

College English Test in China: What Is Called into Question?

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1 Introduction

From the critical perspective Sociology of Education, education is deeply embedded in the cultural politics. In the school curriculum, what counts as legitimate knowledge or “official knowledge,” is not neutral, nor is it randomly chosen or value-free. Rather, it is socially constructed on the basis of predetermined principles and value clusters, as the result of a selective tradition, which refers to the practice of certain individual’s choice and some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge. To a large extent, the legitimate knowledge is the “mirror” of power relations in society and often reflects the ideology of the ruling class as a means to impose social control.

Wu and Xia (2018) indicate: “Language is one of the elements that constitute the country’s soft power. It is an important carrier of cultural influence, ideological influence, institutional influence and diplomatic influence, and an irreplaceable media (p. 30).” Under the encirclement of globalization and informatization,¹ the international status of English

and its advantages as a communication tool have been further strengthened even in China. Specific to the field of education, English is not only a widely-opened course, but also gradually becomes the most influential language of instruction other than the mother tongue. It is a generally acknowledge fact that English helps speed up the process of internationalization. As a curriculum policy of the Chinese government, the Syllabus for National College English Test Band 4 and 6, which guides the National College English Test in China, is a special plan for China’s foreign language policy. It is closely related to the strategic development goals of China’s national medium-and long-term foreign language education and its value orientation has a great impact on college English teaching practice. This chapter will focus on the theme of National College English Test system reform and systematically observe and analyse the characteristics, the developing trail, function, realistic problem and reform measures. The objective of this study is to explore how the value orientation and ideology have changed under the system reform of National College English Test from the perspective of social constructionism.

2 What is the College English Test?

The National College English Test (CET, hereinafter), which is divided into the College English Test Band 4 (CET4, hereinafter) and the College English Test Band 6 (CET6, hereinafter), is a national large-scale standardized examination administered by the Higher Education Department

1 Globalization is a concept and a process of phenomena in the development of human society. There are many definitions of globalization. Generally speaking, globalization refers to the continuous increase of global connections, the development of human life on a global scale and the rise of global consciousness. Countries are interdependent in politics, economy and trade. Globalization can also be interpreted as the compression of the world and the global as a whole.

Informatization refers to the historical process of cultivating and developing new productive forces represented by computer-based intelligent tools and making them beneficial to society. Informatization is a technology that combines the elements of the research object into a database based on modern communication, network, and database technologies, and combines various behaviors related to human life, work, learning, and decision-making.

of the Chinese Ministry of Education in China. The National College English Test aims to provide an objective and accurate assessment about the English proficiency of Chinese college students as well as information for the improvement of college English teaching. Both CET 4 and CET 6 include written test and spoken test (CET-SET, hereinafter). The CET written test is administered twice a year, in June and December; the spoken test is given in May and November. Since January 2007, only students currently enrolled in associate, bachelor's, or graduate programs can sign up for the CET. Students must complete the College English IV curriculum to take CET4. To take CET6, they must complete the College English VI curriculum and score over 425 in CET4. The spoken test of CET is not a required part. Students should register for CET-SET separately after they take the current CET 4 or CET 6 examination. The first time of CET 4 was held in September 1987, and the first time of CET 6 was held in January 1989. Since then, the scale of the CET 4 and CET 6 have been expanding. In 2017 alone, nearly 10 million people took CET 4 and CET6. The CET widely cover all colleges and universities across China, involving 31 provinces and municipalities.

The test content and question types include five parts: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, word usage and grammatical structure, cloze (while the CET 6 is comprehensive correction), and writing. In the distribution of questions, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, word usage and grammatical structure, cloze filling adopt multiple-choice questions as test paper one, scoring by machine; comprehensive correction and writing are non-multiple-choice questions as test paper two, scoring by manual reviewed.

3 Purpose of the CET

Chinese English teaching has experienced a tortuous development process. During the Cultural Revolution,² influenced by the "Schooling is useless" and the misunderstanding of "Do not understand English, still do successors." English learning is almost on the verge of blank. At the beginning of the resumption of the college entrance examination, education was in vain, and the English test did not receive the attention it deserved. With the implementation of China's Reform and Opening policy, the application of English is more and more extensive. People recognize the importance of English as an international communication tool.

In the early 1980s, the teaching of "Public English" (later called "College English") was gradually restored. College English is an English course for non-English majors. It is a basic course related to almost every college student. "Public English" involves a large number of students, many levels, long time periods, and students' English levels are uneven. The initial English teaching has no syllabus to blind. To a certain extent, it is blind,

2 The Cultural Revolution (in full, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) took place from 1966 to 1976 in China. The benign-sounding moniker belies the destruction it unleashed upon the country's population. It was launched under the direction of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Mao Zedong, who wished to renew the spirit of the communist revolution and root out those he considered to be "bourgeois" infiltrators—alluding, in part, to some of his CCP colleagues who were advocating a path for economic recovery that differed from Mao's vision.

Though formally launched at the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in August 1966, the Cultural Revolution actually had been declared months earlier, on May 16, and had been under way since then, with an initial focus on educational institutions. The revolution ended in the fall of 1976, after the death of Mao in September and the downfall of the so-called Gang of Four (a group of radical pro-Mao CCP members) the following month, although it was officially declared over in August 1977 by the 11th Party Congress. The revolution left many people dead (estimates range from 500,000 to 2,000,000), displaced millions of people, and completely disrupted the country's economy. Although Mao had intended for his revolution to strengthen communism, it had, ironically, the opposite effect, instead leading to China's embrace of capitalism.

conservative and unstable. Without a sound college English teaching management institution and system, college English teaching work lacks predictability and planning. There is a shortage of English teachers in college, and not to mention modern English teaching equipment. Due to insufficient teaching conditions, some schools are unable to attend English listening classes. Public English is the least valued in all public courses. In addition, public English teachers are often regarded as “second-class citizens” in the field of foreign language teaching and are discriminated against in terms of titles and further studies. The teaching ideas are chaotic, and the methods are backward. The content of classroom teaching mainly emphasizes grammatical memory and translation. Teachers are accustomed to traditional teaching methods, attach importance to the cultivation of reading ability, and ignore the practical application of language.

In order to solve the contraction between English teaching and the requirements of the times, and to improve the quality of public English teaching, it is urgent to accelerate the pace of reform of public English teaching. In 1982, the former National Education Commission established the revised group of College English Syllabus. In May 1984, the National Education Commission held a meeting in Hangzhou to examine and approve College English Syllabus and formulated a new English teaching syllabus for college students of science and technology and renamed “Public English” to “College English.” In November 1985, a new English teaching syllabus for students of liberal arts and science was approved in Nanjing. After discussion and revision by relevant experts, the National Education Commission has published two different College English Syllabus for students of liberal arts and science as a teaching outline followed by

colleges and universities. Later, textbooks of college English were put into use, and college English teaching changed greatly, which promoted the reform of English test methods---the implementation of unified examination for national university public English teaching. Each type of examination has its own historical mission. The fundamental purpose of the CET is to comprehensively evaluate English education in Chinese colleges and universities. Therefore, the CET is part of the College English Curriculum. With the changes in the College English Syllabus and Teaching Requirements, the CET has undergone many reforms.

4 The Primary Method of CET Reform

The CET has undergone six reforms since its implementation. The first reform measures were introduced in 1990-1996, mainly to adjust the English test process, question types and performance statistics. The second reform began in 1999, mainly to add the spoken English test. The third reform began in 2005, reforming the management system, scoring system, reporting methods, and the form and content of exams. The fourth reform began in 2010-2016, with the main purpose of dealing with the increasing cheating problems of examination. At present, the new CET has been fully promoted, and will be introduced separately below.

4.1 The First Reform: Modify the Content of the CET

At the beginning of the implementation of the CET, the test paper consists of five parts: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, word usage and grammatical structure, cloze and essay writing, mainly examining English language knowledge and some basic skills. However, due to the lack of spoken test, it is difficult to fully evaluate the ability of

college students to use English.

Since 1990, the CET exam papers are divided into two parts: the test paper 1 is the objective question part, and the test paper 2 is the composition part. In the specified time, candidates should answer and submit the test paper 1 first and write the essay in the last 30 minutes. The purpose is to ensure the time of the essay examination and further improve the practical application ability of the students' English.

Since January 1996, the CET has enabled new question types, including fill-in-the-blank dictation, compound dictation, English-to-Chinese translation and short answer questions. The reform aims to "promote the reform of college English teaching objectives, teaching content and methods, testing methods and language use environment, and strengthen the cultivation of students' language skills."

4.2 The Second Reform: Addition of the Speaking Test

In order to meet the needs of English communication in the reform and opening-up, in November 1999, the examination board of CET began to implement the CET-SET in some cities. Applicants for the oral examination must be enrolled in the CET 4 and CET6, and the CET 6 score is 75 or higher, or the CET 4 score is 80 or higher. At the same time, the minimum score of the composition is set. If the score of the composition is lower than the set value, even if the total score reaches 60 points, the final score cannot be counted as a pass. This reform strengthens the identification of English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of college students, which indicates that the CET has entered a relatively complete stage.

4.3 The Third Reform: Comprehensive Reform of the CET

With the development of college English teaching, on February 25, 2005, the Ministry of Education of China announced the National College English Test Band 4 and 6 Reform Program. This is the biggest change since the implementation of the CET. It covers the form, content and the scoring system.

According to the new reform plan, the CET 4 and CET 6 are composed of four parts: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, comprehensive test and writing test. The proportion of the listening comprehension part will be increased from 20% to 35%. The comprehensive and communicative test will be increased too, and more authentic materials will be used to highlight the listening ability. The proportion of reading comprehension is adjusted to 35%, including two categories of intensive reading and fast reading. The reformed reading test focuses on the mastery of students' intensive reading skills and communicative vocabulary skills. The proportion of comprehensive test is 15%, including cloze or correction, short answer question or translation, which is more in line with the characteristics of communicative language ability. The writing test ratio still accounts for 15%. The proportion of subjective questions increased to 35% to 45%. At the same time, the scores of the CET 4 and CET 6 will be scored with a score of 710, and no pass line will be set; the test report will be changed from the test certificate to the report card, that is, the test report will be issued to each candidate after the test. Report transcripts include total scores and sub-score. The changes before and after the reform of the CET 4 and CET 6 in 2005 are shown in Table1.

Table 1: Changes before and after the reform of the CET4 and CET6 in 2005

<i>After</i>			
Area	Content	Format	Proportion
Listening Comprehension	Short conversations	Multiple choice	20%
	Short essays	Multiple choice	
	dictation	Compound dictation	
Reading Comprehension	Text	Multiple choice	40%
Vocabulary and Grammar	Words comprehension	Multiple choice	15%
Comprehensive Test (chose one)	Cloze	Multiple choice	10%
	Proof-reading and error correction	error correction	
	Text quiz	Answer questions	
	Translation	Translation from English to Chinese	
Writing	composition	Short essay	15%
<i>Before</i>			
Area	Content	Format	Proportion
Listening Comprehension	Conversations	Multiple choice	35%
	Essays	Multiple choice	
	Dictation	Compound dictation	
Reading Comprehension	Intensive Reading: text	Multiple choice; fill-in-the-blank with appropriate words	35%
	Fast Reading: text	true or false questions; fill-in-the-blank	
Comprehensive Test	Cloze Or Proof-reading and error correction		15%
	Text quiz Or Translation	Answer question Or Translation from English to Chinese	
	Writing	Composition	

Source: National College English Test Band 4 and 6 Reform Plan (trial) 2005

This reform is the most in-depth and thorough reform carried out in the context of College English Syllabus and Teaching Requirements announced by the Ministry of Education. The reformed CET highlights the emphasis on listening and writing and increases the language output ability of students acquiring language, in order to meet the needs of China's economic development and international exchanges. However, the reform has not changed the

status of "dumb English."

4.4 The Fourth Reform: Reduce Social Added Value

In the past 20 years or so, the CET is widely recognized among Chinese institutions and employers. The CET 4 and CET 6 are used to test students' comprehensive English proficiency and are attached with many social functions. Many colleges

and universities have linked the CET certificates to the diplomas (this requirement was never part of the official policy of the Ministry of Education), and the employers also use them as the standard for measuring talents. Therefore, cheating in exams often occurs. In order to correct the unfairness of the CET, the different version of the test papers began to appear in December 2010, that is, the order of the

test questions and options is different, and the same provinces and even the same test room also have different versions of the test papers.

On August 14, 2013, the CET Examination Board released that from December 2013, the CET 4 and CET 6 will take a unified question type, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes of the reform in 2013

Areas	Content	Format	Proportion	Time	
Writing	Composition	Short essay	15%	30 minutes	
Listening comprehension	Conversations	Short conversation	Multiple choice	8 %	30 minutes
		Long conversation	Multiple choice	7 %	
	Short essay	Short essay comprehension	Multiple choice	10%	
		Short essay dictation	dictation	10%	
Reading comprehension	Vocabulary comprehension	Fill-in-the-blanks with appropriate words	5 %	40 minutes	
	Long-form reading	Match the given information with relevant paragraph	10%		
	Close reading	Multiple choice	20%		
Translation	Chinese to English	Paragraph translation	15%	30 minutes	
Total			100%	130 minutes	

Source: College English Syllabus and Teaching Requirements 2007

The most significant change in the content of the CET is to increase the examination of the candidate's ability and level of translation. Candidates also carry the important task of transmitting and expressing relevant Chinese knowledge in English.

The latest reform happened in 2016, and the focus of this reform is on listening and speaking. The

CET 4 listening area cancelled short conversations and dictation and added short news. The test content is chosen from daily English conversations, television program and broadcasts, lectures, newspapers, magazines, books, and journals. The content structure of the CET 4 listening area is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Content Structure of the CET4 Listening Area in 2016

Content	Format	Numbers of questions	Proportion
Short news	Multiple choice	7	7 %
Long conversations	Multiple choice	8	8 %
Essays	Multiple choice	10	20%

Source: National College English Test Band 4 and 6 Reform Plan (trial) 2016

The most significant change in the content of the CET is to increase the examination of the candidate's ability and level of translation. Candidates also carry the important task of transmitting and expressing relevant Chinese knowledge in English.

The CET 6 listening area cancelled short conversations and dictation, and reduced essays, and added lectures or dialogues. The content structure of the CET 4 listening area is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: The Content Structure of the CET6 Listening Area in 2016

Content	Format	Numbers of questions	Proportion
Short news	Multiple choice	8	8 %
Long conversations	Multiple choice	7	7 %
Essays	Multiple choice	10	20%

Source: National College English Test Band 4 and 6 Reform Plan (trial) 2016

As seen from the reform, the CET is closer to the high-level test, and pays more attention to the candidates' application ability of English. The

following tables show a breakdown of the CET components in the written test.

Table 5: CET4 Written Test

Area	Content	Format	Number of questions	Proportion	Time
Writing	Composition	Short essay	1	15%	30 minutes
Translation	Chinese to English	Paragraph translation	1	15%	30 minutes
Listening comprehension	Short news	Multiple choice	7	7 %	25 minutes
	Long conversations	Multiple choice	8	8 %	
	Essays	Multiple choice	10	20%	
Reading comprehension	Vocabulary comprehension	Fill-in-the-blanks with appropriate words	10	5 %	40 minutes
	Long-form reading	Match the given information with relevant paragraph	10	10%	
	Close reading	Multiple choice	10	20%	
Total			57	100%	125 minutes

Table 5 shows the current examination content, percentage and examination time of the CET4. The test contains 4 areas which is writing, translation, listening comprehension and reading comprehension

and the test content is chosen from daily English conversations, television programs and broadcasts, lectures, newspapers, magazines, books, and journals.

Table 6: CET6 Written Test

Area	Content	Format	Number of questions	Proportion	Time
Writing	Composition	Short essay	1	15%	30 minutes
Translation	Chinese to English	Paragraph translation	1	15%	30 minutes
Listening comprehension	Short news	Multiple choice	8	8 %	30 minutes
	Long conversations	Multiple choice	7	7 %	
	Essays	Multiple choice	10	20%	
Reading comprehension	Vocabulary comprehension	Fill-in-the-blanks with appropriate words	10	5 %	40 minutes
	Long-form reading	Match the given information with relevant paragraph	10	10%	
	Close reading	Multiple choice	10	20%	
Total			57	100%	130 minutes

Table 6 shows the current examination content, percentage and examination time of the CET6. There are no significant differences in the total number of questions, content and format of the CET 6 and CET4. However, in the listening comprehension part, the CET 6 takes five minutes longer than the CET 4 listening comprehension part, and meanwhile, the number of examination questions corresponding to the short news and long conversations is also different.

5 Conclusion

From these reforms, we can see that the Chinese government's demand for English talent training is constantly changing. From the emphasis on English reading ability in the initial period to the emphasis on listening and speaking ability now. As a part of China's foreign language policy, the reform of CET has been restricted by society and government. "Top-down management" is still the characteristics performance in China's current foreign language education policy formulation process. China has announced its goal of becoming an international

education hub in the near future. In recognition of English as the lingua franca, the Testing Centre of the Ministry Education will publish more and more standards to improve national English education and testing. The reform of the CET will never be terminated. It will continue to develop with the changes of the times and continue to reform. However, whether it is education or foreign language education within its scope, it should reflect the educational attributes and reflect the development attributes of human beings, not only to meet the needs of national development.

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