

The Washback Effect of CET Spoken English Test Upon College English Teaching

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to probe into the washback effect of CET (National College English Test) Spoken English Test (CET-SET) on College English (CE) teaching and learning by adopting a descriptive research method, which is of innovative and positive significance. The results of the research may be helpful to improve CET SET and make it better help students enhance their oral proficiency.

Key words: CET-SET; Washback; College English teaching and learning

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INTRODUCTION

Applied linguists define such a phenomenon as the washback effect, either beneficial or harmful (Buck, 1988; Hughes, 1989). Although the formal study of washback is of a comparatively recent scope, its educational significance has been well recognized over the past few decades and a large number of theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted, especially on many large-scale tests, the findings of which indicate that washback phenomenon is far more complicated than was previously assumed.

The present study attempts to investigate the possible washback elicited by the Spoken English Test (SET

thereafter) in College English (CE) Test-band 4/6 on the average non-English-majored undergraduates (CET 4/6 thereafter).

1. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES INTO WASHBACK EFFECT ON CET-SET HOME AND ABROAD

Washback is a relatively new topic in the study of language testing. It has attracted more and more attention of language test designers and researchers since the 1990s. In recent years, a number of empirical washback studies have been carried out in a variety of settings by test experts and researchers, such as Alderson & Wall (1993, in Alderson et al., 2001, p.214), Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Shohamy et al. (1996, in Huang et al., 2002, p.290), Watanabe (1996, in Huang et al., 2002, p.291), Cheng (1999), Andrews et al. (2002), and some researchers from mainland China, including Yuan (2002), etc.. In the empirical researches, various aspects of tests or factors other than a test itself are examined; different subjects are studied; a number of methodologies are adopted. As for the results of the above empirical researches, almost all of them confirm washback effects of tests on language teaching and learning, more or less, in various aspects.

The National College English Test (CET), administered by the National College English Testing Committee in China, is an influential nationwide written test for non-English majors at the tertiary level.

CET-SET is an infant, but many researches have claimed strong washback effects of this test. Chen and Tao (2001) and Jin (2000) claim the positive washback of CET-SET. Here are their discussions. Jin (2000, pp.56-61) discusses the potential positive washback of CET-SET by asserting that it is far from enough to supply students some ready-made phrases or sentences which are

likely to be used in similar situations because CET-SET measures the ability to communicate impromptu by using their limited English language resources and various oral communication strategies. Teachers should teach them how to deal with communication occasions that are partly predictable or completely unpredictable.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, INSTRUMENTS AND SUBJECTS

Basically, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted in the research. Data was collected via questionnaire survey, classroom observations and interviews. In this study, questionnaires were the main research instrument, while classroom observations and interviews served as indispensable supplementary tools. These methods complemented each other in this research.

2.1 Methodology

In order to investigate the washback effect of CET-SET, a descriptive research method is mainly adopted with both quantitative and qualitative data collected from more than 300 students and about 60 teachers from Shandong Normal University and several other universities, including Shandong University and Qufu Normal University.

2.2 Instruments: "A Sociocultural Test"

The data are collected through questionnaires, which are deemed to be useful "for survey research" (Nunan, 2000, p.142) and "for data collection from large groups of subjects" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1999, p.126). Subsequently, the data are analysed by means of descriptive and experimental methods.

Questionnaires are designed for teachers and learners respectively.

Teachers' Questionnaire is made up of 10 items (see Appendix 1), and learners' questionnaire is supposed to be more concrete. It is composed of two sections (see Appendix 2).

2.3 Subjects

In this study, facts and opinions are collected from both CE teachers and learners. As far as CE teachers are concerned, both CET-SET Examiners (hereafter examiner teachers) and non CET-SET Examiners (hereafter non-examiner teachers) will be randomly sampled. The number of examiner teachers is expected to be approximately 20 and that of non-examiner teachers approximately 40. Data collected from 360 CE teachers and learners through questionnaire have shown that CET-SET is both valid and reliable with an obvious positive washback effect.

As far as CE learners are concerned, they will be grouped into two groups for data analyses, namely, qualified learners and unqualified learners in terms of whether they have the qualification to take CET-SET. The

number of CE learners is expected to be approximately 300, covering five classes from Shandong University, Shandong Normal University and Qufu Normal University.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The following is the results of the questionnaire survey of 300 students and 60 English teachers with respect to several aspects that relate to the washback effect of CET-SET, including teachers' questionnaire and learners' questionnaire.

3.1 Results of Teachers' Questionnaire

Twenty copies of questionnaire (see Appendix I) were handed out to examine teachers. Seventeen copies were returned. Of the respondents, nine are assistants accounting for 23.53% of the total population; four are lecturers accounting for 52.94%; the rest four are associate professors accounting for 23.53%. Forty-five copies of questionnaire were distributed among non-examiner teachers. Thirty-seven copies were returned. Of these respondents, seventeen are assistants amounting to 45.75%; fifteen are lecturers amounting to 39.54%; five are associate professors amounting to 13.51%.

Table 1
The Items in Teachers' Questionnaire

0=None 1=Sometimes 2=Often 3=Very frequently 4=Every session	
1	Do you organize group work this semester?
2	Do you organize pair work this semester?
3	Do you demand your students to practice spoken English out of class?
4	Do you help your students with their extracurricular English speaking activities?
1= Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= No view 4= Agree 5= Strongly disagree	
5	CET-SET helps to have quality education in China.
6	CET-SET helps to improve college English teachers' professional capacity.
7	CET-SET prompts me to strengthen spoken English teaching.
8	The qualification of taking CET-SET should be broadened.
9	It is necessary to implement CET-SET.
10	It is necessary to administer an oral exam at the end of each semester.

Note. Table 1 Items in teachers' Questionnaire (see Appendix 1)

In the following part, we are analyzing each question with the statistical data. Let us see the following four questions firstly (see Table 1).

Table 2 indicates that examined teachers organize group work and pair work slightly more frequently than non-examiner teachers, with means being 1.9347 and 1.9023 respectively for group work and being 1.7538 and 1.6247 respectively for pair work.

Table 2
CE Teachers' Responses to Item 1-4 (See Table 1)

Item	Examiner teachers	Non-examiners teachers
1	1.9347	1.9023
2	1.7538	1.6247
3	2.6782	2.4157
4	2.8626	2.3268

It seems that CET-SET has weak washback upon CE teachers' organizing group work and pair work, especially non-examiner teachers'. Examiner teachers slightly more frequently ask students to practice spoken English out of class than non-examiner teachers, with mean being 2.6782 and 2.4157 respectively. Mean for demanding students to practice spoken English out of class by teachers is above 2, which indicates that CET-SET seems to have strong washback upon teachers' demanding students to practice spoken English out of class, both examiner teachers and non-examiner teachers. And mean for helping students with their extracurricular English speaking activities by teachers is above 5, which also indicates that CET-SET seems to have a strong washback effect upon teachers' paying attention to the extracurricular English speaking activities.

As to Questions 5-10, the data can be found in the following table:

Table 3
CE Teachers' Responses to Item 5-10 (See Table 1)

Item	Examiner teachers	Non-examiner teachers
5	4.8901	4.1012
6	4.7544. 4.8856	3.9043
7	4.8054	3.8064
8	4.6936	3.7875
9	4.8210	4.0329
10	4.8766	4.1768

Table 3 shows that examiner teachers express a slightly higher degree of agreement than non-examiner teachers to items 5-10. Mean for expressing degree 38 of agreement to items 5-10 by both examiner teachers and non-examiner teachers is above 3. It seems that CET-SET has strong washback upon CE teachers' attitudes to items 5-10, both examiner teachers' and non-examiner teachers included.

3.2 Results of Learners' Questionnaire

Three hundred and twenty copies of questionnaires (see Appendix 2) were handed out to five classes of students. Three hundred and eight copies were returned with valid responses.

By completing the statement "you know CET-SET from _____", most undergraduates reported that from

their teachers (58.4% reported), or from their classmates (about 17.9%), or their friends (12.7%) they knew of the existence of the test. Only 6.8% of the subjects responded that they did not know the administration of CET-SET until they read the distributed questionnaire. It appears that there is considerable awareness of the existence of CET-SET (see Table 4).

Table 4
CE Learners' Awareness of the Existence of CET-SET

Sources of knowledge	Qualified	Unqualified	Percentage (%)
Teachers	148	32	58.4
Classmates	25	30	17.9
Friends	18	21	12.7
Family members	3	4	2.3
Internet	2	4	1.9
Not heard of	2	19	6.8
Total	198	110	100

However, the subjects who knew of the content, format and the rating scales of CET-SET only account for 18.8% of the total population. The overwhelming majority of the subjects, including more than half of the qualified students, claimed that they were not clear about what to be tested, what formats the test is on and how to be scored in CET-SET, of which 23.1% of the subjects did not hear of them at all. The following table shows technically the results.

Table 5
CE Learners' Knowledge of the Content, Format and Rating Scale of CET-SET

Scales of clearness	Qualified	Unqualified	Percentage (%)
Very clear	11	1	3.9
Fairly clear	18	3	6.8
Clear	20	5	8.1
Not clear	112	67	58.1
Not heard of	37	34	23.1
Total	198	110	100

The result presented in Table 6 shows that most undergraduates are inclined to be unanimous in response to the question: What is your purpose of taking CET-SET? Totally 78.9% of them hold a practical intention, of which 135 students intend to gain advantage in seeking employment, and 108 students are to obtain the certificates. And 60 students claim that they do attempt to test their ability in speaking English. Still 3 students provide the response "Not to waste the chance".

Table 6
CE Learners' Incentive to Take CET-SET

Purpose	Qualified	Unqualified	Percentage (%)
For the certificate	68	40	35.1
For advantage in employment	82	53	43.8
To prove my English level	43	17	19.5
Not to waste the chance	3	0	1
Others	2	0	0.6
Total	198	110	100

Results as to attitudes and perception seem to be clearly identified between groups. There are 65% in the totality of respondents in two groups expressing positive attitudes towards CET-SET, giving their responses that CET-SET "is essential, or very essential", or "CET-SET is of great use". In contrast, about 27.5% of the respondents view CET-SET in a negative way. Table 7 illustrates the different view. In completing the statement "you think CET-SET is unnecessary because _____", about 16.5% of the respondents selected the option as the reason that "even if one can speak English, there is little chance for him to use it". Another 11% of the respondents took "CET-SET is not in the school's requirement" as explanation. While nearly 7.5% of the respondents expressed the idea "we have great difficulties in listening, let alone speak English".

Table 7
CE Learners' Attitudes to CET-SET

Reason	Qualified	Unqualified	Percentage (%)
No requirement	12	21	11
Little change to use English	50	9	16.5
Others	136	80	72.5
Total	198	110	100

Individual time allotment to speak English practice may also reflect the subjects' attitudes in a different perspective. Here are the relevant data:

Table 8
CE Learners' Individual Time Allotted to Spoken English Practice

Time	Qualified	Unqualified	Percentage (%)
Quite some	51	36	28.1
A little	91	52	46.6
No at all	56	21	25
No response	0	1	0.3
Total	198	110	100

As illustrated in Table 8, to answer the question "how much time would you put in practicing spoken English if

there were no CET-SET", 74.7% of the subjects' answer is "Quite some" or "A little". Another 25% express a negative view toward it.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results of questionnaire survey, some suggestions are put forward on how to take advantage of potential beneficial washback of CET-SET and how to reduce its negative aspects in college English teaching and learning English.

"Language testing serves language teaching." (Yang, 1999, p.16) CET-SET is used to measure CE learners' abilities to use English for oral communication. The aim of CET-SET implies that CE learners learn English in order to use it to make oral communication. The assessment criteria of CET-SET comprise accuracy and range, size and discourse management, flexibility and appropriacy.

4.1 Implications for CE Teachers

As Canale points out "the second language learner must have the opportunities to take part in meaningful communicative interaction..., that is, to respond to genuine communication needs and interests in realistic second language situations. This principle is important not only with respect to classroom activities but to test as well". (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p.18)

Communicative activities are possible and feasible for oral class teaching. The important thing is to design suitable activities. The most crucial one might be the group-work, pair-work and individual activities. Through communication learners discuss on what the message would be about by exchanging their prior background knowledge. Individual task is mainly used to train learners' capability to organize orally certain materials they have read or pictures they have seen. It is a good way to check individual's ability of language. Through this task, the teacher can find many problems learners have. For example:

4.1.1 Retelling the Story

First of all, learners are given pieces of reading materials as following.

Learners are required to finish reading it within limited time, usually 3-4 minutes.

Second, based on the passage, learners are required to do some questions and answers. After this procedure, they are much more familiar with the content of the passage.

Third, learners are required to retell the passage in their own words individually.

4.1.2 Eyewitness

Eyewitness is in fact an event recalling or incident description. Learners first are offered a slide show or a series of pictures. The slide shows and pictures may be a part of the event or the whole event. After studying them

for a few minutes, learners are required to tell what they see. What they tell should at least include the setting, time characters and learners' own comment. Eyewitness is an effective way to train learners' ability to observe, to study an event in their own ways. While describing the event, learners have to organize their materials in a proper and logical order. This is helpful to cultivate learners' ability to think creatively.

4.1.3 Pair Work

Pair work is an essential activity in oral class interaction. It is generally used to make a conversation and role-play. Through pair work, learners get a lot of opportunities to practice using language. On the one hand, pair work reduces the teacher talking time, encouraging learners to attend activities and allowing learners to have more time to interact. On the other hand, pair work is beneficial to create an active and relaxed classroom communication atmosphere.

4.1.4 Group Work

Group work is another essential and usual way in oral class interaction. Small number of students interacting is favored in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning. In group work, group size is an important variable that influences learners' participation levels. When there are four or fewer individuals involved in a group, the participants tend to pair off rather than to interact with all members. When a group consists of twelve or more participants, student interaction begins to diminish. With larger groups—that is, fifteen or more—a few students tend to remain very interactive, and the majority becomes silent or passive. Generally, five is considered the most appropriate.

4.1.5 Group Activities

Group activities such as discussions and debate are appropriate to increase teacher-student and student-student interaction in oral class. It helps students adopt a more responsible and independent mode of learning. In discussion, students are active learners since group-work involves students, it requires the teacher to develop a viewpoint and to tolerate and facilitate the exchange of wide range of ideas. Group work provides more opportunities for language production and greater variety of language use.

4.1.6 Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a creative approach to problem solving. Students are free to say anything that comes to their mind at the given time (usually fifteen minutes in my class) while the teacher lists all the ideas on the blackboard. It is quantity of ideas that are needed. After fifteen minutes of brainstorming, we will evaluate each idea, focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of each and then find the best ideas.

To evaluate the students' performance is very important. The teacher can prepare a record book with the

students names listed beforehand. It is very convenient to grade them according to their performance. These are the criteria employed in the students' performance evaluation:

(a) Content: The goal of the speech is clear. The speaker has high quality information. The speaker uses a variety of development materials.

(b) Organization: The introduction gains attention, goodwill for the speaker. The main points are clear statements. The conclusion ties the speech together.

(c) Language: The language is clear. The language is valid. The language is emphatic. The language is appropriate. The language is proficient.

(d) Delivery: The speaker sounds enthusiastic. The speaker looks at the audience students. The pronunciation is good. The speaker has good posture. The delivery is clear, concise, and coherent.

Based on these criteria, I grade the speech as excellent, good, satisfactory, fair, and poor. Teaching practice seems to indicate that whenever big class size is encountered, a common learning environment in non-English-major classroom, there are still ways to be developed in the teaching practice of college English. In order for the students to be truly skilled in English, CE teachers must try to give students various kinds of opportunities to communicate and make English class enjoyable to teach and fun to learn.

4.2 Implications for CE Learners

Tarone and Yule (2000, p.135) point out that "the learners with the utilitarian purpose of accomplishing some goal other than learning the language would probably not turn out to be as successful in developing general language proficiency".

The survey also shows that CE learners have not developed effective learning strategies to cope with spoken English. In fact, they are not spurred to lay much stress on spoken English development. In learning oral English, they prefer individual learning to cooperative learning. They use more individual learning techniques like oral reading, reciting and parrot reading than cooperative learning techniques like group work, pair work and so on. Therefore, it is advisable for CE learners to do more cooperative learning. Inside the classroom CE learners need to make their effort to cooperate with other CE learners and their CE teaches. Outside the classroom CE learners need to grasp every opportunity to use English for communication.

They need to seek chance to talk with native speakers and/or non-native speakers in English speaking activities. In a word, the aim of oral practice is to develop not only micro-linguistic skills and routine skills but also improvisation skills.

4.3 Implications for University Authorities

Both learner subjects and teacher subjects expressed hopes that university authorities would offer a spoken English

course for the students. They also expressed hopes that their university authorities would employ native teachers. Many native English speakers are successful teachers of oral English.

Undoubtedly, a good oral English teacher should be a good English speaker. However, this does not necessarily mean a good English speaker is a good oral English teacher. Apart from fluency and accuracy of the English language, a good oral English teacher must have a good grasp of the teaching syllabus, have a good understanding of the teaching objects (students), and have a good mastery of teaching techniques.

Therefore, choosing good oral English teachers is a matter of great importance for university authorities. In addition, university authorities should give support to the organization of English corner by attracting native speakers and excellent non-native speakers..

University authorities should also invest on CE teaching/learning so as to improve the conditions for teaching/learning spoken English. Multimedia classrooms will be indispensable when modern ELT materials are used. Video equipment will be needed if CE learners' English speaking abilities are measured.

CONCLUSION

The present research tries to explore the possible washback drawn by CET-SET and analyze the nature and functions of CET-SET washback through the analysis of its impact on English teaching and learning in the light of research findings. The result of the research may be helpful to improve CET SET and make it better help students enhance their oral proficiency. With the study and analysis, implications of CET-SET for CE teachers, CE learners and university authorities have been secured.

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APPENDIX 1 (FOR TEACHERS)

Title: a. Assistant b. Lecturer c. Associate professor d. Professor

CET-SET examiner: a. Yes b. No

This questionnaire is aimed at collecting your facts and opinions about the washback effect of CET Spoken English Test (hereafter CET-SET). Your comments on spoken English teaching and testing are important because they will help us to improve the teaching and testing. We sincerely expect that your responses to the questions will reflect your true views.

I. Please choose your answer to the following questions.

1. Do you organize group work this semester?
a. None b. Sometimes c. Often d. Very frequently e. Every session
2. Do you organize pair work this semester?
a. None b. Sometimes c. Often d. Very frequently e. Every session
3. Do you demand your students to learn spoken English out of class?
a. None b. Sometimes c. Often d. Very frequently e. Every session

4. Do you help your students with their extracurricular English speaking activities?
a. None b. Sometimes c. Often d. Very frequently e. Every session

II. Please give a number to statement 1-5 (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=No view, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree)

1. CET-SET helps to improve quality education in China. ()
2. CET-SET helps to improve college English teachers' professional competence. ()
3. CET-SET prompted me to strengthen spoken English teaching. ()
4. The qualification of taking CET-SET should be broadened. ()
5. It is necessary to implement CET-SET. ()
6. It is necessary to offer a spoken English course in the first and second academic year. ()

APPENDIX 2 (FOR STUDENTS)

Major _____

Academic year: a. First year b. Second year c. Third year d. Fourth year

Qualification: a. qualified b. unqualified

This questionnaire is aimed at collecting your facts and opinions about the washback effect of CET Spoken English Test (hereafter CET-SET). Your comments on spoken English teaching and testing are important because they will help us improve the teaching and testing. We sincerely expect that your responses to the questions will reflect your true views.

I. Choose one answer for each question or incomplete sentence. If you choose "others", please write your own answer after it.

1. You know CET-SET from:
a. teacher b. classmates c. friends d. internet e. family members f. others
2. You are about the content, the format and the rating scale of CET-SET.
a. very clear b. quite clear c. clear d. not clear e. not hear of
3. Your purpose of taking CET-SET is _____.
a. to obtain a certificate
b. to add credits to the score of comprehensive evaluation
c. to gain advantage in seeking employment
d. to prove your ability in spoken English
e. to find a chance to practice
f. others
4. You think CET-SET is unnecessary because _____.
a. it is not required by school
b. even if one can speak English fluently, there is little chance for him to use it
c. others
5. How much time would you put in practicing spoken English if there were no CET-SET?
a. no at all b. a little c. quite some
6. In your opinion, CET-SET will promote your English learning in school _____.
a. much greatly b. greatly c. a little d. little e. others
7. Do you expect your teachers to give special lectures or training class concerning CET-SET?
a. Yes b. No c. No comment
8. The time arranged exclusively by your teacher for practicing spoken English is _____.
a. quite enough b. enough c. not enough d. none
9. Spoken English activities take _____ proportion in the exercises in your textbook.
a. very large b. quite large c. large d. small e. very small f. none

II. Please give a number to question 1-4 (0=Never, 1=Sometimes, 2=Often, 3=Very often)

1. Do you use English for communication with Chinese speakers? ()
2. Do you use English for communication with English speakers? ()
3. Do you go to English corner and practice spoken English? ()
4. Do you use English for Internet chat? ()