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**Abstract :**

While College English Tests ( CET ) in China have promoted the college English teaching, they have also led to the test-oriented teaching in colleges and hindered the development of students' communicative competence. To examine the validity of CET-4, experimental tests were carried out to the sampled students one year after they

took CET-4 in December, 2002. The control class was examined with the original paper of CET-4 2002, while the treatment class was tested with a specially designed performance-test paper in which the multiple-choice questions were all changed into the subjective ones. The test scores were processed with the statistical analysis system SPSS. The results showed that although there was no significant difference between the two classes in their CET-4 scores, there was significant difference between them in their experimental test scores. The scores of the treatment class were significantly lower than those of the control class, which indicates that CET cannot objectively reflect students' communicative competence, and thus its validity is low. To eliminate the negative washback effect of CET, suggestions are put forward that CET be devised as a criterion-referenced test, frequency of the test be reduced, subjective questions be increased, and commercialization of the test be avoided.

**Key words:** College English Test, communicative competence, test analysis

### **I. Introduction of China's College English Test**

Communicative competence refers to the ability to exchange information in a foreign language with the native speakers of the language. The College English Teaching Syllabus (for non-English majors) issued by China's Educational Department claims that the purpose of college English teaching is *to train students to have strong reading competence and fair competences in listening, speaking, writing and translation, so that they will be able to communicate in English*. The Syllabus divides the basic college English teaching into two periods including six bands. Each band corresponds to one semester. The first period lasts two years from band one to band four, and the second period lasts one year from band five to band six.

In order to assess the fulfillment of the Syllabus in China's college English teaching, a standardized College English Test (CET) system for non-English majors, supported by the National Education Department, has been carried out in Chinese colleges and universities since 1987. The system consists of six bands corresponding to *the Syllabus*. The second-year students who have finished four semesters' study are required to pass CET-4, and the third-year students who have finished six semesters' study are expected to pass CET-6.

CET scores have now been generally accepted throughout the nation as the standard evaluation of students' English level. Meanwhile, CET's washback—the effects of testing on teaching and learning—has become one of the most controversial issues in China's college English teaching. On the one hand, CET gives colleges nationwide a uniform standard of comparison on the quality of their English teaching, and thus strongly attracts the attention of college leaders to lay emphasis on English teaching, which in turn has greatly promoted China's college English teaching. On the other hand, the test causes both teachers and students to value test results rather than language practice, and the overflow of multiple-choice questions in this large-scale test encourages both teachers and students to work more at the skills of test and guesswork than at the skills of practical communication. Thus it is common to find some students with high CET scores are quite poor in English speaking and writing.

Therefore, in China's present reform of college English teaching, the controversial focus is on whether the washback effect of CET has hindered students' development in practical English and how to improve students' communicative competence in English.

## II. Problems of CET

*CET is basically established on the test theories of structuralism (Liu, Runqing, 2003: 131), which divides language into discrete points and tests them in the form of multiple-choice questions. Its advantages are the convenience for machine grading, objectiveness, and wide coverage of language knowledge. However, discrete-point test views language ability as a discrete system ( Li, Jiong-ying 2002), and thus divides language into separate language points as grammar, vocabulary and so on, and tests them separately. But language in communication is in a synthetic form since phonetics, grammar and vocabulary, etc. are integrated as a whole. Therefore, by focusing on testing students' receptive ability while neglecting their productive ability, the multiple-choice test cannot reflect students' communicative competence objectively (Han, Bao-cheng et al. 2004: 18), and thus its validity is doubtful.*

CET-4 is designed as a criterion-related norm-reference test, namely, the score of an examinee is determined by the comparison with the scores of the norm-reference group. *The standard norm group of CET-4 is made up of approximately ten thousand undergraduates from China's six key universities: Beijing University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Fudan University, Chinese Science and Technology University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University (Yang Hui-zhong, et al. 2001: 66). It is doubtful to what extent such a norm-reference group can be representative in such a big country as China where the higher education is so unevenly developed. Professor Yang Hui-zhong claimed that the purpose of CET-4 is to judge whether examinees have attained the standard required by The College English Teaching Syllabus (2001: 67). According to Professor Liu Runqing(2003: 132), "The standard of the Syllabus should be viewed as a measurement of students' achievement; therefore the test measuring the fulfillment of The Syllabus should be of criterion-reference."*

As a test for measuring teaching results, *CET should be an achievement test, but in reality it is a kind of proficiency test. Although it also refers to the Syllabus, it seldom takes teaching contents into consideration (Liu, Runqing, 1999: 222).* This causes the separation of tests from teaching, which, in turn, causes students to value tests more than regular class performance. Many students think that so long as they can pass the test it doesn't matter whether they attend the regular classes or not, which results in students' high rate of absence from classes in some colleges.

CET is mainly composed of multiple-choice questions. *It has been proved by evidence that students who take multiple-choice tests can significantly increase their scores "artificially" (Alderson et al., 2000:45).* This encourages both teachers and students to work over test skills and countermeasures in preparing for the test, which interferes regular classroom teaching, leads to test-oriented teaching, and consequently affects the students' systematic mastery of the fundamental knowledge

and integrate skills of English, and hinders students' development of communicative competence (Han, Baocheng, 2004; Liu, Runqing & Dai, Manchun, 2003).

### III. Purpose of the Study

In recent years, standardized objective English tests, consisting primarily of multiple-choice and matching items, have been generally criticized as inappropriate, invalid measures of students' communicative competencies (Han, Baocheng, 2004; Liu, Runqing & Dai, Manchun, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Li, Jiongying. 2002). Such criticisms have initiated and sustained a movement toward authentic performance-based test. As Lynch (2003) observes, *the advantage of performance-based testing resides in its potential to engender and sustain positive washback on the teaching and learning process.*

Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the validity of CET-4 test by comparing its results with that of a performance-based test, to determine objectiveness of CET-4 in reflecting students' communicative competence and to ascertain the washback effect of CET on college English teaching.

### IV. Population

The population of the study consisted of undergraduates from four classes of Grade 2001 in Capital University of Medical Sciences, who had taken the CET-4 in December 2002. Their CET-4 scores were from 60 to 76, which represented the average English level of the grade. The 62 chosen participants were divided by equidistance sampling into two classes—the treatment class and the control class, 31 students each. The significance test on the difference of CET-4 between the two classes was performed by using SPSS for Windows and the results are as follows.

Table 1: Comparison of Mean and Std. Deviation of CET-4 between the Two Classes

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	31	69.0645	4.6543	.8359
Treatment	31	67.6129	4.4548	.8001

Table 2: Significance Test on the Difference of CET-4 between the Two Classes

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances								
t-test for Equality of Means								
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed )	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
.000	.997	1.254	60	.215	1.4516	1.1571	-.8630	3.7662

Test for Equality of Variances : F=0.000 P=0.997 >0.05

t=1.254 p = 0.125 >0.05 No significant difference between the means.

It can be seen from Table 1 that both the means and the standard deviations of the two classes are very close. From the first two items of Table 2, it can be seen that the probability of significance P is equal to 0.997, which is greater than 0.05. That means there is no significant difference between two deviations. From the two-tailed t-test, it can be seen that the P value is 0.215, which is greater than 0.05. So it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the two classes in their mean scores. Therefore in terms of CET-4 scores, the English levels of the two classes appeared to be the same.

## V. Development of Testing Materials

*According to modern language test theories, in designing a test, the characteristics of the task and the situation of the test should be consistent with those of the task and situation of language application, so as to increase the test's authenticity and thereby its construct validity* (Han Bao-cheng, et al. 2004: 18). For the convenience of comparison, we designed a performance-based test paper on the basis of a CET-4 paper. We used the test paper of CET-4 of December, 2002 as the base and changed multiple-choice questions into performance questions without altering the contents of the original paper so that the two papers may keep the similar level. Students were required to answer the questions in writing and translation rather than answering multiple-choice questions, by which guesswork was eliminated and the students' communicative competence could be reflected.

As to the part of reading comprehension, the original passages were kept, but the multiple-choice questions were changed into short answer questions and sentence completion questions which required students to find out answers similar to the original multiple-choice questions, but to answer the questions in Chinese. This prevented the students from copying the sentences from the text without understanding them, and thus their real ability in reading comprehension could be reflected.

Likewise, the original multiple-choice questions of vocabulary and structure were changed into sentence completion questions without altering the original sentences. The students were required to fill in the blanks with appropriate words or expressions. The first letter of the key words or Chinese equivalent was provided as a clue. The purpose of this change was to test their performance in grammar and spelling.

As for the cloze test, original text was kept, but the multiple-choice questions were changed into blank-filling questions and at the same time the initial letter and the number of letters of the word to fill in were given as clues. In this way, the students' ability in comprehension, judgment and spelling could be checked.

As for the composition, the original three-paragraph argumentum writing was changed into a practical writing. The students were required to write a letter of application for a job based on an outline to test their practical writing skills.

It was difficult to redesign the CET-4 listening test into a performance listening test paper. In order to increase the structure validity of the listening test, we specially

chose some British IELTS listening exercises that had been examined by an English expert of our university to be on the similar level in vocabulary and structure with the CET-4 listening test. These exercises, which included sketch identification, blank filling, multiple-choice and short-answer questions, formed the listening part of the performance test.

## **VI. Methods and Instruments**

One year after the participants took CET-4 in Dec. 2002, they were given the experimental tests in Dec. 2003. The control class was tested again with the unchanged CET-4 test paper of Dec. 2002, while the treatment class was tested with the performance-test paper in which the objective questions had been changed into subjective ones. The experiment was carried out as students' final examination of the semester so that the students would review lessons before testing and would take the test seriously. The tests for both classes proceeded under strict regulations of CET in order to ensure the reliability of the tests.

After the tests one teacher was requested to grade the papers of the control class according to the criterion of CET-4 and the other teacher to grade the papers of the treatment class with the corresponding standards with CET-4. Double-blind method was used throughout the experiment, namely, neither the students nor the grading teachers knew the real purpose of the tests, thus the objectivity of the tests and the evaluation could be guaranteed.

Null hypotheses of the study were developed as follows:

1. There would be no significant difference between the CET-4 scores and the CET-4 retest scores of the control class.
2. There would be no significant difference between the CET-4 scores and the performance test scores of the treatment class.
3. There would be no significant difference between the CET-4 retest scores of the control class and the performance test scores of the treatment class.
4. There would be no significant difference in the construct validity between the CET-4 paper and the performance test paper.

After the paper grading, the data were analyzed with the standardized statistical analysis system SPSS for Windows for comparison.

## **VII. Results**

### **1. Comparison between CET-4 and the Retest of the Control Class**

The mean scores and the standard divisions of the CET-4 and the retest of the control class are shown in Table 3, and the results of the significance test in the difference between the two tests are shown in Table 4. It can be seen from Table 4 that  $t$  is equal to 4.339, and probability  $P$  value equals 0.000, far less than 0.01, which indicates that there is a remarkable difference between the results of CET-4 in 2002 and those of the retest in 2003. From Table 3, it can be seen that the mean score of the retest in 2003 is much lower than that of CET-4 in 2002. The standard deviation of the retest is higher than that of CET-4, which indicates a higher rate of dispersion between the student's scores than that of CET-4.

Table 3: Comparison between CET-4 in 02 and the Retest in 03 of the Control Class

	N	Mean score	Standard Deviation
CET-4 result	31	69.0645	4.6543
Retest result	31	62.5484	9.3678

Table 4: Significance Test on the Difference between the Results of the Two Tests

Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
6.5161	8.3621	1.5019	3.4489	9.5834	4.339	30	.000

$t=4.339$   $P<<0.01$

## 2. Comparison between CET-4 and the Performance Test of the Treatment Class

Table 6 shows that  $t$  value equals 12.349, and probability  $P$  value equals 0.000, far less than 0.01, which indicates a significant difference between the result of CET-4 and that of the performance test of the treatment class. Table 5 demonstrates that the mean score of the performance test is much lower than that of CET-4. The standard deviation of the performance test is higher than that of CET-4, which shows a widened gap between the student's scores.

Table 5: Comparison between CET-4 and the Performance Test of the Treatment Class

	N	Mean score	Standard Deviation
CET-4 in 2002	31	67.6129	4.4548
Performance Test in 2003	31	51.4677	7.9874

Table 6: Significance Test on the Difference between the Results of the Two Tests

Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
16.1452	7.2792	1.3074	13.4751	18.8152	12.349	30	.000

$t=12.349$   $P<<0.01$

## 3. Comparison between the Retest of the Control Class and the Performance Test of the Treatment Class

An independent sample test was used to find out the difference between the retest of the control class and the performance test of the treatment class. It can be seen from Table 7 that  $t$  is equal to 5.0006, and probability  $P$  equals 0.000, far less than 0.01, which indicates that there is a significant difference between results of the performance test of the treatment class and those of the CET-4 retest of the control

class, although there was no significant difference between the two classes in their CET-4 scores (See Table 1 & 2).

Table 7: Significance Test on the Difference of the Experimental Tests between the Two Classes

Class	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Treatment Class	31	51.4677**	7.9874
Control Class	31	62.5484**	9.3678

\*\* $t=5.0006$   $df=60$   $P=0.000<<0.01$

#### 4. Comparison of Subtests in the Experimental Tests between the Two Classes

In terms of the mean-score comparison of subtests between the treatment class and the control class in Table 8, it can be seen that the mean scores of the treatment class are lower than those of the control class in listening, reading, vocabulary and cloze, with a significant decrease in reading and cloze and with the most dramatic drop in vocabulary.

Table 8: Comparison of Subtests in the Experimental Tests between the Two Classes

	Listening	Reading	Vocabulary	Cloze	Writing
Full Mark for Each Item	20	40	15	10	15
Means of Control Class	12.0645	26.9032	8.5323	6.7903	8.2258
Means of Treatment Class	11.4839	22.3387	4.9032	4.3704	8.9355

Since the multiple-choice questions were changed into written answer questions in reading comprehension, it was found in paper grading that many students were only confined to superficial or general comprehension of the text. It was especially difficult for them to understand the implied meaning, their translations were inaccurate, and their choice of words and expressions was inappropriate.

The contents of the vocabulary and cloze test were from the original paper of CET-4, but the multiple-choice questions were changed into blank filling with the appropriate words and expressions. In paper grading, we found that many students were unable to spell the words correctly even if the number of letters, or initials, or even Chinese equivalents were given as clues.

#### 5. Comparison of the Construct Validity between the CET-4 and the Performance Test

Construct validity concerns the extent to which performance on tests is consistent with predictions on the basis of a theory of abilities. It is recognized by the measurement profession as central to the appropriate interpretation of test scores. *In the design of a test, the consistency of the test behavior and the actual usage of the language should be taken into consideration so as to increase the authenticity of the test. The more authentic the test mission, the more accurate the deduction on testees' language ability according to the test scores, and thus the higher the level of*

*construct validity of the test.* (Han Baocheng et al. 2004: 18).

In doing construct validity research, one way is to correlate each subtest with other subtests and with the total test. *Since the reason for having different test components is that they all measure something different and therefore contribute to the overall picture of the language ability attempted by the test, we should expect these correlations to be fairly low. The correlations between each subtest and the whole test, on the other hand, might be expected, at least according to classical test theory, to be higher since the overall score is taken to be a more general measure of language ability than each individual component score* (Alderson, et al. 2000: 184). In order to evaluate to the construct validity of the test papers, we made a correlation analysis on the experimental test scores of both classes. The results of the analysis are as follows.

Table9: Internal Correlations of the CET-4 Retest of the Control Class

	Listening	Reading	Vocabulary	Cloze	Writing	Total
Listening	1					
Reading	0.372*	1				
Vocabulary	0.411*	0.242	1			
Cloze	0.664**	0.126	0.361*	1		
Writing	0.048	0.268	0.049	-0.001	1	
Total	0.753**	0.831**	0.560**	0.515**	0.354	1

\* P<0.05      \*\* P<0.01

**Note:** The single star \* means the correlation is significant. The double stars \*\* mean the correlation is highly significant.

From the matrix in Table 9, it can be seen that although there is a highly significant correlation between the total score and the individual component scores of listening, reading, vocabulary and cloze in the CET-4 retest, there is no significant correlation between the total score and the score of writing. This indicates that the writing score has little effect on the total score, which is not normal. On the other hand, there is highly significant correlation between two subtests, namely listening and cloze, which means that they both tested the similar ability without much distinction. Furthermore, the negative correlation appears between cloze and writing, which indicates that the two subtests tested completely different abilities. This is unreasonable because the different language skills are naturally related to each other. These results indicate that the test paper of CET-4 of Dec, 2002 has an insufficient degree of differentiation, and thus low construct validity.

Table 10: Internal Correlations of the Performance Test of the Treatment Class

	Listening	Reading	Vocabulary	Cloze	Writing	Total
Listening	1					
Reading	0.090	1				
Vocabulary	0.089	0.377*	1			
Cloze	0.349	0.136	0.332	1		
Writing	0.340	0.047	0.167	0.395*	1	
Total	0.550**	0.729**	0.619**	0.628**	0.464**	1

\*  $P < 0.05$ \*\*  $P < 0.01$ 

From the matrix in Table 10, it can be seen that on the one hand, there is a highly significant correlation between the total score and all the five individual component scores; on the other hand, there is a slight but not significant correlation between each component scores. There is only significant correlation between reading and vocabulary, and that between cloze and writing, which can be considered as normal, as is known to all a large vocabulary contributes a lot to reading, and the comprehensive ability of cloze contributes to writing. The results indicate that compared with CET-4, the performance test has a higher correlation between the total score and the component scores while it still keeps a better degree of differentiation between the individual component scores, and thus a better construct validity.

### VIII. Discussion

Since our experiment was carried out in the samples of one grade in one university, the following conclusions are subject to the conditions and limitations of this study.

1. Our first hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between the CET-4 scores and the CET-4 retest scores of the control class was rejected. The participants did not stop studying English after their CET-4 test in 2002, still having 2-4 hours of required English course per week for each semester in 2003. Therefore their normal English level should not be lower than that of one year ago. However, in repeating the same test, their scores were even significantly lower than those of one year ago. This suggests that CET-4 has failed in producing similar results in repetition and thus its reliability is questionable.
2. Our second hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between the CET-4 scores and the performance test scores of the treatment class was also rejected. The results show that although the contents of the two test papers were almost the same, once the ways in answering the test questions were changed, namely from objective questions into subjective ones, the students' scores significantly dropped. This indicates that CET-4 mainly tested students' receptive ability rather than their productive ability. It can be concluded that CET cannot objectively reflects students' communicative competence and thus its validity is low.
3. Our third hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between the CET-4 retest scores of the control class and the performance test scores of the

treatment class was also rejected. The results show that the control class did much better in the CET-4 retest than the treatment class in the performance test. This is an indication of the negative washback effect of CET which induces the students to work more at developing their receptive skills than their productive ones with the overflow of multiple-choice questions. This consequence, in turn, has affected students' language accuracy and obstructed the improvement in their practical communicative competence.

4. Our fourth hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in the construct validity between the CET-4 paper and the performance test paper was also rejected. The performance test paper presents a better construct validity than that of CET-4 2002. This strongly suggests that the participants' test behavior in CET-4 is not consistent with their actual usage of English and thus the authenticity of the test is also questionable.

### **IX. Suggestions on the Reform of CET in China**

In summary, our study indicates that CET-4 scores, with a questionable reliability and insufficient validity, can not objectively reflect the student's normal English level, and its negative washback effect has hindered student's development in their communicative competence. According to a nationwide survey on the assessment of CET made by Professor Liu, Renqing and others, *more than 90% of college teachers think such a national unity test as CET cannot objectively reflect students' communicative competence in English* (2003: 128). Although our research was conducted on a small scale, its result is consistent with the opinion of most university EFL teachers in China. In view of the above problems, we put forward the following suggestions on the reform of CET.

1. The original purpose of CET is to check the fulfillment of the *College English Syllabus*. Therefore it should be designed as a criterion-referenced test but not a norm-referenced test. As long as students come up to the required standards of *the Syllabus*, they should be allowed to pass the examination. The passing rate should not be determined according to their relative position in a norm-reference group. In this way the college English could be redirected from the test-oriented teaching to the Syllabus-oriented teaching.
2. As a teaching test, CET is named according to semesters, therefore, it should be held once a year according to the normal teaching schedule. The present biannual tests have caused both teachers and students to prepare one test after another without a breathing spell. As a result, the regular teaching is interrupted and the purpose for enhancing students' communicative competence in English cannot be carried out. Therefore, we suggest that CET be held annually so as to leave a stable period between two tests for both teachers and students to keep their concentration on their normal teaching and study instead of getting busy with CET all the time.
3. The main reason for the overflow of multiple-choice questions in CET is their convenience for machine grading. If this convenience is to be kept at the sacrifice

- of the test validity, which in turn misleads the college English teaching, it breaches the original purpose of the test. Therefore, we suggest that objective items be reduced while subjective ones increased in order to evaluate students' real English performance. Only by improving the structure validity of CET can college English teaching be redirected to the right course of enhancing students' communicative competence and the negative washback effect of CET be reduced.
4. Originally CET is a means of assessing and promoting college English teaching but now it inclines to become commercialized with the increasing numbers of social testees. The large numbers of social testees bring great pressures on colleges and universities to arrange CET twice a year. Since many social testees are not really qualified for CET and their real purpose is to obtain CET certificates, the cheating rate in CET is on the rise. Therefore, we suggest that CET remain to be a test for assessing the college English teaching quality. Only in this way can we clearly set the function of CET as a means for developing college students' real communicative competence.

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