

The Study of Content Validation on CET Writing Section After Reform in China

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Abstract

The College English Test (CET) hosted by China Ministry of Education in 1987 is a large-scale standardized test, divided into CET-4 and CET-6. There are two times one year. CET-4 is for the basic requirement, while CET-6 is for higher requirement. CET is the largest exam of English in China. Since the 1980s, more and more people have focused on it, for it has a profound influence on English teaching. In order to test students' English level, improve the quality of English teaching and meet the requirement of social development, CET conducted two reforms in 2006 and 2012 respectively. The present paper based on the college English test from 2012 to 2015 has chosen 42 sets of writing paper as the research object, and studied content validation of the writing section after reform from two aspects, design of test and content of test, aiming at examining the quality of writing part of the thesis. The results show that genre tends to be diversified; the topics are rich; the principles of openness and authenticity have been adopted appropriately; the rubrics of the writing items contain adequate information. The results also show that the subject matter of the CET writing covers a wide range, which has grasped the principle of authenticity well; openness is moderate; prompted information is sufficient; forms of prompted information are no longer model. However, genre of CET writing questions is limited to argumentation, and interaction is less. Based on these results, this paper puts forward some suggestions for

future improvement in design of CET writing test items and for English writing teaching.

Key words: CET; Writing test items; Design of test; Content of test; Validity

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INTRODUCTION

“Compositions are the most accurate measurement and have the highest validity on candidates' writing comprehensive ability” (Yang, 2003, p.26). Therefore, since the first implementation of the College English Test 4 (CET4) in September 1987, College English Test 6 (CET6) in January 1989, writing test has been compulsory part, and the weight is 15%. According to the requirements of College English teaching, CET writing section has reformed twice in the following areas. Firstly, adjustment on requirement of the least writing words that candidates should write a short essay with no less than 100 words in CET-4, and no less than 120 words in CET-6 within 30 minutes, in order to test their writing ability in CET-4 and comprehensive ability in CET-6 (Yang & Weir, 1998, p.19). The writing requirement of “The Latest Examination Syllabus for CET-4”(Revised Edition) (2006) (hereinafter referred to as the “Syllabus for CET-4”) and “The Latest Examination Syllabus for CET-6” (Revised Edition) (2006) (hereinafter referred to as “Syllabus for CET-6”) is that candidates should write a short essay in no less than 120 words of writing section in CET-4 and no less than 150 words in CET-6, and the paper can accurately express ideas, ensure coherent meaning and have no serious mistakes in grammar. The writing requirements

have changed in 2012 after reform: the number of words is no less than 120 words and not more than 180 in CET-4, and the number of words is no less than 150 and not more than 200 in CET-6, and the paper can accurately express ideas, ensure coherent meaning, and have no serious grammatical errors. Secondly, adjustment on writing time: Since 1990, CET test has been divided into objective and subjective papers to ensure students to use writing time to write composition, and implemented separate winding. The examination time is 30 minutes. Thirdly, adjustment of similarities and differences between CET-4 and CET-6 of writing: Until now, from January 1998 to January 2003 the same writing task were presented in CET-4 and CET-6, while the rest years they are not same. Fourthly, adjustment of the examination process: CET-4 and CET-6 start to use new syllabus and new test forms in the second half year of 2006 and the first half year of 2007 respectively. After reform, writing is the first examined part. Fifthly, adjustment from “a set of questions for more than one paper” to “multiple questions and more papers”. After the reform in 2012, CET have implemented “multiple questions and more papers” that there are multiple sets of papers in the same examination room, which have the essential difference with the form changed the order of examination questions to achieve multiple test papers. There are still 30 candidates still in one room, while there are 6-8 papers, which are made by the authority uniformly. At the end of the examination, all papers will be revised by computers, scanning the bar code to identify the type of examination paper. These reforms reflect the importance of CET writing section.

Based on the above analyses, the present paper aims to solve the following two questions. What is the validation of CET writing section after the reform in 2012? What is the quality of CET writing after reform? And the test itself is one of the most important issues in the study of wash-back (Gug, 2004; 2007). Only through full study of the test itself, further study, impact of the examination on teaching- washback, can be conducted. This essay has chosen 42 sets of writing papers of college English test from 2012 to 2015 (including CET4&6) as the research object, and studied the content validation on writing section after reform from two aspects: design of the test and content of the test, aiming at examining the quality of writing part of the thesis. Based on these results, this paper puts forward some suggestions for future improvement in the design of CET writing test items and for English writing teaching.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

Validity refers to the extent that measuring tool or means can accurately measure things which need to detect. In other words, validity is the degree of effectiveness on measuring, the accurate degree of the measured characteristics, or simply to say it refers to the accuracy

and usefulness of a test. If the measured results consistent with content of the test, the validity will be higher. On the other hand, if the measured results are not consistent with content of the test, the validity will be lower. Validity is divided into three types: content validity, criterion validity and structure validity.

Validity has two prominent traits. Firstly, the validity has relativity. The validity of any test is for certain goal, in other words, the validity can work when it must consist with the purpose of test. Secondly, the validity has continuity. The validity is usually expressed in the correlation coefficient, and it only varies in degree, rather than as a “whole” or “nothing”. Validity is in response to results of the test.

Validity is different from reliability. Reliability refers to the consistency, stability and reliability of the test results, more commonly represented by internal consistency reliability of the test. The higher consistency reliability indicates that the test results are more stable and reliable.

In the existing literature, the theoretical research on the writing test mainly involves in two aspects: design of the test and content of the test.

The principles of design of the writing test are mainly in the following aspects:

Firstly, the question setting should have authenticity of the scene. “In the discussion of language testing, authenticity is always an important aspect” (Li, 2000, p.67). Authenticity is that the question setting for subjects is real or not, namely whether it is the situation that they are likely to encounter now or in the future (Li, 1997, p.487; Liu & Han, 2000, p.185). For CET, the real situation should be reflected in college students’ study or life, as well as the future of employment and other more familiar aspects, in order to ensure that the subjects can have something to say.

Secondly, design of the test should be interactive, because “the communicative behavior in real life is interactive.” (Li, 1997, p.491) The scene of the question setting should take interaction into consideration, that is, clear communicative purpose, object and the identity of the communicator in order to present thanks or apologize, request or advice, express a wish or a statement and so on (Weir, 1993, p.132).

Thirdly, design of test should be open, that is, writing questions should be given to subjects to play a free space, and this space should not be too large, otherwise it will not be conducive for teacher to score (Weigle, 2002, pp.91-94). The openness of the setting is to provide a space for subjects in different English levels and distinguish the writing ability of the subjects. At the same time, tests must take the specific questions into consideration and restrict the candidates’ writing output. Otherwise, the answers of the subjects will be multifarious; it will be difficult to use the same standard to give a mark, and it will be difficult to ensure the reliability of the test (Li, 1997, p.500)

Fourthly, the information provided in the test should be appropriate. The information can be used in language, picture or chart. And its role is to further elaborate the writing task, so that it is more detailed and clear. In this way, it can help subjects to understand the requirements of the test. If you use a chart or picture to prompt information, the chart or picture should be clear (Weir, 1993, p.152); if you use the language, the text should be concise and not have excess things. If the message is used in the target language, you must prevent the subjects directly copy the original material; if the message is the mother tongue, you must prevent the subjects directly translate the text (Li, 1997, p.500).

A complete writing task, content of the writing test, should include function, genre, object, subject matter. Function refers to the purpose of writing, in order to present thanks or apologize (Zou, 2005, p.373; Hughes, 2000, pp.49-50). Genre refers to traditional argumentation, description, narration and description (Sun, 1997, p.171). Argumentation is the style of taking methods of explanation and demonstration to elucidate

the author's points; exposition is the style of explaining and illustrating things or events; narration is to narrate someone or something in narrative style of main means of expression; description is to describe someone or something observed (Si & Lu, 2006, pp.140-216). Object is the object of writing and the reader (Weir, 1993, p.132). Topic is subject matter of writing. Examination Syllabus in CET says, "writing should choose subject matter that the candidates are familiar with." The subject matter may include student's study, daily life, leisure and entertainment, etc.

2. ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The framework of this paper is based on the principles of setting CET, and adjusted with the "College English Curriculum" (2017) (hereinafter referred to as the curriculum requirements), "Syllabus for CET-4" and "Syllabus for CET-6". In this study, from the two aspects of design of the test and content of the test, seven items were identified (listed in Table 1).

Table 1
The Analysis Project in CET Writing

	Project	Category
Design of the test	Authenticity	Sufficient, lack
	Interactivity	Sufficient, lack
	Openness	High, moderate, lack
	Prompted information	Redundant, moderate, lack
Content of the test	Genre	Argumentation, narration, exposition, description
	Subject matter	School life, daily life, life philosophy, scientific technology, environment, education, employment, social and cultural issues
	Forms of information	English title, comic, chart, English title+Chinese outline

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is the results of analyzing 42 sets of CET writing from 2012 to 2015 including CET 4&6 from two aspects of design of test and content of test.

3.1 Design of Test

The analysis of design of test questions has four items: authenticity, openness, interactivity and prompted information.

3.1.1 Authenticity

CET-4 and CET-6 have grasped the principle of authenticity well, the ratio of the authenticity is 85.7% and 100% respectively (listed in Table 2). As for college students, the reality of the situation is reflected in more familiar aspects. According to this principle, vast of test papers have authenticity, which relates to students'

learning, daily life and future employment. For example, the topic in CET-4 of December 2013 and CET-6 in June 2012 is on the influence of communication between people by network and in December, 2014 CET-6 referred to the interview discrimination in education issues. "They are topics not only candidates are familiar with, but also the situations students are likely to encounter now or in the future." (Li, 1997, p.487)

Table 2
The Analysis of Authenticity in CET Writing from 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Sufficient	85.7%	95.2%	90.45%
Lack	14.3%	4.8%	9.55%

3.1.2 Interactivity

As can be seen from Table 3, the ratio of the CET writing test on the interaction is particularly small. The proportion of CET-4 and CET-6 is 19.05% and 0, respectively (listed in Table 3). On designing such questions, we should take the purpose of communication, communication objects and the identity of the communicator into account, etc., for the purpose of expressing gratitude or apology, making requests or suggestions, presenting wishes or statements of opinion, etc. (Weir, 1993, p.132).

Table 3
The Analysis of Interactivity in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Sufficient	19.05%	0%	9.525%
Lack	80.95%	100%	90.475%

There are some interactive questions, such as in December 2012, CET-4 writing “a letter applying for a bank loan”. The object of communication is the person in charge of the bank, and the purpose of communication is to apply for a loan and expound their basic situation and repayment plan, which reflects the “communicative behavior in real life” (Li, 1997, p.491). Another example is in June 2014 in CET-4 writing “suppose a foreign friend of yours is coming to visit your campus, what is the most interesting place you would like to take him/her to see and why?” The object of communication is the candidate’s friend, and the purpose of communication is to introduce interesting campus environment to a friend, it also fully embodies the interactive behavior. However, the ratio of the CET writing test questions is 90.475%, lack of interactivity on average. The vast majority are the expression of views or opinions on the problem. There are no communication scenarios and objects, such as in June 2015 CET-6 writing (as follows). Therefore, design of the examination questions should be strengthened in interaction.

June, 2015 CET-6

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay commenting on the saying “Knowledge is a treasure, but practice is the key to it”. You can give an example or two to illustrate your point of view. You should write at least 150 words but no more than 200 words.

3.1.3 Openness

In CET writing most of the questions have been given to the subject in a free space, in which the ratio of the openness of the test questions is 85.7% in CET (listed in Table 4). In December 2013 in CET-4, the writing topic referred to the network’s effects on learning. According to the prompted information, candidates can elaborate based on their actual situation, but they can only express their own point of advantages and disadvantages of network related to life, so the openness of the problem is moderate.

Not only has it been given to participants to develop their thought, but will not lead to multifarious answers of the question.

Table 4
The Analysis of Openness in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Moderate	85.7%	85.7%	85.7%
Lack	9.5%	0%	4.75%
High	4.8%	14.3%	9.55%

However, a small number of questions are lack of openness as the prompted information is too full, such as in June and December, 2012. The writing of CET-4, respectively, referred to the excessive packaging and applications for loans. The provisions of the examination papers are too detailed so that candidates can not be free to play, so the openness is relative lack.

June, 2012 CET-4

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay entitled On Excessive Packaging following the outline given below. You should write at least 120 words but no more than 180 words.

- a) at present, there are many phenomena of excessive packaging of goods*
- b) causes of this phenomenon*
- c) my views and suggestions on this phenomenon*

December, 2012 CET-4

This part Directions: For you are allowed 30 to write minutes Letter A Applying for a Bank Loan. You should write at least words following the outline given below in Chinese.

- a) your basic situation*
- b) the reason, the amount and the use of your application for a loan*
- c) how do you ensure earmarking and your repayment plan*

At the same time, there are a small number of questions which are high of openness due to the lack of prompted information. For example, the writing part of CET-6 in December 2012 and 2013, respectively, referred to the establishment of trust and making the greatest efforts to let life meaningful. The provisions of items are too shortage so that candidates have a lot to say, such as in establishing trust. This topic, candidates can express their own points of the importance of establishing trust, and can also set forth the importance of trust, resulting multifarious answers of the question.

December, 2012 CET-6

Directions: For this part of, you are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay entitled on besides trust by commenting

on the saying, "it takes years to build trust, and a few seconds to destroy it." you should write at least 150 words but no more than 200 words.

3.1.4 Prompted Information

Design of the prompted information in CET writing test questions is more reasonable, and the proportion of the examination questions in CET-4 and in CET-6 is 71.4% (listed in Table 5). The ratio of lacking prompted information is 19.1% in CET-4, and 28.6% in CET-6. For example, the above cited topic of establishing trust in December 2012, it just asks subjects to discuss establishment of trust, but not specific. In addition, in CET Writing Test, there are a lot of questions given by the chart or comic to examine candidates' view of a phenomenon or problem, but the prompted information is insufficient, or too complex so that candidates can not find the topic of discussion. The redundant information of the examination questions accounted for 9.5% in the writing of CET-4, but it did not appear in CET-6. The provided items of writing part in June and December 2012 of CET-4, excessive packaging and applying for a loan, are too detailed so that candidates are not free to elaborate. From the whole analysis, design of the writing in CET is more standardized and scientific.

Table 5
The Analysis of Prompted Information in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Moderate	71.4%	71.4%	71.4%
Lack	19.1%	28.6%	23.85%
Redundant	9.5%	0%	4.75%

3.2 Content of Test

The analysis of content of the examination questions has been divided into three items: genre, subject matter, form of prompted information.

3.2.1 Genre

The analysis on the genre of the CET writing test from 2012 to 2015 shows that since after the reform, the argumentation has accounted for the largest proportion, and the rest are narration and exposition (listed in Table 6). This is mainly because that writing an argumentative essay will not only help the reader understand things, but also express the author's own view and let others accept (Sun, 1997, pp.242-243). Compared with other genres, argumentative papers can examine writing ability most. The cognitive and thinking ability of college students should be able to meet requirements, and can differentiate and analyze the general things or ideas. In June and December 2014 of CET-4, the genre begins to enrich, involving exposition and narration respectively. However, from results of the analysis, the overall style of the examination is relatively simple.

Table 6
The Analysis of Genre in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Argumentation	71.4%	100%	85.7%
Exposition	14.3%	0%	7.15%
Narration	14.3%	0%	7.15%
Description	0%	0%	0%

3.2.2 Subject Matter

Overall, the subject matter of CET writing covers a wide range, covering 8 aspects, like school life, daily life, social and cultural issues (listed in Table 7). Seen from Table7, the topic of life philosophy accounts for the highest proportion, especially in CET-6, such questions in CET6: *good habits from resisting the temptation judging a book by its cover is not wise*; and questions in CET-4: *pay more attention to process rather than results etc.* In CET Writing Test, the scientific and technological topics often appear, such as whether face to face communication between person and person can be replaced by network communication, without computer how will be our life in CET4; and influence of expanding information, not relying on technology excess in CET6. Just because current society and human population are deeply affected by development of science and technology. Meanwhile, science and technology are also changing progress and development of human and society gradually. In addition, the topics, related to education, account for the highest proportion (23.8%), such as education paybacks, whether parents can cope with problems with excessive intervention, going to school to learn something is the right choice. These problems are the current hot topics, closing to candidates' real life.

Table 7
The Analysis of Subject Matter in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
School life	19.05%	0%	9.53%
Daily life	14.3%	0%	7.15%
Life philosophy	14.3%	47.6%	30.95%
Education	23.8%	9.5%	16.65%
Employment	0%	4.8%	2.4%
Social and cultural issues	9.5%	0%	4.75%
Environment	0%	4.8%	2.4%
Scientific technology, environment	19.05%	33.3%	26.18%

Although the topic of CET involves in a wide range, the topics in CET-4 are more uniform, and the topics in CET-6 are more intensive (life philosophy and scientific technology accounted for 47.6% and 33.3% respectively). The topic is too intensive so that it can increase the

possibility of guessing, as a result that it will reduce validity of the test.

3.2.3 Forms of Information

The forms of information in CET writing part are available for English title type. As shown in Table 8, the proportion of English title type is 66.7% in CET-6 and 42.9% in CET-4; in addition, the issue of comic type also occupies a relatively high proportion, an average of 38.1%. The information forms in CET-6 are more intensive, and type and title type account for 33.3% and 66.7% respectively).

Table 8
The Analysis of Forms of Information in CET Writing From 2012 to 2015

Project	CET-4	CET-6	Average
Comic	42.9%	33.3%	38.1%
Chart	4.8%	0%	2.4%
English title	42.9%	66.7%	54.8%
English title+Chinese outline	9.5%	0%	4.75%

Before the reform in 2012, the clues of CET writing test are more adequate, and the outline often appeared. But the form will cause the immobilization of syllogism, such a model may become a template and can provide a hint for examination-oriented writing teaching (You, 2004, pp.100-102). So after the reform and improvement, outline of the test questions is in the gradual reduction. Now there are a lot of questions given by comics to elaborate a social phenomenon or problem, or directly use a common saying to let the subjects express their points. Compared with the previous forms, the model is more difficult, but more able to examine the subjects' ability to analyze problems.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of 42 sets of CET writing test from 2012 to 2015 from two aspects of design of test and content of test, the results show that after reform, the subject matter of CET writing covers a wide range, has various materials, covers the topics of eight aspects of school life, daily life, society and culture. CET writing tests have grasped the principle of authenticity well; openness is moderate; prompted information is sufficient; forms of prompted information are no longer one model. However, genres of CET writing questions are limited to argumentation, and interaction is less.

At the same time, there are some limitations in the present study. Firstly, CET writing tests have been measured from two aspects by the author alone, so the results may be not definitely accurate. Secondly, samples are relatively small, so further study can analyze more test papers to get accurate results.

Based on the results, this paper attempts to provide some enlightenment and suggestions for CET writing test and College English writing teaching.

(a) Enlightenment and Suggestions on System of CET Writing Test

Firstly, the examiner should maintain the diversity of subject matter and increase that of the genre in CET writing. The above conclusion shows that the theme of CET writing tends to be diversified, but the style is mainly argumentation. In CET-4 and CET-6 there are some similar topics like life philosophy, technology, education. They are rich in subject matter, and have a wide range of coverage. Argumentation mainly appears in the CET to test subjects' points of a problem or phenomenon. Therefore, according to the principle in "Syllabus for CET-4" and "Syllabus for CET-6" that "the topics and genres should be wide", the themes should be diversified sequentially, and genres should be diversified.

Secondly, the examiner should maintain authenticity and openness of test questions, and increase the interactivity of the test. Authenticity is reflected in the interaction between subjects, test tasks and real situation. Language testing must be carried out in a real context. Writing questions should also be open, but the openness should not be too large, otherwise it will not be conducive to scoring. The analysis of this paper shows that after reform, the above two principles are good, but interaction of the writing test is less. Because the situation in real life is complex in the communication, "if the subjects with obvious object consciousness to write, it will naturally reflect interaction of communication." (Li, 1997, p.492) So interaction should be strengthened in designing tests.

(b) Implications and Suggestions for College English Writing Teaching

"Language teaching is the first, language testing services for language teaching." (Yang, 1999, p.16). Combined with the analysis of CET writing test questions, this paper attempts to put forward the following suggestions for College English writing teaching from the perspective of testing.

Firstly, teachers should maintain diversity of topics and genres, and constantly enrich content of writing teaching. The implications and recommendations have already been mentioned above, subjects and styles of CET writing should be diversified. Therefore, teachers should guide students to involve in a variety of topics and genres, and constantly enrich content of writing teaching.

Secondly, teachers should guide students to input authentic language materials and provide materials they are familiar with. The general requirements in "Syllabus for CET-4" and "Syllabus for CET-6" propose that "the purpose of CET is to accurately measure Chinese college students' ability to use English in an all-round way."

According to the theory of Communicative Approach, it can be found that this kind of comprehensive ability is mainly embodied in effective language communication (Yang, 1999, p.20) in real context. Therefore, teachers should provide students with more familiar materials with authentic language materials, and guide students to input more real materials.

Thirdly, teachers should take the basic language skills into account to lay a good foundation for writing. Writing tests can be more accurate in measuring candidates' comprehensive ability (Yang, 2003, p.26). It also can test different aspects of language and various factors, such as words, phrases, sentences and discourse and grammar, collocation and meaning (Li, 1997, p.479). If candidates can master the basic knowledge, it can improve comprehensive ability gradually. Therefore, teachers should guide students to listen more, speak more and read more, and lay a solid foundation for writing.

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