

ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING WITHIN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Lu Desheng^a and Liu Li^b

^a Faculty of Education, Sichuan Normal University, China; ^b Institute of Education and Social Studies, Palacký University in Olomouc, the Czech Republic

Monitoring student learning outcomes and school performance is multifaceted. It can include large-scale national, sub-national or international assessments, public examinations, school-based assessments and classroom assessments, which can be standardized or non-standardized (Clarke, 2011). In fact, the goal of various forms of assessment of all learners in formal and informal educational systems is to review the curriculum and pedagogy so as to strengthen teacher professional development and to bring other policy changes aimed at improving student performance (Sui-chu HO, 2012). National assessments provide rich information about learning outcomes according to nationally defined standards. One type of national-level assessment commonly practised is nationwide public examinations, which are often conducted at major transition points, such as from primary to secondary, from lower to upper secondary and from secondary to higher education or to the labour market (Sui-chu HO, 2012). However, public examinations involve higher stakes for students and schools, playing a crucial role in directing students' learning, determining their future careers as well as assessing school

effectiveness. This paper presents a discussion of student learning assessment in English as a foreign language (EFL) context China. It begins by reviewing Chinese examination-driven context, and then provides examples to illustrate the status of current student assessment and its changes.

The Examination-Driven Context

Public examination, namely, assessment for selection and certification has a two-thousand-year history in Mainland China, stretching back to the Han Dynasty (206 B. C. – 220 A.D.). In ancient Chinese society, class-consciousness was strong and many people from the lower classes had little chance to reach public office, much less to gain a position in the official court. Therefore, the imperial examinations which lasted for about 1,300 years in Chinese history before they were abolished in 1905 provided the only real opportunity for them to be selected as officials based on their intellectual achievement and talent rather than on birth (Cheng, 2010). Throughout Chinese history, examinations have been seen by the general public as ways of encouraging the development of talent, to upgrade the performance of schools and colleges, and to counter to some degree, nepotism, favoritism, and even outright corruption in the allocation of scarce opportunities (Cheng & Qi, 2006). That is to say, the long history of the imperial examinations has molded Chinese people holding a traditional point of view which trusting in the value of the examinations and regarding them as a fair means for everyone to success in life.

The examinations nowadays continue to serve as a magic wand, remain very powerful forces in China. A student starts to take examinations as early as the age of 4 years, with the

entrance test for kindergarten. Over the years in their primary education (ISCED level 1), secondary education (ISCED level 2 and 3) and university education (ISCED level 5 to 8)¹, students take numerous examinations at the school, municipal, provincial, and national levels. For students to be successful in school means taking numerous tests and examinations throughout their schooling. Major public examinations are required to enter lower and upper secondary schools, university, and postgraduate education. Then, examinations continue to be used for the selection of government officials, for the promotion of academics and professionals, and for obtaining better employment involving international communication. Among these examinations, English is used as the gatekeeper for these purposes (Cheng, 2008).

In current China, the most important public examination is the National College Entrance Examination (mostly, abbr. NCEE, or commonly known as “Gao Kao”), which is often nicknamed the “Footslog Bridge” to success. The NCEE is usually seen as the gatekeeper for formal higher education in China, although there are many ways to achieve higher education, such as via the Self-Taught Higher Education Examinations and the Higher Education for Adults. However, the NCEE is seen as the origin of examination-oriented school education because of its specific position in the educational system. Its strong washback leads to a situation commonly

¹ The ISCED is the reference classification for organizing educational programmes and related qualifications by education levels and fields. More details see Revision of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011). Available from: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/EDUCATION/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx>

known as “what to examine, what to teach” (Yang, 1992) in secondary schools. For example, the subjects of geography and biology were grouped into optional subjects in the NCEE in an experiment in examination system reform in 1992; as a result, some upper secondary schools reduced the teaching hours or even cancelled the lessons of these two subjects. Although there has been a fierce debate around this examination on issues such as overloading students in one examination or neglecting their creativity and practical ability (Sui-chu HO, 2012). Many secondary school teachers are familiar with the textbooks and the examination syllabus but not the teaching curriculum. The exercises of each subject used in most schools follow the format of the examinations as well as the subjects are grouped into key subjects and regular subjects according to their weighting in the NCEE.

Two National English Examinations in an EFL context China

Brief Introduction of English Language Education and English Learning

In the last quarter century, English language education has been a subject of paramount importance in China. English language Education plays a key role in accordance with the Chinese government’s open-door policy and the urgent needs of Chinese society, and has been viewed by the Chinese leadership as having a vital role to play in national modernization and development (Ross, 1992).

In 1978, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued the first unified primary and secondary curriculum and the accompanying draft English syllabus (Hu, 2005). Foreign language education had been introduced to the curriculum from

Primary Grade 3 (Liu, 1993), and only a small minority (less than 5%) of primary and secondary students studied foreign languages other than English (Adamson, 2001). In fact, due to the lack of necessary resources in many schools, the curriculum introduced the foreign language education at Lower Secondary Grade 1 in poorly equipped schools (HERC, 1993). General, since the mid-1990s, English has been taught from Grade 3 in primary education (Cheng & Curtis, 2010), and it is tested as one of the three core subjects (the others are mathematics and Chinese language) for students to enter lower and upper secondary school. English is a compulsory subject in the NCEE for all types of universities and colleges. English is also an obligatory subject for all majors in Chinese universities and colleges as well as non-English majors are required to take the college English course for at least 2 years. University students often need to pass the College English Test which aims testing test-takers' English language proficiency to obtain a bachelor's degree. Apart from English as an academic requirement, English skills are tested for all those seeking promotion in governmental, educational, scientific research, medical, financial, business and other government-supported institutions (He, 2001). That is to say, being successful in the various English tests and examinations means one of the keys to success in life for many people in China, and also for many Chinese who wish to pursue their undergraduate and graduate education abroad, including the possibility of emigration.

In sum, proficiency in English can lead to a host of economic, social and educational opportunities for individuals; that is, it can provide access to both material resources and 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) for the betterment of personal well-being in the Chinese context.

The National Matriculation English Test (NMET)

Regarding the current national examination in China, the NCEE, which is the largest examination administered annually between June 7-9th, is taken by students at the end of ISCED level 3, their last year of upper secondary school. The examinations are mainly classified into two categories: science and liberal arts. Both of them include three core mandatory subjects: Chinese language, mathematics and a foreign language (usually English but may also be substituted by Japanese, Russian, German, French, or Spanish).

The National Matriculation English Test (NMET) is one of six foreign language tests in the university entrance examination, which was designed in 1991 and first used in some of the examination-reforming provinces. In 1996, the NMET began to be used nationwide (Cheng & Qi, 2006). Since then, the NMET has undergone several changes in its format. Now it exists in three different formats (NEEA, 2007). The first one is based on the Teaching Curriculum of English and does not have a listening section. The second one is based on the same teaching curriculum but has a listening section. The third one has a listening section but is designed on the basis of the Course Standards of English, which is being promoted in mainland China and is replacing the Teaching Curriculum of English year by year. This test format, which takes Lyle Bachman's 1990 model of communicative language ability (Bachman, 1990) as its theoretical framework, is expected to replace the other two tests by 2012. The detailed format of the test can be found in Table 1 below.

The impact of the NMET can be seen clearly in school English teaching, especially in secondary school. For example, the format for any English test in schools is based on the format

of the NEMT, and the last semester of upper secondary students is usually devoted to doing test after test to practice NEMT format.

Table 1: Overview of the NEMT Based on the Course Standards of English

Section	Part	Input	Language of Rubric	Task Focus	Item Types	Number of Items	Raw Score
I. Listening Comprehension	A	5 short dialogues (heard once)	Chinese	Simple factual information	MC (3-option)	5	7.5
	B	5 dialogues and monologues (heard twice)	Chinese information	Simple factual	MC (3-option)	15	22.5
II. Use of English	A	15 sentences/ dialogues	Chinese	Grammar and vocabulary	MC (4-option)	15	15
	B	1 text (200 words)	Chinese	Vocabulary	MC cloze (4-option)	20	30
III. Reading Comprehension	A	4 texts (over 900 words in total)	Chinese	General and detailed information	MC (4-option)	15	30
	B	1 text (about 300 words)	Chinese	Relationship between sentences/ paragraphs	Gap-filling (7-option)	5	10
IV. Writing	A	1 text (100 words)	Chinese	Error correction	Error correction	10	10
	B	prompt (in Chinese)	Chinese	Writing a short text	Guided writing	1	25
Total						85+1	150

Note: Citation the table from Liu (2010), The National Education Examinations Authority and its English Language Tests (p. 39).

The College English Test (CET)

The College English Test (CET) is a national standardized English language test for college and university students in China, which aims to promote the implementation of College English Teaching Syllabus. The CET is held twice a year, once in June and again in December of January. The growing awareness about the importance of the ability to communicate in English and the increasing value attached to the CET test results, coupled with expanded college and university enrolment, have led to sharp increases in the number of CET test-takers since its inception in 1987. The average rate of increase has remained between 10 and 20 percent a year since the late 1990s, and its population has become the world's largest for any EFL test (Jin, 2010).

The CET has adopted a componential view of the language construct and measures the four major language skills separately, that is, listening, reading, and writing in the CET and speaking in the CET Spoken English Test. Unlike most other large-scale standardized language tests, which are either norm-referenced or criterion-referenced, the CET is designed as a criterion-related norm-referenced test (Jin, 2010). Students' skills on key aspects of the language tested in the CET are determined by the teaching syllabuses or curriculum requirements which are based on the CET test syllabuses; in this way, it is criterion-related. Scores of each administration are equated first using anchored students, who usually take the test for the equating purpose one or two weeks before the actual test administration, and then normalized against a pre-determined

norm set up in 1987 (CET-4) and 1989 (CET-6) (Jin, 2010). In this way the test is clearly norm-referenced.

As an assessment tool to examine whether college students have met the curriculum requirements of the compulsory College English course of Band 4 or Band 6 as specified in the various versions of the national teaching syllabus (MoE, 1999), the CET has attracted both teachers' and learners' attention to College English teaching and learning. Students in most of China's colleges and universities are required to take the CET-4 at the end of the foundation stage study (i.e., the first 2 years of college or university study) and some are required to take the CET-6 before graduation (Jin, 2010). As a result of its social significance and tremendous scale, the CET has become a driving force for the development of College English teaching and learning. Therefore it can facilitate the steady improvement of the students' performances in the CET. Statistics from different administrations of the test indicate clearly the rapid progress made by college and university students in their English proficiency (Jin, 2010).

Dual Assessment Functions of Public Examinations: Selection and Teaching

Examinations derived from a need to select the best and most capable individuals to run the country in China. The imperial examination system was an attempt to recruit men on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of family or political connection. Therefore, success in the examination system was the basis of social status as well as education was the key to this success. Many contemporary Chinese scholars believe that with the advent of the imperial examinations, the selection and education processes overlapped, thus promoting the development of the Chinese educational system (Sun, 2000).

Such a belief in examination with dual functions is still obvious in the current examination system. For example, the NMET has always served as a selection measure for university entrance and at the same time has also tried to have a positive influence on the teaching and learning of English in Chinese secondary schools: the latter was one of the purposes of the test intended by the test developers (Cheng & Qi, 2006). However, it was found that the tension between the two purposes of the same test had prevented much of the intended positive washback effect from actually occurring (Qi, 2005). The CET is an instrument to assess the requirements of the College English Syllabus. In addition, its selection function is evident in the competitive job market in China. In many cases, while personnel departments recruiting college or university graduates, one of the prerequisites is choosing the graduate who obtains a CET certificate with a pass grade or a good test score.

New Emphases in Chinese EFL Student Assessment: Take the CET' Revisions as an example

Since the late 1980s when the CET was designed and implemented, it had been revised twice in 1997 and 2006. It was hoped that the CET would be a better measure of Chinese college and university students' English language proficiency. Furthermore, it is to make the test serve teaching more effectively.

Changes in the Test Content and Format. In the late 1980s and early 1990, the predominant form of the test items was the objective item format, namely, multiple choice questions. Subjective items, or constructed response items, accounted for 15 percent in the CET-4 and 25 percent in the CET-6 when the tests were designed (College English Test Design Group, 1994a, 1994b). A number of subjective item

formats was introduced to the CET to emphasise the use of language since 1997, such as short answer questions, dictation, translation, and sentence completion. Meanwhile, items testing about language knowledge (e.g., structure items) were reduced in 1997 and the Vocabulary and Structure Section was entirely removed in 2006. Regarding the skills being tested, comprehension of longer conversations, expeditious reading (i. e. skimming and scanning), understanding the contextual meaning of vocabulary in a reading passage (banked cloze), and translation from Chinese to English have been assessed in the revised CET since 2006 (National College English Testing Committee, 2006a, 2006b). The most significant development was the introduction of the CET Spoken English Test in 1999. The test adopts the format of face-to-face interviews which including a monologue, dialogue, and group discussion to assess students' abilities of use language in interactive communication.

Changes in the Scores Reporting System. Before June 2005, the CET adopted a 100point score scale, with a mean of 72 and a standard deviation of 12. A cut-off score was identified for 60 and a score of 85 or above was labeled as Distinction. However, the cut-off line was to some degree misused. For example, in some colleges and universities, students only focused on whether they pass the test or not, and stopped learning English while they passed. Instead of issuing a certificate indicating whether the test-taker had passed the test or failed, the CET now gives the test-taker a Score Report Form, informing both the overall score and the profile score for each component. Overall scores range from 220 to 710, with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 70. Profile score ranges vary slightly across the sub-tests. Table 2 below summarizes the changes in the CET score reporting system.

Generally, in the past two decades, the CET is gaining increasing recognition as a reliable indicator of college and university graduates’ English language proficiency in China. As a large-scale, high-stakes test, one of the most worrisome problem about it is teaching to the test, especially in a country in which teaching to testing is a prevailing phenomenon. Therefore, changes in the CET test content and format as well as the scores reporting system are intent to make the test serve teaching as well as assessing student learning outcomes more effectively, including to encourage appropriate using of the test results to improve the test’s washback on teaching and learning and its impact on society.

Table 2: Changes in the CET Score Reporting System

<i>Starting date</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Score report</i>		<i>Score interpretation</i>
1987/1989	72	12	Pass 60	Distinction 85	Percentile position in the norm group (students in the six top universities in China)
June 2005 December 2006	500	70	No pass or fail; Reporting total and profile scores		In the process of setting up a new norm

Note: Six universities are: Beijing University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, University of Science and Technology of China, and Xi’an Jiao Tong University. Citation the table from Jin (2010), The National College English Testing Committee (p. 55).

Conclusion

Traditionally, Chinese society in general has accepted the function of examinations as a fair indicator of students' academic success. Chinese teachers and students still follow the examination in their teaching and learning and/or make passing of the exam as the goal of their teaching and learning. However, the high stakes associated with these examinations have led to such a situation, whereby the higher the stakes, the more the test can impact what will be conducted in the classroom, and the greater the possibility for the test to be misused, namely, over-used or used for purposes not intended. A high-stakes examination may well become a "ferocious master of the educational process" (Madaus, 1988, pp. 84-85) or "an unethical and undemocratic way of making policy" (Shohamy, 2000, p. 11).

In fact, before the national curriculum reforms, student evaluation or assessment was simply viewed as examinations and tests for almost all teachers, principals and government officers throughout China (Gao, 2002). Students needed to pass numerous classroom tests, mid-term tests, term tests, year tests, entrance tests, graduation tests and two important national public examinations: the university entrance examination and the graduate school entrance examination during his/her school years. Students were ranked according to their scores in tests beginning in the first year of primary schooling. Meanwhile, before the implementation of *Performance Pay for Elementary and Junior High School Teachers* in 2010, students' scores in these tests also affected their teachers' income- in almost all schools, the distribution of a bonus (a part of teachers' incomes in China) among teachers was based on their students'

achievement in tests and examinations. Parents and the society also valued the exam scores and took it as the most important measure of the quality of a school and teacher. All of these pushed teachers and students into an exam-orientated style of teaching and learning.

To address the problem of extremely high pressure of national examinations, the MoE initiated a series of curriculum reforms since 2001, requiring the local governments to carry out reforms of the examination and assessment system. The assessment for graduating lower secondary students was re-designed to include the element of “comprehensive qualities” besides academic examination, such as a) moral performance, b) civil awareness, c) learning aptitude, d) ability in communication and cooperation, e) physical well-being, and f) aesthetic literacy (Gao, 2011; OECD, 2011). The revised secondary school English curriculum in China (Ministry of Education, 2005) has also suggested alternative and diversified forms of assessment such as peer- and self-assessment. In summary, the biggest change in school practice is the shift in the focus of attention, towards greater interest in the interactions between assessment and classroom learning, and away from concentration on the properties of restricted forms of test; that is, the awareness of “assessment OF learning” and “assessment FOR learning”. For instance, the introduction of assessment of students “general quality in learning” and the use of rating grade in tests and examinations. The former extended the scope of students, teachers and in particular parents to report and record students’ integrated development. Student self-evaluation and peer-evaluation techniques were widely used in this field, which will play an incentive role for students to review and learn from their own experiences of learning. Although there are still lots

challenges, for example, the class size of primary and lower secondary schools in most Chinese city (e. g. Chengdu) is about 50-60, communication between teachers and students via portfolio assessment became difficult even though this was quite an important feature of using portfolio assessment. Furthermore, numerous seminars and workshops of teacher training were conducted on classroom assessment practices- an attempt to combine assessment of learning with assessment for learning into the teaching and learning of English within the Chinese contexts.

Abbreviations: CET- College English Test; EFL- English as a foreign language; HERC- Higher Education Research Center of Sichuan Foreign Languages Institute; ISCED- International Standard Classification of Education; MoE- Ministry of Education; NCEE- National College Entrance Examination; NEEA- National Education Examinations Authority; NMET- National Matriculation English Test

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