he started his preparation for the CET4 so early, he responded in that way: *That doesn't mean I began to prepare for the CET4. I just feel curious about the test and I want to know what it exactly looks like* (Extract 11, from Lee's post-diary interview, 20th Nov. 2007).

4.2.2 The period of normal College English learning

After the period of accommodation, Lee began to learn English in a way he expected, which

was described in 4.2.1. By analyzing Lee's diaries in the first term the author found he always chose an English magazine called Crazy English as his learning material outside the classroom. The magazine Crazy English was famous for authentic English and very popular among young people in Mainland China. Lee got both of written and verbal versions of the magazine. He often picked articles he was interested in to read in a day and in the evening he listened to the same articles. He always learnt new words in the articles he read. Occasionally he watched English film or reports downloaded from websites or played on TV channels. In a word, he learned English out of his interest and tried to make sense of English environment.

Lee's daily English learning was affected by the UCEE to the least extent. When the first UCEE came, Lee didn't know what would be tested. He made preparation for it by doing the CET4 past papers since he thought the two examination would be alike. He got good marks in the first UCEE and found the UCEE was quite easy and half of the tested content came from the textbook. He thought it would be better to make good use of class time to learn the texts for the UCEE but when the CET4 came closer, he even gave up listening to the teacher in class. He told the author about his sacrifice for the CET4 in his ninth post-diary interview: *I think the CET4 is much more important than the final-term examination. I did past papers while I was having English classes this morning. I know what taught in class is important for my final-term examination preparation, but for the moment I have to sacrifice it for much more important exam. After all I can ask my classmate to lend his class notes to me* (Extract 12, from Lee's post-diary interview, 10th June 2008).

Lee's normal learning was occasionally different from what was discussed above. He chose vocabulary and reading parts in the CET4 past papers to practice. But his passion for doing the CET4 past papers just lasted for a while. He told the author the reason like that: *Doing past paper was boring. I was annoyed at that. It is much more interesting to read English magazines to know about English culture* (Extract 13, from Lee's post-diary interview, 11th Dec. 2007).

4.2.3 The period of preparation for the CET4

Lee began his preparation for the CET4 at the beginning of the second semester. He never showed uncertainty about the preparation for the CET4. He seemed to carry out his preparation plan step by step and revised it continuously. Lee's learning was definitely affected by the CET4 to some extent. The findings were also discussed in two aspects of 'what' and 'how' as follows.

In the aspect of 'what', Lee emphasized reading and listening skills as usual but he also thought test taking and test management skills were critical. He summed up these skills by his own experience of doing past papers, the guidance in the CET4 preparation books and other's experience of the CET4. He attached more importance to the CET4 words than the new words in authentic English materials. He substituted the CET4 past papers, the CET4 vocabulary book and the CET4 preparation books for the authentic English materials such as English magazine and films. He did the CET4 past papers, recited the CET4 vocabulary, attended the CET4 lectures offered by the tutorial school outside the campus in place of the activities mentioned above in 4.2.2.

In the aspect of 'how', there were some changes in Lee's learning methods. Lee used to learn English by using it in daily life but he changed to adopt traditional methods when the CET4 came closer. He recited the new words by rote rather than in a discursive context. He practiced listening and reading by doing past papers rather than by reading English magazine and listening to authentic English media. As for learning degree, Lee thought the CET4 made him work harder and the frequency of learning English was higher than before.

The extent of the CET4 washback on Lee's learning was time-related. As a whole, the closer the CET4 approached the greater the effects of the CET4 became. However the level of effects oscillated between regular ups and downs across time. Lee read English magazines and saw English films at intervals when he studied towards the CET4. He told the author in that way: *I felt uncomfortable after I did past papers several times in sequence. That made me sick and bored. I would like to read English magazine for a change. The content is interesting and there is an attached new word checklist. You can enjoy reading and don't bother about new words.* (Extract 14, from Lee's post-diary interview, 1st Apr. 2008).

5. Conclusions

From the above stories of Alma and Lee, the author found they had different College English learning experiences in their first academic year although there were some similarities in their exam preparations. The whole learning processes of the two cases are described in the following table for comparison.

Table 1 Cases' learning processes under the CET4

Time	Cases	
	Alma	Lee
The period of accommodation to College English learning	<i>She was enthusiastic about practising her speaking skill. She didn't care about the CET4.</i>	<i>He followed his English teacher's instruction. He began to know about the CET4.</i>
The period of normal College English learning	<i>She followed her English teacher's instruction. She prepared for the UCEE by following her teacher's suggestion.</i>	<i>He read English magazines and listened to/ watched different English media. He prepared for the UCEE by doing the CET4 past papers. He did the CET4 past papers at intervals.</i>
The period of preparation for the CET4	<i>She felt blank-minded at the beginning. She did past papers and recited the CET4 words. She made less preparation for the UCEE than before.</i>	<i>He got preparation plan at the beginning and revised it continuously. He did past papers, recited the CET4 words and attended the CET4 lectures. He gave up his preparation for the UCEE. He read English magazines and listened to/ watched different English media at intervals.</i>

From the above table, it seems clear that the latest CET4 is exerting some influence on students' learning behaviors outside the classroom. The results also appear to indicate that the extent of the CET4 washback on learning has become much greater when the exam approached closer. The increased impact in the preparation period may perhaps be attributed to the students' anxiety about the CET4.

However, as the study has revealed, only if the students study towards the exam, the intended

qualitative learning hardly occur especially in the period of exam preparation. Both of Alma and Lee are inclined to learn English in a quantitative way such as rote learning in the period of exam preparation but sometimes they seem to learn English in qualitative way. For instance, Alma paid more time to practise communicative skills and Lee saw English films and read English magazines at intervals. However these effects seems to be superficial and indirect. Alma did past papers to practice her listening and reading skills and Lee exposed himself to authentic English mainly out of his own interest.

The case study as a whole seems to confirm the complexity of targeting washback, as discussed by some researchers (see, for example, Cheng, 1998; Andrews et al., 2002). There seem to be at least two factors involved to explain the complexity. One factor is related with individual learning experiences. Alma and Lee had examination-oriented high school experiences of different nature. Alma had no harmful experiences while Lee got painful experiences. That's why Lee represents more communicative learning than Alma. In college, Alma depended on teacher to learn while Lee got his own idea to learn. That's why without teacher's guidance Alma experienced a blind-minded phase in the period of examination preparation and Lee never had such phase. The other factor deals with individual concept of possible self (Dörnyei, 2005). Alma thought she ought to learn English well to meet expectations of her parents and English teacher. The high marks of the CET4 could demonstrate she lived up to their expectations. Therefore she studied hard towards the CET4. Lee got both ideal self and ought-to self in his mind, which were reflected in his ideal and realistic learning objectives. He wanted to use English in daily life like native speakers and also attempted to pass the CET4 as to be responsible for himself and his family. His concept of possible self was a powerful motivator for him to learn English. He took different actions to realize possible self in his mind.

This research was a preliminary study of the washback effects on Chinese learners. It could be concluded that even if the test format and content are changed, this will not automatically bring about the intended washback on all learners since there are other factors involved in the mechanism of washback.

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