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## **Washback Effects of the New CET4 Listening Test on College English Listening Teaching and Learning**

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### **Abstract**

As a high-stake and criterion-related norm-referenced test which is intended to supervise the implementation of Syllabus and diagnose the strength and weakness in college English teaching and learning, CET4 (College English Test Band-4) exerts both beneficial and harmful effects on English education. Conducted respectively from the perspectives of teaching and learning attitude, materials and strategies, the study is mainly aimed to explore the possible washback effects of the new CET4 listening subtest on college English teaching and learning. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted to research on 10 English teachers and 50 students from Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology. The findings reveal that the new CET-LT has made satisfactory innovations in test format and input materials, and it has more beneficial washback effects on college English teaching and learning. However, the phenomenon of “teaching and learning to test” still exists in our educational practice, which affects the efficiency of EFL teaching and learning in China.

**Keywords:** listening subtest; the new CET-4; washback effects

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Research background**

CET 4 is a “criterion-related norm-referenced test” (Yang & Weir 1998) which is intended to supervise the implementation of Syllabus and diagnose the strength and weakness in college English teaching and learning.

With the process of China’s modernization, more and more qualified personnel with English proficiency are required to meet the social needs. The revised syllabus (2004) stated the goal as: “College English teaching aims to develop the students’ overall ability to use English, especially listening and speaking ability, so that the students are capable of effectively exchanging information in both verbal and written forms of the target language...” It can be clearly seen from the new edition of syllabus that the emphasis of college English teaching has been shifted from “linguistic knowledge” to “communicative ability”. To guarantee the implementation of such a teaching objective, the Designing Committee of National College English Test (DCNCET) has reformed CET 4 in June, 2005.

The new CET 4 had been put into practice in only 180 chosen universities since June of 2006, and then spread to all universities and colleges in 2007. It has been implemented for 15 years so far. Compared with the traditional CET 4, it has been improved in various aspects. The most eminent innovation is made in the component of listening comprehension, which embraces varieties of test tasks, including the listening of short conversation, long conversation, short passage and compound dictation. In addition, the weight of the listening comprehension test of CET 4 becomes more and more significant, increasing to 35% of the total weight. Since the communicative language competence has been attached with great importance, assessment of listening comprehension has become more communication-oriented, which is naturally reflected in the classroom listening teaching. What is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught, which is regarded as washback in the field of education.

Washback, the influence of test on language teaching and learning, has been realized by the experts on testing for a long time, but the empirical studies of washback haven't been conducted until in recent decades. The research of washback in the mainland of China is mainly concentrated on CET except a few articles introducing overseas theories of washback in language testing, and others researching into the washback of TEM and NMET. Though College English teaching reform and CET reform have been undergoing over ten years, and there have been some empirical researches about the washback effect of old CET4, few researches have been done about the washback effect of the new CET4, which is of great importance to test innovators.

## 1.2 Research significance and purpose

The study was undertaken to identify the negative and positive effects of the new CET4 listening subtest and to find out the way to foster positive washback effects and reduce negative washback effects to some extent. The research questions to be addressed in the study are as follows:

- a. To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence the goals of teachers' teaching and students' learning?
- b. To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence what teachers teach and students learn?
- c. To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence how teachers teach and students learn?

The methodological techniques employed in the investigation are questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews. Analysis, findings and implications are based on the data arising from these research methods.

## 2. Theoretical foundation and literature review

### 2.1 Definitions of Washback

It's a commonplace phenomenon in education that testing influences teaching and learning (Anderson & Wall, 1993). This is referred to as washback in the language testing theory. Many linguists have explained this term in their works. Buck (1988) gives his definition to washback as the influence of tests on classroom activities. He mentions that both teachers and students tend to tailor their teaching and learning activities to the demands of tests, especially for high-stakes tests, because the scores of such tests usually make a decisive effect on the lives of students along with their teachers.

Differing from Buck, Hughes (1989)' explanation of washback stresses whether the washback is beneficial or harmful and in what conditions they occur respectively. He defines washback as the effect of testing on teaching and learning. According to him, teaching and learning will be dominated by testing, especially when teachers and students are preparing for the important test. If the test materials or testing approaches are at variance with the objectives of the course, it is likely to make harmful washback on both teaching and learning.

Shohamy (1992) also mentions that language tests affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context. Such an effect is regarded as washback. Like Buck, she underlines that washback is the result of the strong authority of external testing.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) extends the range of the definition of washback. They believe washback is a more complex phenomenon than simply the effect of a test on teaching and learning. They feel that the washback of a test works at two levels, a micro level, in terms of the individuals, and a macro level, in terms of the educational system or society.

Stephen Andrews, John Fullilove, Yama Wong (2002) agree with Bachman and Palmer. They identify washback as the effects of tests on teaching and learning, the educational system and the various stakes holders in the process of education.

To summarize, there is a general agreement on the definition of washback: it is the influence of the test rather than the test itself that should be focused by the research. The little divergence in those definitions is what area the washback study should be outlined in. In this study, we will follow Alderson & Wall's definition and emphasize the influence of the test on the specific process of teaching and learning.

### 2.2 Theoretical Frameworks for Washback Studies

It is easy to have a basic notion of washback. But how washback works is far more complicated than it seems to be. In order to make it clear, researchers have made in-depth inquiries into washback working mechanisms to form a good theoretical foundations for the later studies.

### 2.2.1 Alderson and Wall's Washback Hypotheses

By adopting a dichotomy approach, Alderson and Wall (1993) bring forward 15 hypotheses to specify the washback working mechanisms which focus the influence of testing on teaching and learning, and on the subjects of teachers and students. Their hypotheses are as follows:

- 1) A test will influence teaching.
- 2) A test will influence learning.
- 3) A test will influence what teachers teach.
- 4) A test will influence how teachers teach.
- 5) A test will influence what learners learn.
- 6) A test will influence how learners learn.
- 7) A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching.
- 8) A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning.
- 9) A test will influence the degree and the depth of teaching.
- 10) A test will influence the degree and the depth of learning.
- 11) A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc, of teaching and learning.
- 12) Tests that have important consequences will have washback.
- 13) Tests that do not have important consequences will not have washback.
- 14) Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers.
- 15) Tests will have washback for some learners and some teachers, but not for others. (Alderson & Wall, 1993, pp. 120-121)

Of those hypotheses, six (1, 3, 4, 7, 9 and 11) relate to teaching and six (2, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 11) relate to learning. To be more exact, they concern the aspects of content, methods, rate and sequence, degree and depth, and attitudes, etc.; the rest (12, 13, 14, and 15) are about the intensity of washback, which varies with the importance of the test consequences and the ratio of subjects that the test affects.

Later, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) found that the simple existence of a test is not bound to effect washback. Other factors, such as teaching and learning conception, are needed to guarantee the working of washback. So they added one more to the 15 washback hypotheses "tests will have different amounts and types of washback on some teachers and learners than on other teachers and learners." They suggested that the amounts and types of washback vary with test-takers' conceptions — whether they are willing to innovate to find appropriate methods for test preparation.

### 2.2.2 Hughes' Basic Model of Washback

Different from Alderson and Wall's dichotomy approach to study washback, whose focus is on micro aspects of teaching and learning that may be influenced by tests, Hughes (1989) explores the mechanism of washback by taking trichotomy way to make a distinction between washback on the participants, the process and the products in teaching and learning. The advantage of Hughes' model is to expose the complex mechanism specifically in actual teaching and learning practices. Participants refer to students, teachers, school administrators, textbook editors, etc. Products involve changes in teaching methodology and learning strategy, syllabus designing, textbook writing, the use of test-taking techniques, and so on.

Based on the combination of Alderson and Wall's Hypotheses and Hughes' PPP trichotomy model, Bailey (1996) depicts a basic model of washback, which was the result of supplying "test-derived information" to the test-takers, and "washback to the program", which was the result of supplying information to all of the other participants.

Both Alderson & wall's dichotomy and Hughes' trichotomy attempt to outline the area of washback study. Alderson & Wall's Washback Hypothesis assumes that washback involves two parties and two processes: teachers and students, teaching and learning. Hughes' Basic model adds to the theoretical discussion by making a distinction between washback on the participants, the processes and the products of an educational system. Besides teachers and students, materials writers, curriculum designers and researchers are also involved in his theoretical framework.

### 2.2.3 Prodromous' Overt-covert Washback

Different from the researchers before, Prodromou (1995) prefers “backwash effect” rather than “washback” to refer to the direct or indirect effect of tests on teaching and learning. And he studies backwash from a new angle by classifying it into two trends: overt backwash and covert backwash. The overt washback refers to the explicit consequences of testing which are easily identified, while the covert washback means implicit consequences which are too elusive to present exactly.

The overt washback can be seen in teachers and students' actual practices to deal with a test. Much preparation will be done in order to pass examinations. For example, doing simulated test papers, replicating the exercises favored in the particular test in terms of both test materials and test patterns.

The covert washback is often an unconscious process, which reflects certain pedagogic principles: the role of classroom management, the relationship between learners and teachers, students' learning strategy and so on.

The present study applies the distinction between “overt” washback and “covert” washback as the basic guideline to conduct the classroom observation, in order to perceive what really happens to learning process in the classroom.

### 2.3 Previous Empirical Studies of Washback

The theoretical discussions are followed by empirical studies on the washback of different types of tests in different parts of world.

Table 1 is the summary of the influential empirical washback studies and their major findings abroad.

Researcher(s) & Time	Test	Purpose	Methodology	Major Findings
Wall & Alderson 1993	Sri Lanka O-level Exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To establish what impact an examination has.</li> <li>•To investigate the frequently asserted but rarely researched belief that tests have washback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Classroom Observation</li> <li>•Questionnaire Survey</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Tests have impact on what teachers teach but not on how they teach.</li> <li>•The exam is only one of the factors that affect how innovations succeed or fail. The nature of curricular innovation is much more complex than the advocates of washback seem to realize.</li> </ul>
Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman 1996	Israel ASL test & EFL oral test	•To examine the impact of two national tests over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Questionnaire Survey</li> <li>•Interview</li> <li>•Document analysis</li> </ul>	•Washback varies over time, owing to many factors such as the status of the language and the use of the test.
Alderson & Hamp-Lyons 1996	USA TOEFL	•To see whether influence of TOEFL varies from teacher to teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Classroom Observation</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	•The TOEFL affects both what and how teachers teach, but the effect is not the same in degree or in kind from teacher to teacher.
Watanabe 1996	Japan University Entrance Examinations	•To see whether there is any connection between the exam and the prevalence of grammar-translation teaching	•Classroom Observation	•Teacher factors, such as educational background, personal beliefs and teaching experience may outweigh the possible effect of the entrance examinations.
Cheng, Liying. 1997	Hong Kong The revised	•To investigate how a change in a	•Classroom Observation	•The change could press teachers to change

	HKCEE in English	high-stakes public examination might influence classroom teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Questionnaire Survey</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	classroom activities, but it has not changed their belief and attitudes towards teaching and learning.
Andrews, Fullilove & Wong 2002	Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary (AS) 'Use of English' (UE) oral exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To probe into the effects of changes to high-stakes tests on the performance of those who take them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Oral Exam Observation</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The introduction of the UE Oral is exerting some influence on students' performance in spoken English, and the impact of the test on student performance is delayed.</li> <li>•The precise nature of the washback seems to vary from student to student.</li> </ul>
Read and Hayes 2003	New Zealand IELTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To probe the impact of IELTS on the preparation of international students for tertiary study in New Zealand and various dimensions of the washback of IELTS.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Classroom Observation</li> <li>•Questionnaire Survey</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Teachers rely heavily on exam-preparation materials and pay much attention to the explanation of test-taking strategies.</li> </ul>
Green 2006	IELTS Academic Writing Module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To explore the influence of teacher priorities on learners preparing for a test of academic writing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Classroom Observation</li> <li>•Questionnaire Survey</li> <li>•Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Learner perceptions of course outcomes are affected by the course focus reported by teachers, but that relationship is not deterministic.</li> <li>•Although test preparation courses, as predicted by washback theory, do appear to cover a relatively narrow range of skills, there is evidence that narrow preparation strategies are not driven primarily by learner expectations.</li> </ul>

*Table 1 Summary of the influential empirical washback studies abroad*

From the table, we can see the influence of test on language teaching and learning has been realized by the experts on testing for a long time, but the empirical studies of washback haven't been conducted until in recent decades. Among them, we can find the contributions made by Alderson & Wall 1993, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman 1996, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons 1996, Cheng 1997 and so on. Their researches have focused on the following aspects: does washback exist; how does washback function; what are the factors influence washback; how to weaken negative effects and strengthen positive ones, etc. The tests under research are mainly nationwide foreign language examinations in researchers' own countries or the large-scale, international standardized tests, such as TOEFL, IELTS and University Entrance Examination, etc. The researchers often conduct questionnaires, class observations and interviews to collect their data.

Table 2 is the summary of the influential empirical washback studies and their major findings in China.

Researcher & Time	Test	Purpose	Methodology	Major Findings
Li Xiaoju 1990	Matriculation English Test (MET)	•To see whether the innovation in MET led to any change in English language teaching in the middle schools.	•Questionnaire Survey	•Changes have taken place in three different areas: teaching materials, the content of lessons, and activities outside the classroom.
He Chongzhou 1998	Test for English Majors TEM	To investigate the anticipated washback of the grammar test on the teaching of grammar.	•Analysis from test-designer's perspective	•The anticipated washback of the grammar test is beneficial to the teaching and learning of English majors.
Jin Yan 2000	CET-SET	To see how CE teachers and students perceive the exam and its implementation.	•Questionnaire Survey	•All examiners and most of the test takers see the design of the test in a favorable way.
Huang Dayong 2002	CET-4	To investigate the washback of the exam on CE teaching and learning.	•Classroom Observation •Questionnaire Survey •Interview	•CET 4 exerts more positive washback than negative washback on CE teaching and learning, which is contradictory to some criticisms of the test. •CET-4 exerts influence on various aspects of CE teaching and learning, including teachers' methods, contents, materials, attitudes, time allotment and students' motivation, learning strategies and the selection of materials. •The skill practiced, materials used, and activities organized in the classes of test-oriented are tailored to assist the students to pass the exam. •Different types of colleges and universities experience different intensity of CET-4 washback.
Qi Luxia 2004	National Matriculation English Test (NMET)	•To investigate the impact of the exam in China	•Classroom Observation •Questionnaire Survey	•The NEMT has considerable impact on materials and learning activities but not the kind of influence that is envisaged by its designers.
Gu Xiangdong 2007	CET-4 & CET-6	•To investigate the relationship between CET and CE teaching and learning.	•Classroom Observation •Questionnaire Survey •Interview •analysis of documents	•Most CET stakeholders think highly of the test, especially the design, administration, marking and the measures newly adopted. •CET is more influential on teaching content, teaching pace and attitudes towards teaching, but less influential on teaching

				<p>methods.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The influence varies from university to university, from grade to grade and from teacher to teacher.</li> <li>•Teacher factors, such as teachers' devotion to work and their English proficiency, may outweigh the effect of the test on CE classroom teaching and learning.</li> </ul>
Cai Jigang 2009	IB CET-4 & IB CET-6	•To investigate the gap between the intended and actual washback of the IB CET	• Questionnaire Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•IB CET is beneficial for the innovation of teaching and learning mode</li> <li>•IB CET helps to cultivate students' sustainable learning ability.</li> </ul>

*Table 2 Summary of the influential empirical washback studies in China*

As stated above, Chinese scholars' studies on washback mainly concentrate on whether tests have brought positive or negative effects on teaching, learning and even the educational system. Nevertheless, the question which is rarely further studied lies in whether a particular test succeeds in achieving test constructors' intentions?

Though College English teaching reform and CET innovation have been undergoing over ten years, and the IB CET-4 has been undergoing (on trial) experimentation for two years and is to be implemented nationwide in the near future, the present author thinks it is high time to do some immediate research in this field, to investigate how successful and unsuccessful the innovated test is in achieving its goal. The present research is conducted to bridge the gap between test constructors and test takers, thereby leads to an improvement of CET and College English teaching and learning.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research questions

The overall objectives of the present study are to collect data on the washback effects of the new CET 4, to identify its negative and positive effects and to find the way to foster positive washback effects and reduce negative washback effects to some extent. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence the goals of teachers' teaching and students' learning?
- To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence what teachers teach and students learn?
- To what extent does the new CET4 listening test influence how teachers teach and students learn?

#### 3.2 Participants

The subjects of this study included 10 English teachers and 50 students from Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology. The teachers who were invited to complete the questionnaires are of different ages with different teaching experiences. 70% of the teachers investigated had taught college English for more than five years. The students were of non-English major undergraduates from Grade 2021 and all of them had ever taken part in the New CET 4.

#### 3.3 Instruments

Washback effects do not manifest themselves, but must be inferred from teachers' and students' statements and their behaviors. As a result, data will be collected to explain the washback effects. Basically, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted in the research. Data was collected through questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews. In this study, questionnaires were the main research instruments, while classroom observations and interviews served as indispensable supplementary tools. These methods complemented each other in this research.

### 3.3.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires have been designed for both CE teachers and students mainly based on “Washback Hypotheses” and “Basic Model of Washback” mentioned in the previous part. The teacher’s questionnaire is made up of two parts. Part one is about personal information including college, teaching years, gender, highest academic degree and the grade the teacher is teaching. Part two is the main body including 8 items. The following variables have been addressed from teachers’ point of view: the aspects of English listening teaching influenced by CET 4 listening, the nature of the influence, teaching methods, teaching objective, CET 4 listening preparation, CET 4 listening reform and new listening test methods, merits and demerits of CET 4 listening, language materials and teaching time allotment.

The student’s questionnaire is similar to the teacher’s questionnaire in terms of basic model. There are altogether two parts with 23 items.

### 3.3.2. Interviews

The interviews are done after the preliminary results of questionnaire survey are obtained. They are conducted to obtain the in-depth data about what and how teachers and students actually do in the classroom and to help interpret the data collected by the quantitative methodology.

The interviews are held with the two teachers in whose classes’ questionnaire survey are carried out. The interview questions are concerned with the following variables: university policies concerning CET 4; general teaching practice such as teaching objectives and materials; college English teachers’ attitude towards the changes of CET4 listening subtest. Some of the students in the classes are also interviewed so as to gain complementary data for a better understanding and a better analysis of classroom observations. Their interview questions are similar to those of teachers: university policies concerning CET 4; general learning practice such as learning objectives and materials; their attitude towards the changes of CET4 listening test. The interviews with those teachers are held mainly at class intervals while the ones with students are conducted during the time for their extracurricular activities. The interviews are held in an informal way so as to make the interviewees feel at ease and speak up their minds frankly. Before the interviews begin, the researcher explains the purpose of the study to all the subjects. All the interviews are done in Chinese and note down manually. They are analyzed afterwards.

### 3.3.3. Classroom observations

Classroom observations have been carried out in CE listening classes of Grade 2021. The purpose of the observations is to perceive washback in classroom activities, and watch whether interviewees’ words are in line with their behaviors. All the observations were noted down, which made the original data accessible for later inspection.

### 3.3.4. Data collection and analysis

All data for the study was collected before the end of November, 2022. With application of triangulation, the reliable and valid data was drawn to its greatest extent. Multiple-choice questions were tallied to produce frequencies for each item. In terms of scaled questions, means, medians, standard deviation and frequency were analyzed was calculated by Microsoft Excel 2019. Notes from interviews were categorized and findings from classroom observations were described.

To make the questionnaires in the present survey covered as many relevant aspects as possible and to fully reflected the washback effect of the new CET 4 on English teaching and learning, the author referred to current literature both at home and abroad. Theoretically, the questionnaires were designed based on the three washback theories introduced in part I.

In order to achieve better reliability and validity of the questionnaires, the drafts of the students’ questionnaires and the teachers’ questionnaires were both pre-tested. Two students and two teachers were invited, separately, to do the questionnaires in order to see whether some items needed to be deleted, added, modified or recorded, whether instructions needed to be reworded or modified, and whether printing style needed to be improved. Modification where necessary were made based on the feedbacks from pre-tests. In addition, the interviews were held in manner that made the interviewees feel at ease and speak up their minds frankly.



An important source of threat to reliability and validity of observation data is that the presence of a “stranger” in the classroom might change the behavior of the teachers and students under observation, that is, the effect of the observer on what is observed. To minimize the possible negative effects from observer, every effort was made to make sure that the normal teaching and learning process was not disturbed.

**4. Results and discussion**

**4.1 Results of questionnaires**

With the help of EXCEL, the following results have come out in accordance with survey data.

a. General perceptions of CET-4 listening washback in CE listening teaching and learning.

With the definitions of washback, both teachers and students have given their general perceptions of positive and negative washback effects on attitudes, objective, content, quality, schedule and sequence, choice of materials and methods.

Here are four figures to show their general perceptions.

Totally positive	Totally negative	Positive> Negative	Negative >Positive	No influence
4.3 %	0%	66.9 %	23.8%	5%

*Table 3 The Overall Nature of CET-4 Listening Washback in Listening Teaching*

Totally positive	Totally negative	Positive> Negative	Negative >Positive	No influence
3.3 %	5%	48%	34.3 %	9 .3%

*Table 4 The Overall Nature of CET 4 listening Washback in Listening Learning*

Influence of CET4 on	Totally positive	Totally negative	Positive> Negative	Negative >Positive	No influence
Teaching objective	5.7 %	0%	61.4%	22.9%	10%
Teaching content	6.3%	5%	64.3%	21.4%	3%
Teaching methods	10%	1.4%	61%	20%	7.6%
Teaching attitudes	7.3 %	7%	52.9%	27.1%	5 .7%
Teaching quality	8%	5%	57.1%	22.9%	7%
Teaching materials	7 %	4.3%	50%	31.4%	7.3%
Teaching schedule and sequence	10%	5 .7%	63.6%	15%	5.7%

*Table 5 The Aspects of Teaching Influenced by CET 4 Listening*

Influence of CET4 on	Totally positive	Totally negative	Positive> Negative	Negative >Positive	No influence
Learning objective	7.3 %	5%	58%	20.4%	9.3%
Learning content	6.3%	2.3%	58%	27.3%	6.3%
Learning methods	12.7%	1%	59.7%	21.3%	5.3%
Learning materials	7 %	1.3%	48%	31.3%	13%
Learning interest	12.7%	1%	59.7%	11.3%	5.3%

Learning level	21 %	1.3%	47.3%	24.3%	6%
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Table 6 The Aspects of **Learning** Influenced by CET-4 Listening

As the data from teacher’s questionnaires shows, 95 % of teachers admit that CET 4 listening has certain influence on their listening teaching, and only 5% of them think such test has no influence. As far as the overall nature of the washback is concerned, 66.9% of the teachers believe that CET 4 listening exerts more positive effect than negative effect on CE listening teaching, while 23.8% of the teachers agree that CET 4 exerts more negative effect than positive effect on CE listening teaching, as is indicated in Table 1.

As the data from student’s questionnaires shows, 90.7 % of students admit that CET 4 listening has certain influence on their learning, and only 9.3 % of them think such test has no influence. When asked whether they agree on abolishing testing, 73.3 % of students agree on abolishing it, 26.7 % of them disagree on abolishing it.

As for the aspects of listening teaching influenced by CET 4 listening (shown in Table 5), we can see that the test has generated more positive washback than negative washback in CE listening and teaching. Over 60% of teachers think CET 4 listening has more positive influence on their teaching objective, content, methods, schedule and sequence. More than half of teachers believe that CET 4 listening exerts more positive influence on teaching attitudes and materials. In terms of teaching quality, 57.1% of teachers believe positive influence exceeds negative influence.

As far as the overall nature of the washback is concerned, over 58% of the students believe that CET-4 listening exerts more positive effect than negative effect on CE learning in the respects of objective, content methods and interest. There is one thing worthwhile to mention: 59.7% of students believe that the new CET4-LT helps to increase their interest on learning. In terms of learning materials and learning level, only nearly half of the students think that the new CET 4 listening exerts more positive effect than negative effect on CE learning, as is indicated in Table 4. The figures indicate that students have recognized the purpose and function of testing, but they don’t think CET 4 functions properly and effectively to promote their study and improve their listening level. This point can also be seen in the following answers. Only 55.7% of students agree that CET 4 certificate can prove students’ real language proficiency and communicative competence to some degree. 6.3% of students take CET 4 for graduation diploma, 59% take CET 4 for a good job, and 33.7% of students regard the test as a chance to test their English proficiency.

Compared with the data from teacher’s questionnaires, 44% of students believe CET 4 listening has certain influence on their listening practice and 40% of students think their teachers’ listening teaching has also been influenced, and the specific aspects influenced by CET 4 listening, which is also displayed in the later interviews.

The above are general viewpoints of washback effects on CE listening teaching and learning. The followings are the analysis of other aspects.

Merits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) CET listening test is one method of measuring test takers’ listening ability. And the measurement and evaluation is relatively objective, standardized and comprehensive.</li> <li>2) CET-4 listening makes the university administrator and test takers attach importance to CELTL.</li> <li>3) CET 4 listening stimulates and induce CE teachers and students to teach and learn well.</li> <li>4) There are various kinds of listening test formats in CET 4 listening, and the difficulty is moderate.</li> <li>5) CET-4 listening is a large-scaled, standardized and authoritative test</li> <li>6) CET listening can measure test-takers’ real listening competence objectively. That is to say, to improve their practical use ability is encouraged.</li> <li>7) CET listening is added in authentic and natural spoken materials.</li> </ol>
Demerits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) CET-4 listening induces test-oriented teaching phenomena. CET4 listening becomes the common goal of both teachers and students while the goal set by the syllabus-the improvement of students’ English listening proficiency, especially their communicative competence, is overlooked to some extent.</li> <li>2) CET-4 listening is a hindrance to the “quality-oriented education” policy.</li> </ol>

	CET-4 listening makes teachers and students teach to test and learn to test instrumentally and mechanically, which inhibits their creativity, enthusiasm and the innovation in English education.
suggestions	1) Innovations in the listening test design: a) more subjective, communicative and practical test items, less objective test items; b) Make listening and speaking integrated 2) Reform teaching methods, and use learner-centered CA in listening teaching to develop students' listening proficiency in natural communication. 3) Teachers' professional development should be attached more significance.

Table 7 Merits, Demerits and Suggestions (*Teacher's view*)

#### b. Learning Practice

The data from student's questionnaires shows that 19% of students say they study English in order to find a satisfying job, 73% study English for CET 4, and only 8% study English for communication. When asked about what kinds of English skills they want to improve most, 65.3% of students choose speaking, 15.7% choose listening, 12.3% choose writing, and only 6.7% choose reading.

In comparison with 90% of teachers, only 54.7% of students agree that their teachers' listening teaching objective is to cultivate students' communicative competence, 12% of students think helping students pass CET 4 is their teachers' primary concern, 24% believe their teachers' objective is to finish the teaching task, and only 9.3% choose no definite teaching goal. As for current listening teaching, 71.3% of students think that they are not satisfied with it. They claim that the main problem teachers meet in current listening teaching is lack of listening training, listening techniques and passage comprehension competence.

In terms of listening class activities, as Table 8 shows, only 20% of students always employ pre-teaching new words, phrases and prediction, 16% always conduct drawing and constructing activities, and 20% or 30% of students sometimes develop the two kinds of activities. As for repetition and recall, only 35% of students sometimes conduct it, and 34% of students sometimes employ dictation, speaking and writing after-listening. More than 60% of students often do mock tests and check answers in listening class.

Activities	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Pre-teaching new words, Phrases & prediction	20%	28%	30%	7%	15%
Doing mock tests and checking	13%	68%	16%	3%	0%
Drawing & constructing	16%	21%	20%	40%	3%
Repetition & recall	24%	29%	35%	8%	4%
Dictation, speaking, writing After-listening	12%	25%	34%	26%	3%
Watching original movies	12%	22%	37%	22%	7%

Table 8 Frequency of Listening Class Activities

The figures from student's questionnaires indicate that 10% of students focus on vocabulary and grammar in their English study, 18.3% of students spend most of time on reading and writing, 26.7% spend their time on listening and speaking, and 45% of students lay equal emphasis on the three aspects. For learning materials, when asked about what your learning reference books include besides textbooks, 58% of students choose CET 4 reference books and tapes, 14.7% choose references books and tapes for textbooks, and the rest of them choose English movies, music, VOA and BBC.

As for the main factors of affecting listening performance, 43.3% answer pronunciation and vocabulary, 23% answer English usage and cultural background, 15.3% answer listening techniques, and the rest of them answer grammatical structure and specialized knowledge.

#### c. CET 4 listening reform and new format

87 % of students are in favor of CET 4 listening reform, and most of the students are not content with the current listening teaching. 54.3% think CE listening teaching reform should contact with listening test reform. In addition, 59 % of students believe the implementation of communicative testing can promote CET to lay emphasis on students' communicative competence.

As for CET 4 new format, 43 % of students believe that the format and the quality of new CET 4 listening test papers are scientific and desirable. The new format indicates the variety and freshness of CET-4 listening, but the amount of new format is too large, they are still unfit for it at present, and 51% of students think language materials in CET-4 listening are lack of authenticity. When asked whether the increase of CET 4 listening ratio and new format have influence on their test techniques and listening preparation, 78.7 % answer they have great influence. And 43.3 % of students believe the subjective part, namely spot or compound dictation, and answering questions can better reflect test takers' English listening ability than the objective part. The sharp contrast of percentage may result from the fact that students are required to write something, which is more difficult for them to get higher scores.

## 4.2 Results of classroom observations

The information from the questionnaires enables us to have a bird's view of the washback effects of CET 4 on college English teaching and learning, and class observations will help us to gather further information of the washback effects on CET 4 and to find out whether teachers and learners do what they said in the questionnaires of classroom activities.

Classroom observations were carried out in two classes which were chosen randomly and labeled A and B for the privacy of the participants. Both the two classes were of grade 2021 with the New College English as their textbook. The English teachers in each class were named teacher A and teacher B accordingly. They were all females. Teacher A and teacher B had taught English for more than five years. The observations mainly covered the following aspects: teaching and learning materials; contents; attitude; methods; classroom activities and time allotment.

The results had been summarized as follows:

Teacher A's class was always very active and interesting, because she designed many interactive activities to encourage students to participate in the process of teaching and the students in her class were all very cooperative with high spirit of learning English. She always asked one student to give a presentation with a free topic at the beginning of every class, and then the other students could ask any question towards him or her in English, the teacher would ask some interesting questions as well and the performance would be scored by the teacher as a part of the final examination, and this part always took no more than 10 minutes. After the student's presentation, she always asked her students to review the topics and contents which were listened to last class, and gave a leading to the following topic and contents, sometimes the background knowledge related with the topic was introduced, and meanwhile she was inclined to explain the vocabulary. The grammar was not explained too much during her classes. After listening to the materials, she always asked her students to conclude the general idea. She tended to choose the special English from VOA as well as the exercises in the college English textbook and she always encouraged her students to listen to the campus English radio and choose the listening materials that provided on the Internet, and she often took a classroom quiz of speaking and listening. As to the CET 4, she would ask the students to do some mock tests as her students have required. Although teacher A paid attention to the students' communicative abilities, there's not much chance for the students to open their mouth during the class except the presentation, which could not cover all of the students, except some active students. The students attached more importance to the CET 4 than the teacher in Class A.

Teacher B chose duty report as the warming-up activities for her classes, she designed different topics which closely related with students' daily lives, and chose one of them each week as the focus of students' report, all the students should prepare for it before the class and she would ask some students to present their ideas before the class, all the students in her class seemed very nervous at that time. During the teaching process, she used English as the main tool and asked her students to speak as much English as possible.

She usually applied the listening materials in the previous CET 4 besides the listening exercises in the text book. The attitude of students in teacher B' class was more serious. The teacher has an awareness of the importance to improve the students' communicative abilities and tried various activities to implement it, however, many of the students just considered the communicative activities such as duty report as tasks which would add score to their final examination. Therefore, there was a gap between the teacher's wish and the students' practical learning attitude. She liked to explain the usage of new words in sentences and context, and asked students to recite the sentences instead of remembering the single words.

The observations in their listening class showed that the second semester of Grade 2021 was generally cut into two halves. The first half was used to cover the textbook or part of the content in the textbook, and the second half was arranged to prepare for CET 4. During the first half period, the classes were basically textbook-oriented. For this period of time, they adopted communicative approach in listening classes. However, in the second half semester, CE listening classes were generally CET oriented. The most popular activity in these classes was teacher's briefing (checking and explaining the answers) on the mock listening test paper.

### 4.3 Results of interviews

The interviews were conducted with five teachers, two of them were the teachers whose classes were observed and the other three were the teachers who helped to finish the teacher's questionnaire. The interview covered the following aspects: college English teachers' awareness of the new CET 4, their attitudes towards the quality of the new CET 4, their attitudes towards the new scoring system, teaching objectives, contents, materials and methods used in the classes.

The interview questions were semi-structural listed below:

- a. Do you know the detailed contents, format and scoring system of the new CET 4 listening test? What do you think of the quality of the test?
- b. In what aspects and to what extent does the new CET 4-LT influenced your teaching?
- c. In terms of the teaching contents (materials, objectives, methods, time allotment), how have these aspects been influenced in your class?

The messages from the interviews can be summarized as follows:

- a. All the interviewed teachers had a good understanding of the content, format and scoring system of the new CET 4-LT, and they were quite clear that greater importance should be attached to listening. Most of them believed that the new CET 4-LT could better reflect the students' listening abilities for they thought that more authentic materials and subjective questions (compound dictation) were added to the listening comprehension part, which helps to test the students' communicative listening competence. Two teachers' statements may well represent most teachers' views: "The listening materials were more authentic and more western culture and customs had been embodied in the new CET4-LT, so I think the new CET-4 can better reflect a student's English level" "The increase of the subject items and the decrease of the objective items require higher language abilities of the candidates but the test skills. And the students in my class who got high marks in the new CET-4 are all the students who are really good at English."
- b. Most of the teachers admitted that their classroom teaching had been influenced by the new CET 4 more or less. As to the aspects influenced by the CET 4, all of the interviewed teachers chose the teaching contents, teaching objectives and teaching methods as the three main ones. One of the teachers thought that her teaching contents were influenced most, with the increase of the compound dictation. She paid more attention to training students' abilities to catch the main idea of each sentence, and had more consciousness of developing students' writing skills. She often encouraged her students to listen to daily news on radio or cctv-9 and to imitate the similar conversation of borrowing books, TV interviewing, buying plane tickets and so on.

Teaching objectives had been transformed from test-oriented to communicative ability-oriented. All the teachers tried to design different kinds of communicative activities to improve the students' communicative competence, such as role plays, duty report, and presentation, group discussion and so on. However, many teachers said that the students were not very enthusiastic about these activities, some of them even refused to open their mouths to speak any English. With regard to the teaching methods, all of the teachers confessed that their class had been "student-centered" instead of "teacher-centered", they tried various ways to arouse the students' interest of learning English and make them to be the leader of the class, however, the actual situation were always not as satisfactory as they wished because the time for every class were so limited and they had the uniform and fixed teaching tasks to be finished every term.

They emphasized the learning autonomy and tried different ways to cultivate students' self-learning abilities, but the effects were not obvious, according to the interviewed teachers.

The other aspects such as the selection of the teaching materials, the rate and sequence of teaching, the teaching attitude and teaching quality were all influenced to some extent. As one teacher said, "all these aspects are closely related, one was influenced, and the others must be affected as well."

c. In terms of the training of the basic language skills, the most influenced parts were the listening and reading according to the English teachers who accepted the interviews. All of the teachers attached great importance to listening as it occupies a comparative large proportion of the CET 4 score and it is also one of the communicative abilities required in the teaching syllabus. The teachers often asked the students to listen to the VOA or BBC to practice their listening, and chose some longer conversations and materials with different accents to their students as the practice materials for listening comprehension.

Similar to the interview questions for the teachers, the students' interviews are covering the following aspects: students' awareness of the new CET 4, their attitudes towards the quality of the new CET 4-LT, learning objectives, contents, materials and methods used in the class.

The interview questions are listed as follows:

- a. Do you know the detailed contents and format of the new CET4-LT? What do you think of the quality of the new CET4-LT?
- b. In what aspects and to what extent does the new CET 4-LT influenced your English listening learning?
- c. In terms of the learning contents (materials, objectives, methods, time allotment) how have these aspects been influenced in your class?

The messages from the students' interviews can be summarized as follows:

- a. Most of the students confessed that they knew the contents and format of the new CET4-LT, because all of them had taken part in the CET 4. "I am clear about the content and format of the new CET-4. The proportion of the listening has been raised to 35% of the total weight, and the long conversations and authentic materials were required while the fast reading has been added to the reading comprehension part". Some other students stated that they knew the change of the CET 4-LT, but didn't have a very clear idea of the changes of the proportion for every part and the numbers of the items.

As to the quality of the CET4-LT, most of the students thought that it could reflect the student's actual language abilities to a large extent. One of the student's ideas might mirrored their overall views, "I think the new CET4-LT has a good quality that can exam a student's listening comprehension level, because it covers a lot of authentic materials and more emphasize the communicative function. And I notice that my classmates who got high score in the CET4-LT do have high English level. What's more, we can know our advantages and disadvantages from the scores of the CET-4."

b. The influenced aspects, according to the interviewed students, were the learning contents and learning methods. Most of the students said that they would focus on listening comprehension part, since it occupies 35% the total weight. The teachers paid much attention to the communicative and authentic topics and conversations very much, which changed the students' learning content as well. The students also care for the training of their own writing skills which helps them to perform well in the compound dictation. With regard to the learning methods, different students have different ways, but most of them emphasized the importance of self-learning after class, as they said, "more practice make perfect, and there's no short-cut in English study, you should learn hard, then you'll be return well."

c. According to the interviewed students, the listening comprehension was the most influenced aspect of learning contents. Listening and speaking were the most boring and the hardest works for Chinese students' English learning. The students always spent much time on practicing their listening comprehension for it had been emphasized by the new CET 4 and the newly published College English Curriculum Requirements. One student stated like this, "I spent most time on the listening because it is more demanding than before in the CET-4. And English is a kind of communicative instrument, so the listening is the primary abilities that an English learner should train. If you want to communicate with the foreigners, you should understand what he says first, and then you can communicate with them."

To sum up, the interviews with college English teachers and students have further supplemented the research results in the questionnaires and classroom observations and offered more detailed information on the teachers and students' attitudes towards CET 4 and their inner thoughts about it.

## **.5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Major findings and pedagogical implications**

Findings in this study prove that CET 4 listening has crucial influence on CELTL, and such influence is both positive and negative. The positive washback is mainly embodied in the following aspects:

- a. CET 4 listening makes the university administrators and the test-takers attach great importance to CE listening teaching and learning.
- b. CET 4 listening test is one method of measuring test-takers' listening ability. And the measurement and evaluation are relatively objective, standardized and comprehensive. Students have a channel to learn about their strengths and weaknesses in English study, and their position and English listening level among other test-takers. Employers also have a recruitment standard to choose the talents they need.
- c. CET 4 listening stimulates and induces CE teachers and students to teach and learn well.
- d. CET 4 listening has made great contribution to improving the social status and teaching quality of CET4 as a whole in the past 20 years.
- e. CET4 listening encourages the innovations of teaching syllabus and the publishing of communicative oriented instructional materials.
- f. CET listening promotes students to employ more scientific and efficient learning strategies.

However, in spite of the great contribution of CET 4 listening to the improvement of CELTL, negative influence of CET 4 listening has emerged especially in the recent years, which is manifested in these aspects:

- a. CET 4 Listening induces test-oriented phenomena. CET 4 listening becomes the common goal of both teachers and students while the goal set by the syllabus-the improvement of students' English listening communicative competence, is proficiency, especially their communicative competence, is overlooked to some extent.
- b. CET 4 listening is a hindrance to the "quality-oriented education" policy. CET 4 listening makes teachers and students teach to test and learn to test instrumentally and mechanically, which inhibits their creativity, enthusiasm and the innovations in English education.
- c. CET 4 (including the listening part) makes students suffer from great anxiety, stress and fear, for they can't get their graduation diploma without passing the test.
- d. CET 4 listening preparation suspends the normal teaching, and students focus on mock listening tests instead of English listening textbooks. It also disturbs students' study on other subjects.
- e. New CET 4 listening test formats give variety and freshness to CET 4 listening, but more formats with higher validity are still needed to improve the quality of the test.

To sum up, from the perspective of teaching and learning attitude, both teachers and students who take part in the new CET4 test have a clear goal, and they both admit that the preparation of the test and the process of improving the listening ability are not contradictory.

From the perspective of teaching and learning materials, the new CET4 test imposes great restraints on teachers and students' selection. The new CET4 model tests are the main materials of teachers' teaching and students' learning in the preparing stage for the CET4.

From the perspective of teaching and learning strategies, the new CET4 listening test has effects on the improvement of teachers and students' understanding of listening comprehension, which contributes to build up their reasonable and efficient teaching and learning strategies.

Besides, based on the findings in this study and the general situations in China, we have put forward some proposals in an attempt to optimize positive washback and minimize the negative washback of CET 4 listening.

### **5.3 Limitations and suggestions for the future study**

What has been presented in the paper is only a tiny part in the enormous study of academic writing. The present research is far from being perfect because of subjective and objective limitations. The data analyzed in this paper is quite limited, further study will be needed to verify present findings.

The significance of the study lies in detailed observation and verification of working mechanism in CET 4 listening washback to arrest attentions of the Designing Committee of National College English Test (DONCET), university authorities, CE teachers and students to come to realize the current drawbacks and problems in CE listening testing and corresponding teaching and learning.

And we hope this study could be valuable in understanding washback and making full use of the positive washback of CET 4 listening testing to promote CELTL.

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