College English Teaching and Testing in China
— Achievements and Problems in the Past Two Decades

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Abstract

In the paper, the development of college English teaching and testing in China in the past two decades will be reviewed focusing on the promulgation and implementation of the National College English Teaching Syllabuses since the 1980s and the launch of the National College English Test (CET) in the late 1980s. The second part of the paper focuses on the achievements made and problems encountered in the development of college English teaching and testing. The English proficiency of college students in China will be presented by referring to the CET Syllabus. Examples of students' performance in the CET will be given to illustrate their communicative competence. The imbalanced development of the English proficiency of college students across the country will also be discussed and possible explanations given for the discrepancy. The paper will then move on to a discussion on the impact of language testing on teaching with special reference to the washback of the CET on college English teaching in China. Both beneficial and detrimental effects of the CET on teaching and learning will be presented and the social consequences of the large-scale standardized test will be discussed in some detail. The paper ends with a brief introduction to the recent reform of the college English teaching and testing in China.

Key words: college English teaching, college English testing, achievements, problems

I. Introduction

Since the 1980s, English language teaching and learning at tertiary level in China has made great progress. The most frequently quoted example to illustrate the progress made by students over the years is the significant improvements of their reading speed. A nationwide survey carried out in the early 1980s showed that only one third of college graduates were able to read in English at a speed of 17 wpm. In the recently published College English Curriculum Requirements (for Trial Implementation 2004; abbreviated to CECR), however, the basic requirement of reading speed for college and university students is 70-90 wpm. The progress can also be inferred from the rapid increase in the testee population of the College English Test (CET), a standardized EFL test taken by college and university students in China. When the test was first administered in 1987, about 100,000 students took the test. In 2001, the number was around 4 million. In 2005, the number soared to a phenomenal 10.5 million, making the CET the biggest EFL test

in the world. Apart from the CET, in China, there are many other large-scale EFL tests (e.g., PETS, TEM, MET, etc.). The number of the test-takers of each of the tests every year exceeds hundreds of thousands, which indicates to some extent the growing passion for learning English in China.

The focus of the present paper is on college English teaching in China, that is, English language teaching at tertiary level (referring to both 3-year colleges and 4-year universities), which has been a compulsory course for non-English major college and university students since the mid 1980s. The paper will also discuss college English testing with a special focus on the CET, which is an optional test given to college and university students.

II. Part 1 Teaching, testing, and social needs

The development of language teaching and testing has its roots in changing social needs. Bachman (1990: 279) is often quoted when we talk about the purposes of test development: "… tests are not developed and used in a value-free psychometric test-tube; they are virtually always intended to serve the needs of an educational system or of society at large." This quote applies even better to teaching: educational policies are made in accordance with the changing needs of society. As illustrated in the figure below (Figure 1), with changing social needs, educational systems should keep innovating. Meanwhile, the accompanying assessment and evaluation should reform in order to positively impact on teaching and society.

FIGURE 1
Teaching, Testing, and Social Needs
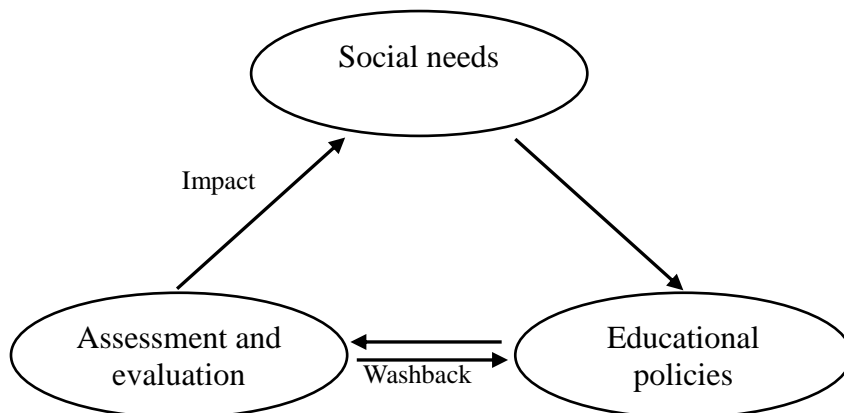
In the context of China's continuous opening to the outside world, a pressing social need is the increasing demand for college graduates who are able to communicate in English. Since the 1980s, English language teaching and testing at tertiary level in China has experienced tremendous changes: full restoration in the 1980s, rapid development in the 1990s, and substantial reform in the new era.

In the early 1980s when China opened its door to the outside world and began its economic and social reforms, a survey carried out nationwide indicated the necessity for a new curriculum to encourage the teaching and learning of English as a tool of communication. The National College English Teaching Syllabuses (for Students of Science and Technology 1985; for Students of Arts and Science 1986; abbreviated to NCETS), the first two unified national college English teaching syllabuses, were therefore designed and published in the mid 1980s. In accordance with the requirements set for college students in the syllabuses, the CET was designed and launched in the late 1980s with a view to promoting the implementation of the teaching syllabuses.

In the 1990s, with China's further opening up to the outside world, the teaching syllabuses were revised to reflect the new requirements for the English proficiency of college and university students. The revised version was published in 1999. The CET Committee also recognized the social need for college graduates who are not only able to read and write in English but also able to communicate orally in English. A four-year research project was carried out and the Committee officially launched the CET Spoken English Test (CET-SET) nationwide in 1999. Another noticeable change with higher education in China in the late 1990s was the expanded enrollment of college and university students, to allow more high school graduates to have the chance to receive higher education. The expanded enrollment has had a significant impact on college English teaching and learning.

Moving on to the new century, with its entry into the WTO and the 2008 Beijing Olympic and Shanghai 2010 Expo drawing near, China is witnessing another stage of fast economic and social development. The Ministry of Education (MoE) saw the necessity for an urgent reform in the educational system so as to produce more qualified people whose skills and abilities can better serve the needs of society. As part of the reform of the entire educational system in the new era, college English teaching started to face the new challenges by taking various measures. The teaching syllabus (1999 version) was revised and the CET is undergoing major changes as well. The following two parts will deal with the continual development and reform in college English teaching and testing over the past two decades in detail.

III. Part 2 College English teaching and its reform

To review the development of college English teaching in China, it is useful to refer to Nunan's frequently quoted list of components of English language teaching practice (Nunan 1988), which includes such activities as initial needs analysis, goal and objective setting, selecting/grading content, ongoing needs analysis, devising learning activities, instructing learners, monitoring/assessing progress, course evaluation, etc. The list highlights four essential aspects of English language teaching and testing: teaching requirements, teaching methodology, material development, and assessment and evaluation. The achievements made and problems encountered in college English teaching practice will be reviewed from these aspects.

1. College English teaching in China: achievements

One of the most important achievements in English language teaching at tertiary level since the 1980s was the promulgation of various versions of the NCETS. To implement the teaching syllabuses, teachers experimented with new teaching methodologies and publishers developed a variety of textbooks and computer-based courseware. In line with the ideology of communicative language teaching, progress has also been made in the theory and practice of college English testing, the typical example of which is the rapid growth of the CET. All in all, these achievements led to the improvements in students' English language proficiency.

1) Promulgation of College English Teaching syllabuses

The NCETS (1985, 1986) for non-English major college and university students across the country was designed on the basis of the needs analysis carried out among 1700 university graduates from 1982 to 1984. The differences between the two syllabuses concern the teaching requirements (e.g. one considers translation a necessary skill, the other does not), teaching hours (240 for one syllabus and 280 for the other), vocabulary, etc. The reasoning behind the two syllabuses was mainly the unresolved question at the time among English language teachers and syllabus designers over the so-called common core English suitable for students of all disciplines. In the mid 1990s, after three years' survey and investigation, the 1985 and 1986 syllabuses were merged into one single revised version college English teaching syllabus, which was published in 1999. Starting from 2002, the Higher Education Department of the MoE set up a team of English language teaching experts and revised the 1999 teaching syllabus. The College English Curriculum Requirements was officially published in 2004.

The major contribution of the first two syllabuses (1985/1986: 1) was the

introduction of the idea of "band" into college English teaching and testing. According to the course design specified in the syllabuses, college English teaching was divided into the foundation stage for students during their first two years at college and the ESP reading stage for the last two years. College English teaching at the foundation stage was divided into six bands, with Bands 1 to 4 constituting the compulsory course and Bands 5 and 6 the optional course. Successful completion of Bands 1 to 4 means reaching the basic requirements, and that of Bands 5 and 6 the higher requirements. The ESP reading stage was an optional requirement and students were encouraged to continue their English study after they completed the first two years' compulsory college English course.

The teaching objectives set by the 1985/1986 syllabuses were to improve students' EFL reading, listening, writing and speaking abilities so as to enable them to use English as a tool for accessing information related to their academic fields. With the emphasis on using English as a tool for accessing information, reading was considered the most important skill. Listening was considered of secondary importance and limited requirements were set for writing and speaking.

Requirements of each band were specified in both quantitative and qualitative terms. For example, the vocabulary requirement for Band 1 was 2150 words, among which 1500 words were considered active vocabulary, meaning students should be able to use these words in speaking and writing. There were also specific requirements for each component skill. Students were required, for example, to complete a certain amount of reading material for each band of learning. For Band 1, they should read materials in English of about 6000 words for intensive reading, and 24000 words for extensive reading. In addition, a qualitative description of the subskills for Band 1 reading was also provided. Students were required to read carefully for important facts and the main idea, for drawing logical conclusions and making sound judgments, accurate inferences, generalizations, etc. They should also be able to skim and scan and to use such basic reference skills as understanding and utilizing table of contents, index, appendix, etc. Detailed descriptions of the component skills and subskills proved to be conducive to teaching, learning and textbook writing.

The first two syllabuses played essential roles in college English teaching from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s. After more than 10 years' implementation, further needs analysis indicated the necessity for revising the teaching syllabuses. In 1999, a revised version National College English Teaching Syllabus (NCETS 1999) was published, in which no more distinctions were made between the requirements for students of arts and science, and for students of science and technology. The two syllabuses were merged into one, which was considered applicable for non-English major students of all disciplines.

In the NCETS (1999: 1), the teaching requirements were adjusted so as to better suit the needs of society for college graduates who are able to communicate in English. Emphasis was still laid on reading, but listening, speaking and writing were considered of equal importance. In addition, teachers were required to pay more attention to the development of students' strategies of language learning and their cultural capacity (i.e., to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures). But this syllabus was considered a revised version instead of a new syllabus because it retained the most essential feature of the first two syllabuses, that is, the division of the two-year college English teaching into six bands (ibid.: 2).

In 2004, College English Curriculum Requirements was officially published by the Higher Education Department of the MoE. The major change made to the 1999 version NCETS was the abandoning of the idea of a unified teaching syllabus for students across the country and the establishment of curriculum requirements. The reasoning behind the shift from syllabus to curriculum requirements is to allow colleges and universities more flexibility to set up their own teaching syllabuses, which stipulate specific teaching objectives, teaching hour requirements, teaching content, teaching methodology, teaching materials, etc. in line with the actual circumstances of English language teaching and learning in a particular college or university (e.g., the average level of the students enrolled, the required level of the English proficiency, teaching resources and facilities available, the overall quality of teachers, etc).

In the CECR (2004: 25-31), the division of bands was modified. Instead of dividing the course into six bands, a three-level framework was established, which set the requirements at the basic, intermediate and advanced level. All students are required to attain to one of the three levels of the requirements upon completing the college English course. Similar to the previous syllabuses, specific requirements for each level were described in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

The most significant change in the 2004 CECR concerns the requirements on the development of students' language ability. According to the CECR (ibid.: 24), the ultimate objective of college English teaching is to "develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges."

It can be seen that students are now required to develop their overall language competence so as to be able to exchange information effectively in English. It has long been a hot topic in applied linguistics whether language is a unitary or componential construct. Abundant research in the past has indicated the componentiality of the

language construct. However, the trend nowadays is clearly moving towards communicative language teaching and testing, which advocate performance-based authentic teaching and testing tasks. The figure below illustrates the integrated nature of language abilities/skills (Gui, 2004).

FIGURE 2
Relations between language abilities (Gui, 2004)

mode direction	spoken	written
receptive	L	R
productive	S	W
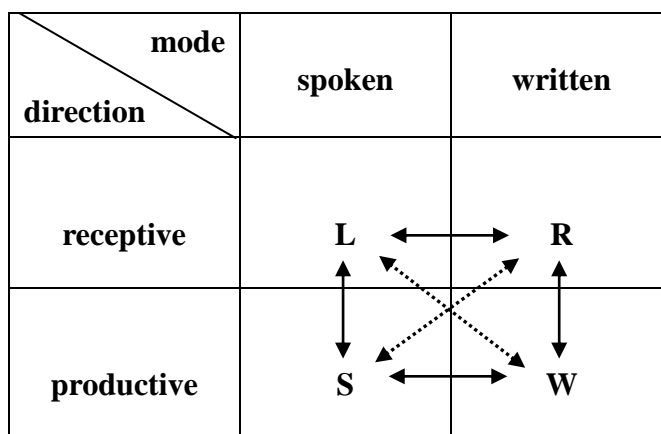
Therefore, the shift of the emphasis from reading in the previous syllabuses (1985, 1986, 1999) to listening and speaking in the CECR (2004) does not mean to downplay the importance of reading, but rather, this is a clear indication that classroom activities and test items should pay equal attention to listening and speaking, and if possible, the skills should be integrated, as people do in real life communication.

Another notable feature of the teaching objective laid down by the CECR (2004) is the emphasis on the use of English as a tool for work and social interactions. According to Carroll's estimates of communication mode combinations (see Table 1 below, Carroll 1980: 28), in academic English, reading ranks first as a mode of communication, taking up 31% of the various mode combinations. In the context of social interactions, however, the mode of listening and speaking ranks highest, accounting for almost half (49%) of the various mode combinations. So the emphasis on the development of students' listening and speaking abilities, in fact, responds to the social needs for college graduates who are able to use English not only in academic settings (e.g., to access information related to their academic fields, as stipulated in the 1985/86 Syllabuses), but also for social interactions.

TABLE 1
Estimates of mode combinations (Carroll, 1980:28)

Academic English			Social English		
Rank order	Modes	%	Rank order	Modes	%
1	**R**	**31**	**1**	**L+S**	**49**
2	R+W	23	2	R	21
3	L+S	22	3	R+W	12
4	L+W	11	4	L	4
5	L	8	5	L+S+R	4
6	L+R+S	5	6	W	3
			7	R+L	3
			8	S	2
			9	L+S+R+W	2

2) Improvements in teaching methodology

It has been well accepted in the field of language teaching that appropriate teaching methodology ensures successful implementation of a curriculum. Over the past two decades, with developments in the theory and practice of communicative language teaching, with improvements in English language teachers' academic background and their more and more active participation in English language teaching research, and with more and more attention paid to teacher training, college English teachers were increasingly aware of the significance of using appropriate teaching methodology and were increasingly willing to experiment with various teaching approaches.

In traditional English language teaching classes in China, students were used to sitting quietly and busying themselves with note-taking while teachers provided detailed analysis of the so-called "language points", i.e., some important grammatical, structural or word knowledge in the texts. However, the past two decades has witnessed a departure from the traditional grammar-translation teaching methodology as teachers have come to realize the importance of communicative language ability and the advantages of a student-centered teaching methodology. In classes, the role of the teacher has gradually shifted from an instructor to a facilitator of learning: to organize, prompt and guide students in classroom activities. To use an analogy, in the classes, college English teachers are trying hard to be the director of an orchestra instead of a performer. Students' surveys also showed that they were more interested in activities like role play, group discussion, debate than explanation of language points, analysis of

students' exercises, etc.

It must be admitted, however, that the picture for the whole country is not that rosy. On the one hand, teachers have not yet fully accepted the new teaching philosophy, which puts students at the center of learning. On the other hand, inadequate teaching resources have severely constrained the use of appropriate teaching methodology. In some areas, for example, due to lack of qualified teachers, there are 50-60 or even 100 students in a single class, rendering the student-centered communicative teaching methodology impossible.

Since the late 1990s, multimedia courseware, as an important supplement to or even a replacement of traditional textbooks, has gained popularity among teachers and students. New teaching models have been introduced which combine the traditional classroom instruction with the computer- and/or internet-based teaching and learning. A significant step forward with regard to teaching models was the strong recommendation of "the computer- and classroom-based multimedia college English teaching model" in the recently published CECR (2004: 32-33). With the help of modern information technology, it is hoped that "English language teaching will be free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students' individualized and autonomous learning."

The new model, on the one hand, caters to the needs of top universities because it places a premium on individualized teaching and independent learning and therefore enables advanced students to study at their own pace and learn the contents that better suit their needs. On the other hand, in many parts of the country, the implementation of the new model will help ease the tension between the marked increase in student enrollments in recent years and the relatively limited teaching resources. And it is especially suitable for impoverished areas where there is a severe lack of qualified teachers.

3) Design and development of textbooks and courseware

Another noticeable achievement made in the past twenty years in college English teaching is the development and publication of a variety of high quality textbooks and courseware. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, textbooks for EFL learners in China were mostly imported, e.g., *New Concept English*, *Essential English,* or co-produced with foreign publishers, e.g., *Modern English* by Higher Education Press (HEP) and Macmillan. One of the very few homemade textbooks for college English teaching at the time was Professor Xu Guozhang's *English*. From the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, a number of high quality textbooks were produced, including for example, *College English* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP), *College Core English* by HEP, *New English Course* by Tsinghua University Press (TUP). But

there were not many varieties available, and most of them were developed by individual universities.

Since the late 1990s, with increasing attention paid to college English teaching, there appeared a large variety of textbooks, often supplemented by well-designed user-friendly courseware. These textbooks and the accompanying courseware were often jointly produced by a number of universities and published by some of the major publishing houses in China. Examples include *21st Century College English* published by Fudan University Press and HEP, *New College English* by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), etc. In the recent two or three years, a number of new textbooks were compiled as part of the college English teaching reform project. The most popular ones include *College English (New)* by SFLEP, *Experiencing English* by HEP, *New Horizon College English* by FLTRP, *New Era Interactive English* by TUP, etc. It is interesting to note that the variety of the textbooks has encouraged competition among publishers, who not only focus on improving the quality of their products but also try hard to promote the sales through various means, including for example, financially supporting teacher training activities to familiarize teachers with the design principles of the textbooks and courseware so that they can make better use of the materials.

4) Improvements in students' proficiency

The combined efforts of the government, who has supervised the development and implementation of the teaching syllabuses and curriculum requirements, college English teachers, who have been continuously improving their teaching methodology, textbook writers and publishers, who produced a large variety of college English textbooks and courseware, and most important of all, college students, who are well aware of the importance of English for their study at college and future work, have resulted in significant improvements in students' English proficiency (refer to Jin and Yang 2006). One way to illustrate the progress made in the past two decades is to look at the rising average scores in the CET-4. The table below shows a steady rise over the three five-year periods in the average component scores of the whole country and the 89 state key universities.

TABLE 2
Improvements in students' proficiency as reflected in the CET-4

	Listening (20 points)			Reading (40 points)			Writing (15 points)		
	1st 5yrs	2nd 5yrs	3rd 5yrs	1st 5yrs	2nd 5yrs	3rd 5yrs	1st 5yrs	2nd 5yrs	3rd 5yrs
Whole country	10	11.7	12.5	25	26	27.5	4.5	6	7.5
89 key	11	13	14	27	28	31	5.5	7.5	8.5

Note: 1st 5 years: 1987-1991; 2nd 5 years: 1992-1996; 3rd 5 years: 1997-2001

2. College English teaching in China: problems

When talking about college English teaching over the past two decades, teachers, employers, language teaching experts, university administrators, and officials from the MoE, would all agree that achievements have been remarkable and impressive. But it is also admitted that English language teaching at tertiary level in China is not without problems, among which, the following three were considered most acute: lack of qualified teachers; teaching to the test; and imbalanced development of students' English proficiency.

1) Lack of qualified college English teachers

According to some recent surveys, the ratio of the total number of college English teachers and students in the year 2001 was 1:130 (Shu 2004: 4). Some officials (e.g. Zhang 2006) in recent conferences on college English teaching reform quoted the number 1:200. Among the teachers, the percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or below in the year 2001 was 73.2% (ibid.: 4), and in the year 2002 76.7% (Cai 2006: 21). In contrast, the percentage of those holding a professorship in the year 2002 was only 3.7% (ibid.: 21). The lack of qualified teachers is partly due to the insufficient attention paid to teacher training. But the main cause is the rapid expansion of college enrollment in recent years. So colleges and universities have to lower the requirements when recruiting new English language teachers. And still many college English teachers complain of their heavy workloads, often 12-16 hours a week, much more than teachers of other subjects.

2) Teaching to the test

Another big headache with regard to college English teaching is teaching to the test. Under the pressure of a satisfactory pass rate in national tests like the CET, teachers in some universities are found to use coaching materials in class, and students often use practice books for exercises, thus narrowing the teaching and learning content. In these universities, normal classroom teaching is replaced by test preparation and multiple choice questions (MCQ), a testing technique used for its high reliability and wide coverage of curriculum content, become teaching tasks used in classroom teaching. In some cases, teachers and students spend as long as three months practicing for the test. Some universities even encourage students to take the CET before the course is completed because no more teaching will be provided once students pass the test. Students are also satisfied with a passing score and stop learning after they get a certificate.

3) Imbalanced development of students' proficiency

It is true that great progress has been made in college and university students' overall English proficiency since the mid 1980s. However, as China is such a vast country and different regions are at different stages of economic development, there is an imbalance in the level of education across the country. In some economically backward areas, due in part to lack of qualified college English teachers, teaching resources and facilities (language labs, audio-visual materials, computers, internet facilities, etc.), the average level of students' English proficiency is often lower than the level of the students from more developed areas, resulting in a huge imbalance in English language proficiency among students across the country. This is proven by the large discrepancies in the CET test results.

When describing the average performance of the test-takers in a group, the usual practice is to use the simple pass rate, i.e., the percentage of the test-takers who have reached the minimum cut-off score. In order to better indicate the average proficiency level of the students in a group, the CET Committee introduced a new measure called the average graded score (AGS) in 1996, which takes into account only the grades of the test-takers who pass the test. The formula for calculating the AGS is $AGS=(\sum G_i/N)\times 50+100$, where G_i is the graded score of a particular test-taker (see Table 3) and N is the total number of test-takers in the group to be described.

TABLE 3

Graded score of an individual test-taker

Total score	95–100	85–94.5	75–84.5	65–74.5	60–64.5	< 60
Graded score	7	6	5	4	3	0

Using this reference scale, we can see the imbalanced developments of students from different universities, different provinces, and different areas of the country (Tables 4-6).

TABLE 4

AGS of some universities

University	Year 95	Year 96	Year 97	Year 98
1	**324**	**325**	**316.9**	**326.0**
2	255	248	258.1	258.8
3	297	304	299.7	288.3
4	**235**	**223**	**205.3**	**196.7**
5	**328**	**328**	**322.6**	**329.8**
6	257	274	275.5	266.4
7	306	300	300.8	302.5
8	301	260	271.3	275.6
9	293	303	309.6	314.7
10	329	327	303.4	300.0
11	266	263	264.6	256.2
12	255	222	261.4	226.6
13	308	300	303.3	180.2
14	261	237	245.3	225.3

TABLE 5
AGS of all provinces

Provinces	Area code	Year 98	Year 99	Year 00	Year 01
1	**1**	**225.7**	**223.0**	**213.5**	**208.6**
2	1	184.3	184.4	177.0	168.3
3	2	161.4	169.2	155.5	153.9
4	2	135.8	139.6	135.8	138.7
5	3	123.3	125.2	122.9	121.7
6	2	183.4	178.4	174.5	164.0
7	2	152.2	138.6	135.5	131.1
8	2	142.2	136.0	141.3	140.4
9	**1**	**227.7**	**230.7**	**237.5**	**232.1**
10	1	170.0	169.9	173.1	165.8
11	1	209.4	207.6	195.6	178.2
12	2	173.6	174.0	163.6	156.6
13	2	175.9	168.5	168.9	162.4
14	2	143.4	137.1	139.5	137.3
15	1	217.5	213.1	205.8	206.9
16	1	193.8	198.8	190.2	176.6
17	2	120.7	121.7	122.3	121.1
18	2	159.1	161.3	157.4	157.2
19	2	169.3	165.2	162.8	162.9
20	2	170.7	163.4	157.2	156.7
21	3	117.5	115.8	118.0	118.6
22	2	139.3	142.1	144.0	141.2
23	**3**	**104.0**	**104.0**	**104.7**	**106.1**
24	3	120.2	117.5	119.6	121.4
25	3			109.4	108.0
26	3	162.8	154.6	153.9	151.7
27	3	124.8	129.4	130.7	125.6
28	**3**	**102.7**	**102.8**	**105.5**	**105.3**
29	3	111.1	111.5	111.5	111.0
30	3	114.8	115.5	115.1	116.6
31	2	150.3	154.6	151.8	151.6

TABLE 6
AGS of different areas (in the year 2001)

Groups for comparison	AGS
Whole country (31 provinces)	159.2
89 key universities	203.5
Other universities	147.4
Area 1 (7 coastal provinces/cities)	187.5
Area 2 (14 inner provinces)	150.7
Area 3 (10 western provinces/cities)	123.6

IV. Part 3 College English testing and its impact on teaching

Testing has always constituted an important part of teaching in the educational systems in China. College English teaching is no exception. To help promote the implementation of the NCETS (1985/1986), the CET was designed and developed in the late 1980s. Since each academic year in most of the colleges and universities in China consists of two semesters, the two-year compulsory college English course comprises 4 semesters of teaching, i.e. College English Bands 1 to 4. Upon completing the compulsory college English course, students can sit for the CET Band 4 (CET-4). The CET Band 6 (CET-6) is available to students who have already passed the CET-4, and have taken the optional college English course of Bands 5 and 6.

1. A brief introduction to the CET

The purposes of the CET are twofold: to provide an appropriate assessment tool to see if college students have met the teaching requirements of the college English course of Band 4 or Band 6 as specified in the NCETS (1985, 1986, 1999); and to exert a positive washback effect on college English teaching in China. Therefore, from the design of test tasks to the decision on the cut-off score for passing the test, all were based on the requirements set in the teaching syllabuses.

Both the CET-4 and CET-6 are administered twice a year, in June and December or January. The tests are now available to students in all provinces, autonomous and special administrative regions, including Tibet and Macau. The CET-SET is administered twice a year as well, in May and November. Applicants of the spoken English test are required

to have a CET score above a qualification line. Through more than seven years' development, a total of 52 CET-SET test centers located in 35 major cities have been established.

According to the CET Syllabus (1994: 2-4), students who pass the CET should be able to understand the main ideas and important details stated either explicitly or implicitly in listening materials and reading passages. Listening conversations and passages are recorded by native speakers of English and the requirement for the speech rate is 130-150 wpm (see Appendix 1 for an example of the CET-4 Compound Dictation task). The requirement for the reading speed is 70 wpm for careful reading and 100-120 wpm for fast reading (see Appendix 2 for an example of the CET-4 reading passage and the items). Students are required to write 120-150 words within 30 minutes on a given topic expressing their ideas clearly and coherently (see Appendix 3 for an essay written by a CET-4 test-taker, which was given 14 out of a full mark of 15). As for speaking, CET-SET certificate holders should be able to take part in oral interaction on familiar topics. The criteria of rating include 1) accuracy and range; 2) size and discourse management; and 3) flexibility and appropriacy (see Table 7 for CET-SET grade descriptions).

TABLE 7
CET-SET grade descriptions
(CET-SET Test Syllabus and Sample Test Paper 1999:17)

Grades	Description
A+ and A	Ability to take part in oral interaction in English on familiar topics with little difficulty.
B+ and B	Ability to take part in oral interaction in English on familiar topics, with some difficulty but scarcely impeding communication.
C+ and C	Ability to take part in basic oral interaction in English on familiar topics.
D	Inability to take part in oral interaction in English.

2. Washback of the CET

It was made clear in the teaching syllabuses that the CET is an optional test to be taken by students who prefer to assess their English proficiency or by universities who prefer to use the test results as one of the means to evaluate college English teaching. However, over the years, almost all non-English major students have taken the test as if

it were compulsory. The main reason is that the test has won social recognition due to its high validity and reliability. As a result, the CET has to bear heavy weight attached to its certificate by students (to find a job in the highly competitive job market), by teachers (for self-evaluation and to evaluate their students), by universities (for self-evaluation and to evaluate their teachers), and by employers (to recruit employees), which has turned this test into a high-stakes test. Similar to other large-scale high-stakes tests, both positive and negative washback has been observed with the CET.

1) Beneficial effects on teaching and learning

The implementation of the CET has attracted both teachers' and learners' attention to college English teaching and learning, which was much neglected before the mid 1980s. Resources, such as books, audio-visual materials, etc., have been more readily available and language labs more easily accessible to teachers and students. More important, the CET test results provide a wealth of feedback information to students, teachers, and universities, who are able to make use of the information to improve teaching and learning. Examples of some types of feedback include item analysis data available to teachers (Figure 3), writing score distribution and percentile available to schools (Figure 4), and AGS reported to the municipal educational authorities and the Higher Education Department of the MoE (refer to Table 5 in 2.2).

FIGURE 3
Item analysis

File name: CET4F971			Item No. 11				
Group	Top	2nd	3rd	4th	Bottom	Total	Percent
Missing	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.1%
A	38	49	75	81	83	326	35.9%
B	4	5	6	9	9	33	3.6%
C	39	48	53	51	59	250	27.5%
D*	100	80	46	41	31	298	32.8%
	181	182	181	182	182	908	

FIGURE 4
Writing score distribution and percentile

Score Range	School: XXXX			School: YYYY		
	No.	Pct.	Cum. No.	No.	Pct.	Cum. No.
15-15	17	0.8%	17	0	0.0%	0
14-15	43	2.0%	60	0	0.0%	0
13-14	125	5.8%	185	0	0.0%	0
12-13	226	10.5%	411	0	0.0%	0
11-12	335	15.6%	746	7	0.9%	7
10-11	325	15.2%	1071	7	0.9%	14
9-10	362	16.9%	1433	22	2.7%	36
8-9	290	13.5%	1723	74	9.2%	110
7-8	172	8.0%	1895	91	11.3%	201
6-7	94	4.4%	1989	139	17.3%	340
5-6	69	3.2%	2058	142	17.7%	482
4-5	48	2.2%	2106	134	16.7%	616
3-4	19	0.9%	2125	102	12.7%	718
2-3	14	0.7%	2139	36	4.5%	754
1-2	2	0.1%	2141	23	2.9%	777
0-1	4	0.2%	2145	27	3.4%	804

The administration of the CET also benefits the society by providing an objective evaluation of a college student's overall English proficiency. The certificate is used as one of the prerequisites for employment. Equally important is the great contribution of the CET to the professional development of language testing in China. The design, development and administration of the test have promoted language testers' understanding of the principles and practices of large-scale standardized testing in China. And the test has instilled a strong sense of responsibility in educators and professional testers, who are constantly reflecting on how to improve the test so as to provide better washback on teaching.

2) Detrimental effects on teaching and learning

In some universities, students are required to pass the CET-4 in order to graduate or get their bachelor's degree. In the most extreme cases, big cities like Shanghai and Beijing require college graduates to pass the test in order to be granted residential

certification. The heavy weight attached to the CET certificate has brought about negative washback on teaching and learning as discussed in the section on the problems of English language teaching at tertiary level. Therefore, the designers and administrators of the CET have to think about how to minimize the negative washback effects and how learners can benefit from high-stakes tests like the CET.

V. Summary

The trial implementation of the CECR (2004) in 180 universities across the country since January 2004 has been considered a success and the document is being finalized for nationwide implementation. But even more important than finalizing the document is that more efforts should be made to speed up the implementation and to train teachers to adapt to new teaching models and teaching methodology. Meanwhile, the CET will continue to revise the test content and format. An urgent task for the test reform is to use modern technology to develop the computer-based or internet-based CET so as to further improve the test validity and reliability. More importantly, the recent reform of the CET will focus on improving the test's washback.

In addition to the CET reform, as an important component of college English teaching, college English testing should aim at establishing a comprehensive, objective, scientific and accurate evaluation system, which places emphasis on both formative and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation, according to the CECR (2004: 34-35), includes students' self-assessment, peer assessment, assessment conducted by teachers, and assessment conducted by school administrators.

The stress on formative evaluation, which has never been attached so much importance in the previous syllabuses, is mainly to enhance the implementation of the new computer- and classroom-based multimedia college English teaching model. Formative evaluation is particularly important in computer-assisted teaching which is characterized by students' independent learning. By keeping a record of students' activities in and outside of classroom and their online self-learning data, and keeping files on their study results, students' learning process is under observation, evaluation and supervision.

As for summative evaluation, it is reiterated that the CET is optional. Students can take the tests administered by individual schools or by a number of schools (intercollegiate or regional tests). The focus is on the assessment of students' ability to use English for communication, particularly their ability to speak and write in English.

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Appendix 1   An example of the CET-4 Compound Dictation task

Directions: *In this section, you will hear a passage three times. When the passage is read for the first time, you should listen carefully for its general idea. When the passage is read for the second time, you are required to fill in the blanks numbered from 36 to 43 with the exact words you have just heard. For blanks numbered from 44 to 46 you are required to fill in the missing information. For these blanks, you can either use the exact words you have just heard or write down the main points in your own words. Finally, when the passage is read for the third time, you should check what you have written.*

Russia is the largest economic power that is not a member of the World Trade Organization. But that may change. Last Friday, the European Union said it would support Russia's **(36) effort** to become a W.T.O. member.

Representatives of the European Union met with Russian **(37) officials** in Moscow. They signed a trade agreement that took six years to **(38) negotiate**.

Russia called the trade agreement **(39) balanced**. It agreed to slowly increase fuel prices within the country. It also agreed to permit **(40) competition** in its communications industry and to remove some barriers to trade.

In **(41) exchange** for European support to join the W.T.O., Russian President Putin said that Russia would speed up the **(42) process** to approve the Kyoto Protocol, an international **(43) environmental** agreement to reduce the production of harmful industrial gases. **(44) These "greenhouse gases" trap heat in the atmosphere and are blamed for changing the world's climate**.

Russia had signed the Kyoto Protocol, but has not yet approved it. The agreement takes effect when it has been approved by nations that produce at least 55 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. **(45) But currently, nations producing only 44 percent have approved the Protocol. Russia produces about 17 percent of the world's greenhouse gases**. The United States, the world's biggest producer, withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol after President Bush took office in 2001. So, Russia's approval is required to put the Kyoto Protocol into effect.

(46) To join the W.T.O., a country must reach trade agreements with major trading countries that are also W.T.O. members. Russia must still reach agreements with China, Japan, South Korea and the United States.

Appendix 2   An example of the CET-4 reading passage and the items

Questions 57 to 61 are based on the following passage.

"Tear 'em apart!" "Kill the fool!" "Murder the referee!"

These are common remarks one may hear at various sporting events. At the time they are made, they may seem innocent enough. But let's not kid ourselves. They have been known to influence behavior in such a way as to lead to real bloodshed. Volumes have been written about the way words affect us. It has been shown that words having certain connotations may cause us to react in ways quite foreign to what we consider to be our usual humanistic behavior. I see the term "opponent" as one of those words. Perhaps the time has come to delete it from sports terms.

The dictionary meaning of the term "opponent" is "adversary"; "enemy"; "one who opposes your interests." Thus, when a player meets an opponent, he or she may tend to treat that opponent as an enemy. At such times, winning may dominate one's intellect, and every action, no matter how gross, may be considered justifiable. I recall an incident in a handball game when a referee refused a player's request for a time out for a glove change because he did not consider them wet enough. The player proceeded to rub his gloves across his wet T-shirt and then exclaimed, "Are they wet enough now?"

In the heat of battle, players have been observed to throw themselves across the court without considering the consequences that such a move might have on anyone in their way. I have also witnessed a player reacting to his opponent's intentional and illegal blocking by deliberately hitting him with the ball as hard as he could during the course of play. Off the court, they are good friends. Does that make any sense? It certainly gives proof of a court attitude which departs from normal behavior.

Therefore, I believe it is time we elevated the game to the level where it belongs, thereby setting an example to the rest of the sporting world. Replacing the term "opponent" with "associate" could be an ideal way to start.

The dictionary meaning of the term "associate" is "colleague"; "friend"; "companion." Reflect a moment! You may soon see and possibly feel the difference in your reaction to the term "associate" rather than "opponent."

57. Which of the following statements best expresses the author's view?
    A) The words people use can influence their behavior.
    B) Unpleasant words in sports are often used by foreign athletes.
    C) Aggressive behavior in sports can have serious consequences.
    D) Unfair judgments by referees will lead to violence on the sports field.

58. Harsh words are spoken during games because the players _____.

    A) are too eager to win

    B) treat their rivals as enemies

    C) are usually short-tempered and easily offended

    D) cannot afford to be polite in fierce competitions

59. What did the handball player do when he was not allowed a time out to change his gloves?

    A) He angrily hit the referee with a ball.

    B) He refused to continue the game.

    C) He claimed that the referee was unfair.

    D) He wet his gloves by rubbing them across his T-shirt.

60. According to the passage, players in a game may _____.

    A) kick the ball across the court with force

    B) lie down on the ground as an act of protest

    C) deliberately throw the ball at anyone illegally blocking their way

    D) keep on screaming and shouting throughout the game

61. The author hopes to have the current situation in sports improved by _____.

    A) regulating the relationship between players and referees

    B) calling on players to use clean language on the court

    C) raising the referees' sense of responsibility

    D) changing the attitude of players on the sports field

Appendix 3   An essay written by a CET-4 test-taker

For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write a poster recruiting volunteers. You should write at least 120 words following the outline given below:
1. 校学生会组织一次暑期志愿者活动，现招募志愿者
2. 本次志愿者活动的目的、内容、安排等
3. 报名条件及联系方式

Volunteers Needed

As the summer holiday is approaching, the Student Union will organize a voluntary program and is now recruiting volunteers. This program will focus on teaching farmers' children at Yu Cai School. It aims to instill confidence, independence and optimism into the pupils and to help them improve their English. Through participating in the activity, volunteers can gain teaching experience.

Volunteers will give lessons in the morning and organize after-class activities in the afternoon. The program will start on July 10th and end on July 30th. The Student Union will arrange buses to take you to the school.

We need 30 local students who are warm-hearted and good at English. Fellow students that meet the requirements and want to take part in the activity please call us at 6543210 or email us at volunteers@126.com.

You are welcome to join us!