

IS THE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEST BAND FOUR
PROMOTING OR IMPEDING COLLEGE STUDENTS'
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING?
FINDINGS FROM CLASSROOM-BASED RESEARCH
AT A UNIVERSITY IN CENTRAL CHINA

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Is the College English Test Band Four Promoting or Impeding
College Students' English Language Learning?
Findings from Classroom-based Research at a University in Central China

By
Cai, Yuyang

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Abstract

To investigate the antecedent conditions before the reform of the old CET-4 so as to determine whether the change is desirable or the education system is ready and able to take on the burden of implementation, this study was designed to look into whether the old CET-4 was affecting students' English learning, specifically, to look into whether CET-4 was affecting students' college English textbook study and which side of students' English learning is affected the most: listening, speaking, writing, or reading. Based on data collected through interviews with 12 participants and observations in four classes in a university in central China, this study showed that: 1) different factors contributed to students' perceptions and actions in terms of their CET-4 information receiving, test preparation motivation, and test preparation strategies; 2) the influence of CET-4 increased as the test was approaching; 3) CET-4 had great influence on the content and intensity while a little on the ways of students' English learning; 4) CET-4 affected some participants' study of the college English course but not others'; and 5) CET-4 brought about receptive learning rather than productive learning. However, this study could not tell whether the old CET-4 exerted more positive washback than negative washback on college students' study of the college English course.

Chapter One: Introduction

In 1987, intending to measure the fulfillment of the National College English Teaching Syllabus (1999), the National Education Ministry of China introduced College English Test - Band Four (CET-4) to the national higher education system (Yang & Jin, 2001). CET-4 tests the English competence corresponding to that described in the Syllabus. In more than 20 years, this test had been claimed to have positive influence on China's college English teaching and learning (Hu, 2004). However, in recent years, rumors are increasing about its negative effects.

One problem with CET-4 is that the over-reliance of multiple-choice items in the original CET-4 leads to test practice unrelated to the English language. In the old test, the score proportion of the items in the form of multiple-choice is as much as 85%. According to Alderson, Nagy, and Overges (2000), it is possible for students to increase their scores artificially when they are taking tests mainly in the form of multiple-choice. Thus, the form of CET-4 encourages both teachers and students to work at test skills and countermeasures in preparing for the test rather than in the English language itself (Gu & Liu, 2005).

Another problem with CET-4 is that CET-4 impedes students' productive English learning. This effect of CET-4 originates from the test theory of structuralism on which CET-4 is designed. Structuralism divides language into discrete points, such as grammar, vocabulary, and so on, and tests them separately (Liu & Dai, 2003). The theory basis of this test is against the language view that "language in communication is in a synthetic form in which all components of language are integrated as a whole" (Liu & Dai, 2003, cited by Gu & Liu, 2004, p.2). Consequences of adopting tests based on structuralism are serious. For example, to prepare for CET-4, students usually have to spend a lot of time studying some "important" language points described in CET-4 document, such as vocabulary, grammar, and reading. Therefore, CET-4 does not encourage students to put all language components together and

practice them during their test preparation. Hence, it impedes students' productive English learning, namely, speaking and writing (Liu & Dai, 2003, cited by Gu & Liu, 2004, p.2).

One more problem with CET-4 is the high rate of students' absence from college English classes caused by the misuse of CET-4 in reality. According to Yang and Jin (2001), the purpose of CET-4 is to assess whether college students have achieved the standard required by the Syllabus. As a test to assess teaching results, CET-4 should be an achievement test. However, in practice, CET-4 has been attached so much social weight that it has been used as a proficiency test, which seldom takes teaching contents into consideration (Liu, 1999). Therefore, it leads to the separation of the test from teaching, which in turn causes students to value the test more than regular class performance, and contributes to students' high rate of absence from classes (Gu & Liu, 2005).

As a response to those complaints introduced above, the Ministry of Education decided to reform the old CET-4 reform in 2002, intending to minimize negative effects and improve college students' English learning. However, up to the time of this study, very few empirical studies had been conducted to provide evidence for those complaints about the negative impact of CET-4 on college English learners.

The influence of high stakes tests on teaching and learning, which is referred to as washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993), has caught researchers' attention since the 1950s (see, for example, Vernon, 1956). Before the 1990s, publications about washback were mostly related to the negative or positive nature of tests claims (see, for example, Hughes, 1989; Madaus, 1987; Messick, 1989; Popham, 1987; Pearson, 1988). Most of those claims were based on assertions rather than empirical studies. Until the 1990s, researchers such as Alderson and Wall (1993) began to question the existence of washback. Through looking at others' work and their empirical studies, they provide 15 Washback Hypotheses to explain how washback works and call for more empirical studies about washback in different local

educational settings.

As a response to Alderson and Wall's (1993) call, many empirical studies about different tests have been conducted internationally (see, for example, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Burrows, 1999; Cheng, 1997, 1998; Watanabe, 1997). Findings from those studies are mostly related to the teacher and process of washback. Whether and how language learners are affected by high stakes tests are still under-explored (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Bailey, 1999; Wall, 2000). Seeing the paucity of study about learner washback, Bailey (1999) calls for more studies about the perceptions and actions of language learners. Another researcher, Wall (2000), also emphasizes the importance of study about learner washback. Wall suggests a framework which is instructive for learner washback study. According to Wall, before a testing reform, a baseline study should be conducted to look into different factors involved in the three stages of a reform—antecedents, process, and outcomes—and to find how these factors relate to each other and affect the process of washback.

To sum up, the old CET-4 had been receiving harsh criticism that: 1) the overflow of multiple choice items was causing undergraduate students to learn test skills unrelated to the English language; 2) it was impeding undergraduates' productive English learning; and 3) it had been leading to a high rate of absence of students in class. Besides, findings from the washback literature are not enough to explain or support those criticisms. Intending to provide new evidence for those criticisms and to fill in the gaps in washback literature, as well as to provide baseline data for later study about the reformed CET-4 washback, this study investigated whether and how the old CET-4 affected college students' perceptions and actions related to the old CET-4 and English study in a university in central China. However, due to the inaccessibility of the subjects' test results or information about how the teachers might have changed their practice, this thesis only focuses on students' experience with preparing for the test.

Chapter Two: Background

Introduction

In this chapter, a detailed description will be given about the background of this study, which consists of three parts: College English Test Band Four (CET-4) in China, college English teaching and learning within the target university, and CET-4 in the target university. The first part involves three issues related directly to CET-4: 1) the history of CET-4; 2) the construction and nature of CET-4; and 3) the national CET administration system. The second part deals with the CET-4 policy of the target university. The last part outlines issues related to college English teaching within the university, which includes: 1) a brief introduction to the target university; 2) the school curriculum for college English teaching; 3) college English textbooks; 4) classroom conditions; and 5) college English teaching schedule and teaching process.

2.1. CET-4 in China

2.1.1. The history of CET-4

The first topic here is related to the history of CETs. The introduction of CETs is concerned with the College English Teaching Syllabus. In the 1980s, the Ministry of Education in China issued the College English Teaching Syllabus for non-English majors. According to this syllabus, college English teaching is “to train students to have strong reading competence and fair competences in listening, speaking, writing and translation, so that they will be able to communicate in English” (College English Syllabus, 1999, cited by Gu & Liu, 2005, p.1).

The syllabus divides the achievements of college English teaching and learning into two stages containing six bands in all. Each band represents one level of English achievement required for each of the first six terms. The first stage includes four bands of English achievements, from Band One to Band

Four, which are required in the first four terms (two years) of college English teaching and learning. The second stage contains Band Five and Band Six, which are required for college English teaching and learning in the fourth and fifth terms (one year) of undergraduate study (Gu & Liu, 2005).

Holding the view that there is some connection between the testing and the teaching syllabus and that the introduction of a new test can improve learning, in the late 1980s, the Ministry of Education in China decided to introduce some new English tests to the higher education system to strengthen the connection between the National College English Teaching Syllabus and college English teaching and learning. The objectives of the tests are “to drive the colleges and universities to teach English according to the national College English Syllabus and to provide objective and accurate measurement for college English students’ English competence, so as to promote the quality of college English teaching nationwide” (CET, p.3).

To achieve this purpose, in 1986, the College English Testing Designing Group (later renamed as the National College English Testing Committee (NCETC)) was set up with the support of China’s Ministry of Education to design, organize, and administer two new College English Tests (CETs). In 1987, CETs were first introduced into the higher education system. These tests consist of CET-4 and CET-6, and they test English language competence corresponding to that described in the College English Syllabus. Intended test takers of CET-4 are second-year students who have finished four terms of English study, and intended takers of CET-6 are third year students who have finished two more terms of college English study (Gu & Liu, 2005). Students can not take CET-6 if they do not pass CET-4. CETs are held twice a year at the same time: one in January and the other in June. Students who pass the tests will be issued a certificate related to each test.

Since the introduction of CETs in 1987, CETs have been claimed to exert positive influence on

China's English education. However, in the past few years, rumors were rising concerning the negative effects of CETs on college English education, especially on college students' English study in listening and speaking. To solve these problems, the Ministry of Education launched a CET reform project in 2002. The aim of the reform is to emphasize listening and speaking by making changes in terms of the form and contents of the tests (Hu, 2003).

2.1.2. The construction and nature of CET-4

The second topic discussed in this chapter is related to some aspects concerned with the test itself, specifically, the construction and nature of CETs. Firstly, in terms of the test construction, the early designers and constructors of CET-4 borrowed from the large-scale international English test, TOEFL, to some extent. This borrowing can be seen from the similarities of these two tests in two aspects: 1) both of them contain similar sections including: Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Grammar (Vocabulary and Structure), and Short Composition; and 2) both of them adopt similar formats: a larger portion of items are in the format of multiple-choice and a smaller portion in the format of writing. Refer to Table 2.1 for an overview of the construction of CET-4.

Part	Item Name	Item number	Item points	Item Form	Given Time
I	Listening Comprehension	20	20	MC	20
II	Reading Comprehension	20	40	MC	35
III	Vocabulary and Structure	30	15	MC	20
IV	Cloze	20	10	MC	15
V	Short Composition	1	15	Writing	30
Total		91	100		120

MC = multiple choice

Table 2.1. The original construction of CET-4 papers

Secondly, concerning the nature of the test, CET-4 is a large-scale and high-stakes test. Since the adoption of CET-4 in 1987, CET-4 has been functioning as a uniform way of evaluating college students' English ability by China's universities and as a standard of comparing the English teaching quality of different universities in China (Gu & Liu, 2005). Therefore, it pushes most universities in China to set the successful passing of CET-4 as an indispensable requirement for granting undergraduate students' bachelor's degree. Thus, students who can not pass the test during their four years' undergraduate study will not be able to get their bachelor's degree, no matter how well they can perform in their major studies. Thus, they will have trouble in future employment or pursuing a further degree.

Besides, CET-4 is designed as a criterion-related norm-reference test, which means that the score of a CET-4 taker is given by comparison with the scores of the norm-reference group, which consists of about ten thousand undergraduates from China's six key universities: Beijing University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Fudan University, Chinese Science and Technology University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University (Yang et al., 2001, cited by Gu & Liu, 2005).

2.1.3. The national CET administration system

The third topic outlined in this chapter is related to the national administration system of CETs. The national administration of CET-4 involves four levels: the Ministry of Education, the NCETC, three testing centers of CETs in China, and local colleges and universities. (See Figure 2.1 below.)

The responsibility of the Ministry of Education is to provide political support for the NCETC. The main duties related to CET administration lie with the NCETC, which is responsible for making policies and rules related to CETs, developing and constructing new CET papers, delivering information about CETs, and issuing CET certificates to students who have passed the tests. Besides, by way of the three CET testing centers, the NCETC also administers the holding, scoring, score reporting, and

certificate issuing of CETs.

The three local testing centers are the local executing bodies of the NCETC. They help NCETC to deliver information related to the tests and to help manage the holding, scoring, score reporting, and certificate issuing of CETs. Each testing center is in charge of a certain number of provinces concerning CETs testing administration.

All colleges and universities in the charge of each testing center are responsible for helping the testing center in the whole process of executing the tests. Different colleges and universities may differ in their administration related to CETs. General administration related to CETs at the level of all individual institutions will not be described in this study. However, a detailed description of CETs administration within the target university will be dealt with in the description of the background of CET-4 within the target university.

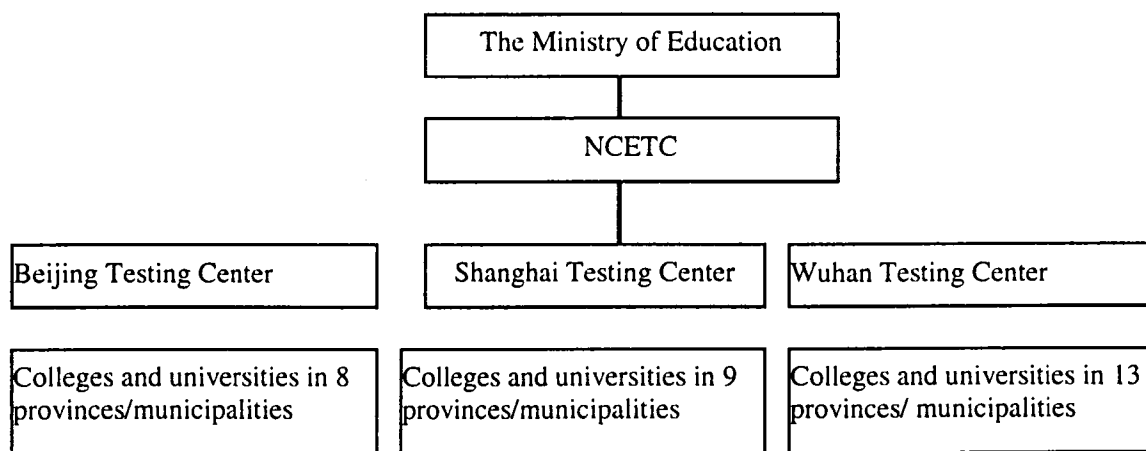


Figure 2. 1. The national CETs testing system

Within the university, together with support from different academic departments, two departments take the main responsibility for the administration of CET-4: the Department of Teaching

and Learning and the Department of English. The former department provides logistic support for the holding of CET-4 and supervises the quality of college English teaching and learning. With the support of the Department of Teaching and Learning, the Department of English takes the main responsibility for transferring information on CET-4 directly from the Testing Center to English teachers or students. Besides, it is also responsible for registering students for CET-4, providing invigilators during the testing, and recommending raters for CET-4 after the testing. As well, the Department of English takes measures to balance college English teaching with respect to CET-4. For example, in the case of CET-4 oriented teaching, the Department of English does not encourage English teachers to spend time in English classes teaching CET-4 preparation strategies.

With the support of the Department of Teaching and Learning, other academic departments are responsible for motivating students to prepare for CET-4, or taking any other possible measures to help students preparing for CET-4. For example, some academic departments asked the Student Union of their departments to take actions to help students prepare for CET-4. Refer to Figure 2.2 for detailed information on the CET-4 administration within the target university.

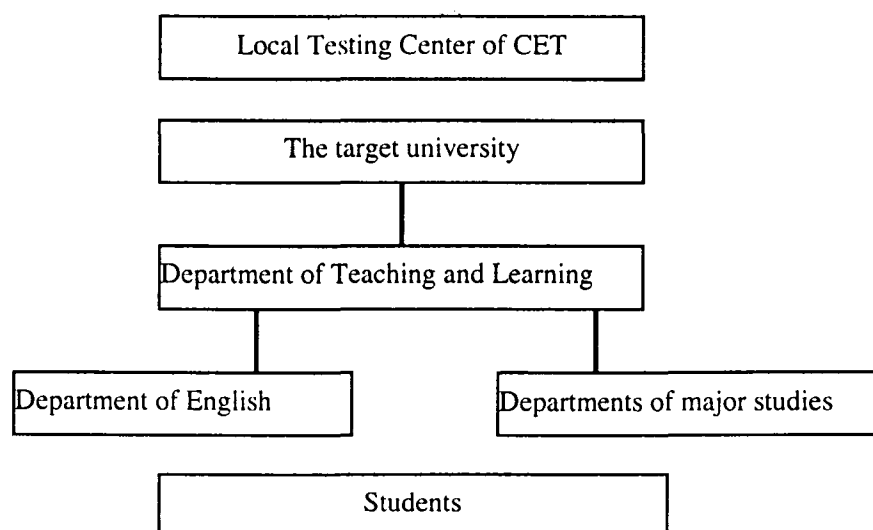


Figure 2.2: Detailed information on the CET-4 administration within the university

2.2. CET-4 policy of the university

2.2.1. The school policy related to CET-4

The university sets the successful passing of CET-4 as an indispensable requirement for granting undergraduate students' graduation and bachelor's degree. Thus, if students fail to pass CET-4, they will not be able to get the certificate for graduation or the bachelor's degree, no matter how well they can perform in their major studies or other fields. Therefore, they will have trouble in getting employed or pursuing a further degree after they finish their undergraduate study.

Also relating CET-4 to students' graduation and degree, the university requires that all undergraduate students, no matter whether they have passed CET-4 or not before they enter university, should take CET-4 in the prescribed time. (See 2.3.2 below for details.) According to university policy, students in level-3 (the highest level) English classes are required to take CET-4 at the end of the second term. Students in level-1 and -2 (the lower two levels) are required to take it at the end of the third term, namely, one term later than students in level-3. All students in level-3 and those students in level-1 and -2 who can pass CET-4 at the end of the third term will stay in their original levels and continue their English study till the end of the fourth term. Students in level-1 and level-2 who can pass CET-4 the first time will be moved to CET-4 preparation classes. All students who fail CET-4 the first time can try as many times before they finish their four years' undergraduate study. Refer to Table 2.2 for the timetables for students' College English course and taking CET-4.

	Term 1 (Sept., 2003–Jan., 2004)	Term 2 (Mar.2004–Jun.2004)	Term 3 (Sept.2004–Jan.2005)	Term 4 (Mar.2005–Jun.2005)
L1	Screening test and Compulsory College English course	Compulsory College English course	Taking CET-4 at the end of this term	Compulsory College English course or CET—4 training class for students who did not pass CET-4
L2	Screening test and Compulsory college English course	Compulsory College English course	Taking CET-4 at the end of this term	Compulsory College English course or CET—4 training class for students who did not pass CET-4
L3	Screening test and Compulsory college English course	Taking CET-4 at the end of this term	Compulsory College English course	Compulsory College English course

Table 2.2: Timetable for College English course and taking CET-4

To ensure that the students can give enough attention to CET-4, each academic department makes its own rules concerning CET-4. For example, some departments demand that students who have not passed CET-4 are not allowed to buy their personal computers in case they waste too much time playing computer games and thus affect their English study. Some departments even set the successful passing of CET-4 as the indispensable qualification for receiving scholarships or any other honorary rewards.

2.3. College English teaching and learning in the target university

2.3.1. A brief introduction to the target university

The target university is one of the key universities in China, which is located in one of the biggest

cities in Central China. It has a good reputation for its education and research in science and technology. Each year, after taking the National College Entrance Exams (Matriculation English Test (MET) is one of those exams), about 8,000 new students with very competitive scores from all over the country register at this university.

2.3.2. The school curriculum for college English

College English teaching for non-English majors in this university is divided into two stages: the foundation stage and the advanced stage. The foundation stage contains two years' compulsory college English study. Each of the two years consists of two academic terms—the first term beginning from the September to the end of the next January and the second term starting from the beginning of the March to the beginning of the July. Before students are registered into the foundation English class, to ensure a better teaching quality, the Department of English uses a test produced by the department in the format of CET-4 to screen the students into three levels: level-1, level-2, and level 3, representing English standards from low to high. Once screened, all students will stay in their levels for two years except for those students from level-1 and -2 who fail CET-4 at the end of the third term. As mentioned above, these students will be moved to CET-4 preparation classes, which last only for one term (the fourth term in their undergraduate study). If these students fail the test again, they, together with any other students from level-3 who fail CET-4, will have to prepare by themselves and try at most three more times during their undergraduate studies. Otherwise, they will not be able to get their graduation certificates or their bachelor's degree.

The other stage—the advanced stage—involves one year's English study. During this year, English study is elective. The students who have passed CET-4 can decide by themselves whether or what English courses to select among the English courses provided, such as English courses related to cultivating students' interest in the English language, English courses related to their majors, or English

courses related to other interest subjects.

2.3.3. College English textbooks

In the target university, different departments may use different versions of college English textbooks, all of which were edited according to the College English Teaching Syllabus (1999) and issued by several authoritative publishers in higher education. Usually, each version of textbooks consists of two sets, one set for the first year of college English study and the other for the second year. Each set of textbooks includes three books: one for the reading and writing class, one for the listening and speaking class, and the other for fast reading used by students outside English class. The book for reading and writing class is divided into different units. Each unit is again divided into four parts: 1) Passage A: Intensive Reading; 2) Passage B: Extensive Reading; 3) Passage C: Interest Reading; and 4) Exercises. Besides, each unit usually has one disc attached on which all content in the textbook is written in the format of PowerPoint, including some background knowledge related to the topic addressed by Passage A, recorded reading by native speakers for Passage A, and answers to the exercises. Another book for listening and speaking class is also divided into units. Each unit consists of different activities related to listening and speaking. Attached to this book was one laser disc with recordings for each activity. The third book is for fast reading, which is usually not required by the teachers, and students practice it according to their own needs.

2.3.4. Classroom conditions

The reading and writing class is given in large classrooms which can hold about 200 students, where students are seated in rows and it is very inconvenient for them to move and have interactions with each other. Each classroom is well equipped. There are usually two air-conditioners, one whiteboard in the front of each classroom, one computer table and one computer, one pair of headphones, one

microphone, one projector, and one projecting screen. The listening and speaking class is given in language labs, which can usually hold about 70 students. Each language lab has the same equipment as the ones for the reading and writing class. Besides, each of the student seats is equipped with one pair of headphones and one microphone. In some labs, the seats are located in the form of the letter “U”. Therefore, two students can sit face to face and it is very convenient for them to have interactive activities. In some other labs, the seats are located in rows, very inconvenient for students to move or have interactive activities.

2.3.5. Teaching schedule and teaching process

The term observed in the present research study lasted for 17 weeks, with 15 weeks available for teaching. During the first 13 available teaching weeks, each of the four teachers observed mainly dealt with the textbook for the college English course. Sporadically, they would mention some test taking strategies. During the last two weeks of the term observed, all teachers began to spend the full time dealing with CET-4 in class.

English teaching during the first 15 weeks was in a regular English class, which mainly dealt with the college English textbook. Regular English classes were instructed unit by unit, according to the structure and content of the textbooks. Instructions for each unit were divided into three periods: two periods for reading and writing and one period for listening and speaking. Each period consisted of two 45-minute classes between which there was one 10-minute break. In the reading and writing class, the teacher studied intensively the words, expressions, and structure of the passages, translated English into Chinese, or played recordings for the passages. For the reading and writing class, besides finishing the textbook material, every two or three weeks, the English teacher would assign one written task from old CET-4 papers, which would be corrected by the English teacher. In the other class for listening and speaking, the teacher would go through the activities in the textbook (usually just listening activities) or

taught some listening strategies.

English teaching during the last two weeks was towards CET-4. Of the four classes observed, three teachers gave a simulated test in their classes. Subsequently, these three teachers spent special time checking answers and teaching test taking strategies. The other teacher did not give any simulated test in class because the Department of English did not allow teachers to do that. However, due to students' demands, this teacher still spent about one week teaching test taking strategies in class.

Chapter Three: Literature

Introduction:

In Chapter One, it was stated that the purpose of the present study is to look into the washback effect of CET-4 on college students' English learning. For the purpose of this study, in this chapter, the literature will be reviewed for information related to the understanding of learner washback and expose gaps to be explored in washback study. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part will introduce different terms used by educators to refer to the relationship between testing and teaching and learning. The second part will present different models revealing how washback works. Finally, in the last part, findings from empirical studies related to learner washback will be introduced.

3.1: Notions related to washback

Tests have long been playing an important role in people's lives in the world and the influence of tests has caught educational researchers' attention as early as the 1950s (see, for example, Vernon, 1956). From the 1950s to the 1990s, educational researchers (see, for example, Davis, 1968; Kellaghan, Madaus, & Airasian, 1982; Alderson, 1986; Morrow, 1986; Pearson, 1988; Hughes, 1989) had begun to make claims about the relationship between testing and teaching and learning. During this period, different terms have been used by educators to show their different views of this relationship. Washback, a term used in applied linguistics and language testing, means the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). This concept is rooted in some other terms created by educators before the 1990s, which include measurement-driven instruction, curriculum alignment, systemic validity, Messician washback, backwash, and impact.

'Measurement-driven instruction' indicates that tests can and should drive teaching and learning (see, for example, Frederickson, 1984; Popham, 1987; Popham et al., 1985; Haladyna, Nolan, and Haas, 1991; and Shohamy, 1992, 1993b).

'Curricular alignment' has a similar meaning to that of the term measurement-driven instruction in that they both describe the relationship between tests and teaching syllabus. The difference is that curricular alignment proponents (for example, Linn, 1983; Madaus, 1988; Smith, 1991; Shepard, 1993) claim that tests possibly narrow the curriculum and classroom teaching by leading to an overlap of the content and format of tests and the content and format of curriculum and classroom teaching.

'Systemic validity' is the use of curriculum alignment in the whole education system. According to Fredriksen and Collins (1989), a new or reformed test can be integrated into the education system to help develop the skills described in the testing syllabus during teaching and learning.

'Messician washback', an expression related to Messick's (1996) view of washback, regards washback as "an instance of the consequential aspect of construct validity". It claims that valid tests should "increase the likelihood of positive washback and help to distinguish test washback per se from good and bad educational practices regardless of test quality" (Messick, 1996, p 255). In the sense that it relates tests to fostering teaching and learning in educational system, Messick's view of washback is regarded as similar to Fredriksen and Collins' (1989) systemic validity.

'Backwash' refers to the phenomenon that "testing influences teaching and learning in the educational and applied linguistic literature" (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p115). This term is considered to have the same meaning as the term 'washback'. The latter is more frequently used in the field of language testing (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Messick, 1994, and Bailey, 1996; Shohamy, 1993a; Hamp-Lyons, 1997).

'Impact' is used by American measurement experts (for example, Madaus, 1985) to refer to the effects of tests on the classroom, the school system, the educational system, and even society (Hamp-Lyons, 1997). This term is the broadest view in connotation compared with all other terms introduced above.

To sum up, in washback literature, there are different definitions of the relationship between testing and teaching and learning. In this literature review, I will not distinguish the difference between those terms but simply follow the tradition as Alderson and Wall (1993) do, to use the term washback in the field of language testing without preferring either label semantically or pragmatically.

3. 2. Models of washback study

Not only have washback researchers made great efforts to work out the description of washback, they have also endeavored to explore the mechanisms or models of the washback phenomenon. There are at least five models which deserve mentioning: Alderson and Wall's (1993) 15 Washback Hypotheses, Hughes' (1997) trichotomy of 'participants', 'process' and 'product', Bailey's (1996, 1999) division of 'learner washback' and 'program washback', Wall's (2000) adaptation of the innovation theory, and Watanabe's (2004) complex description of washback. In this literature review, Watanabe's model will not be dealt with for two reasons. On the one hand, it is too complex because it tries to encompass everything related to the washback phenomenon. On the other hand, it provides too little information on learner washback. In the following paragraphs of this part, I will present the other four models intending to find directions for this study.

3.2.1. Alderson and Wall's (1993) Washback Hypotheses

The first model is related to Alderson and Wall's (1993) work. Based on their own and others'

empirical studies, they proposed 15 Washback Hypotheses to guide further empirical washback studies.

Some of the items related to learners are:

- 2) A test will influence learning.
- 5) A test will influence what learners learn; and
- 6) A test will influence how learners learn.
- 8) A test will influence rate and sequence of learning.
- 10) A test will influence degree and depth of learning.
- 11) A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc. of ...learning.
- 12) Tests that have important consequences will have washback; and conversely
- 13) Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback.
- 14) Tests will have washback on all learners
- 15) Tests will have washback effects for some learners..., but not for others.

(Alderson and Wall. 1993, pp. 120-121).

Alderson and Wall's model is limited in at least two ways. Firstly, it seems to be too rigid a description of washback mechanisms because it cannot display the interrelationship between different components of washback. Secondly, when implying the role of factors related to learners, it fails to tell what factors may really be. However, this model is significant for my study in two aspects. On the one hand, it provides different types of learner washback — the rate and sequence of learning, degree and depth of learning, and students' attitudes to the content, and method of teaching and learning. On the other hand, this model is instructive for my study by taking into account test stakes (consequences of tests) and implying the potential role of other individual student factors by stating that a test might influence some learners while not others.

3.2.2. Hughes' (1993) trichotomy of 'participants', 'process', and 'products'

The second model is related to Hughes' (1993) trichotomy of 'participants', 'process' and 'products'. According to Hughes, 'participants' include language learners, teachers, administrators, material

developers, and publishers. 'Process' covers "any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning" (Hughes, 1993, p.2). 'Products' refers to "what is learned (facts, skills, etc.) and the quality of learning (fluency, etc.)"(Hughes, 1993, p.2).

Hughes' model is limited in that, similar to Alderson and Wall's (1993) model, it enumerates some components involved in washback phenomenon and cannot reflect the interrelationships between those different components. However, Hughes' model gives a more structured framework for learner washback study than Alderson and Wall's. Instructed by Hughes' work, my study addressed learner washback on two aspects: the process and product of learning.

3.2.3. Bailey's (1996, 1999) division of 'learner washback' and 'program washback'

The third model is related to Bailey's (1996, 1999) work. By combining the information from Alderson and Wall's (1993) 15 Washback Hypotheses with Hughes' (1993) ideas of the trichotomy of participants, process, and products, Bailey (1996b, 1999) refers to the effects of tests on students as 'learner washback' and the effects of tests on teachers, administrators, material writers, curriculum designers, researchers, as 'program washback'. Besides, Bailey suggests the potential influence a test may have on different participants, the reactions different participants may give to the test, and the different products resulting from the reactions of different participants.

Bailey's model is limited in several aspects. Firstly, it is only a linear description of washback mechanism. It can, if possible, just reflect the mechanism of washback within each group of participants. However, washback is a complex phenomenon (see, for example, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Wall, 2000; among others), which never proceeds in a solely linear way. When washback proceeds, different participants may interact with each other and the processes and products of one group of participants might affect the processes and products of other participants. Secondly, Bailey's model

tries to depict possible relationships within one participant. However, it does not give in detail what relationships may exist between elements within one group of participants. Thirdly, Bailey's model doesn't consider other important factors which are outside of the educational system which will affect the performance of washback, such as local educational contexts and local social environments.

Nevertheless, Bailey's model is significant for my study in that it does not just enumerate elements possibly involved in the washback phenomenon, as what is done in Alderson and Wall's (1993) model and Hughes' (1996) model; it also points out the dynamics of the relationship between different elements, though what relationship may exist is not clearly given.

3.2.4. Wall's (1999) adaptation of the innovation theory

The last model to mention is related to Wall's adaptation of the innovation theory. After going through a lot of empirical studies (see, for example, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cheng, 1997, 1998; Watanabe, 1996; Shohamy et al., 1996; Wall & Alderson, 1993), Wall concludes that washback is a more complex phenomenon than researchers had assumed. To explore a new model to guide further washback studies, Wall (1999) turns to Henrichsen's (1989) Hybrid Model of the Diffusion/Implementation Process in the literature of educational innovation.

In Henrichsen's model, the process of innovation is broken down into three different components: 1) antecedents, which includes factors in place in the educational context or environment before the introduction of an innovation; 2) process, which includes factors in operation when the innovation is being implemented; and 3) consequences, which includes factors that may occur as a result of the interaction between the factors in the former two components.

Wall (1999) adopts this model to analyze the use of new tests to influence teaching in Sri Lanka. The

analysis discloses the difficulty of using a new test to influence teaching in a specific place and reasons for this difficulty (Wall, 1999, 2000). According to Wall's (1999) analysis, she finds that all factors identified in the study may create change to different extents. Wall goes on to claim that it will not be reasonable to assume that all the factors will work in the same way in other contexts or will lead to the same outcome.

The limitation of Wall's adaptation of Henrichsen's model is that, when coming to study some specific participants (i.e., washback on individual learners), it cannot provide detailed factors related to individual learners or how these factors affect the process and product of learning. However, Wall's adaptation of Henrichsen's model identifies many other factors other than test design that may affect the result of washback and depict a clear, multidimensional, and rigorous model for my study.

To take into consideration all the things said above, the literature provides different models for my study in learner washback. According to these models, learner washback study should deal with three aspects: 1) various factors that may affect learner washback (such as test stakes, teacher factors, and factors related to individual student, etc.); 2) the process of washback (perceptions and actions of learners, the rate and sequence of learning, the depth and degree of learning, and learning methods, etc.); and 3) the outcomes (such as the quality, the results of students' learning, etc.).

3.3. Achievements from empirical or other kinds of studies

Since the 1990s, many empirical studies have come out as a response to Alderson and Wall's (1993) call. Influential studies include those conducted by researchers such as Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Cheng (1997, 1998), Shohamy et al. (1996), Wall and Alderson (1993), Wall (1996), Watanabe (1996), Burrows (1999) Hamp-Lyons (1998); Hilke and Wadden (1997, 1999); Terry (2003); Saville(2000);

Saville and Hawkey (2004). Of these studies, most are related to teachers (see for example, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Burrows, 1999; Cheng, 1997, 2003; Wall & Alderson, 1993; Watanabe, 1996). Relatively less attention has been paid to learners (see, for example, Andrews et al., 2002; De Prada, 1998; Roberts, 2002), and even less to other participants such as test developers, teacher educators and curriculum planners, and teacher advisors, etc. Concerning the purpose of this study and time constraints, the following part of this section will not cover everything but just deal with those about learner washback.

3.3.1. Learner washback

Before the 1990s, washback to learners was an under-explored area. During the following decade, opinions in this field were mostly not based on empirical studies. Until the writing of this literature review, some washback researchers (see, for example, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Shohamy et al., 1996; Watanabe, 1996) just included learners into their studies for triangulation. Only a few studies focused on washback to learners (see, for example, Andrews et al., 2002; De Prada, 1998; Roberts, 2002). This section will deal with findings related to learner washback from both kinds of studies mentioned above.

Most studies did not focus on learner washback. However, a few findings related to learner washback from those studies are instructive. For example, in the TOEFL study conducted in the United States by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), when students were asked about their preferred teaching activities, they suggested that the TOEFL preparations class should have: 1) a placement test before a TOEFL preparation course; 2) more opportunities for student participation and student questioning; 3) diagnosis of individual student weakness; 4) the combination of self-study with revision in class; and 5) practising English all the time (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996, p. 285). After the study, the researchers complemented Alderson and Wall's (1993) hypotheses by concluding that "the tests will have different

amounts and types of washback on ... some learners than on other ...learners” (p. 296). For another example, in Cheng’s (1997) study about the impact of a major English test in Hong Kong (the HKCEE), a survey of 42 students about the motivation of their English learning showed that HKCEE played “a 30% role in their learning,” followed by other factors such as the influence of future jobs, their parents’ concerns, and competition with other classmates (p.47). For one more example, to research the impact of two different tests over time in Israel, Shohamy et al. (1996) surveyed students for their perceptions of two tests. The data revealed that high stake tests lead to students’ anxiety to the test while low-stake tests do not.

The literature also presents some studies focusing on learner washback, for example, the study about IELTS by De Prade (1998), the study about the University Entrance Examinations by Watanabe (2001) in Japan, the study about TOEFL by Roberts (2002) in Toronto, and the study Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary ‘Use of English’ oral examination by Andrews et al. (2002).

De Prade (1998) used surveys and interviewed students in an IELTS class to look into their beliefs about the test and the preparation class, and factors that might affect their beliefs. This study identified factors that affected students’ beliefs, which include course content, the teaching students received, and students’ educational and cultural background, as well as pressure from various sources.

Watanabe’s (2001) study researched the impact of a university entrance examination on learners’ motivation and their test preparation practices. Data collected from student interviews revealed that students’ attitudes towards test preparation varied and this variation partially resulted from their perceptions of the difficulty level of the test.

Roberts (2002) conducted a study about some Korean learners in Toronto who were preparing for the TOEFL. The researcher interviewed the students in focus groups to look into their reasons for preparing

for TOEFL, their overall attitudes towards their test preparation, and their general preparation practices. The data showed that students test preparing methods were affected by student factors such as culture of learning, individual motivation, and experiences.

Andrews et al. (2002) did a two-phase study in Hong Kong to look into the effects of changes to a high-stake test on the performance of learners. Data analysis showed that a new oral test had some influence students' performance to some extent. However, the way and extent students were affected varied. The test had led to improved performance in some students, but superficial learning outcomes in others, such as the ability to conform to the requirements of the exam format, or to produce memorized phrases.

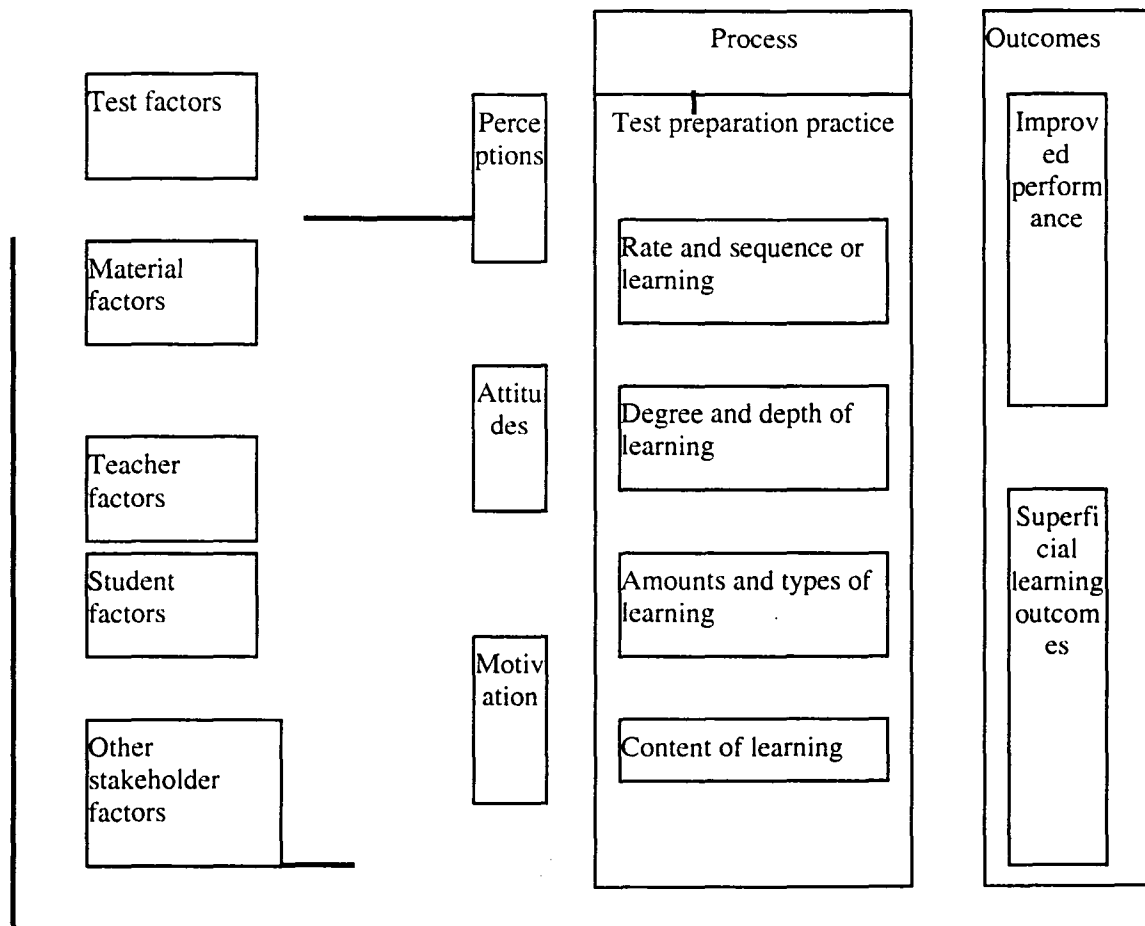
Findings from those empirical studies presented above are significant for the present study in that they provide some specific factors to be considered in learner washback study, such as student factors (e.g. individual student motivation, students' culture of learning, students' experiences etc.), test factors (e.g. stakes of the test, the difficulty level of the test), preparation course factors (e.g. the course content, the teaching received). Besides, those empirical studies are also significant in disclosing some types of washback outcomes, such as improved learning and superficial learning, to be investigated in further study. Those factors and types of outcomes can be framed into the results of the theoretical model for learner washback developed earlier to guide the present study.

Based on knowledge from theoretical discussions and complementary information from empirical studies, a tentative model of learner washback (see, Figure 3.1) may be developed to guide the present study. This model is rooted in Hughes' and Bailey's idea of learner washback. Besides, this model adopts Wall's (2000) idea of dividing all components into three categories—antecedents, process, and outcomes. Specific components include ideas from Alderson and Wall's (1993) Washback Hypotheses and findings

from empirical studies.

This model involves components which can be divided into three categories: 1) antecedents, which include factors related to the test (e.g. stakes of the test, the difficulty level of the test, etc.), teachers (e.g. teachers' teaching beliefs, familiarity with the test, education background, teaching content, etc.), material factors (e.g. content of the test preparation materials), student factors (e.g. individual motivation, learning culture, experience, individual financial condition etc.), and other stake holders (e.g. pressure from parents, future employers, etc.); 2) process, which may include factors such as learners' perceptions of, attitudes or motivation regarding the test, test preparation, and preparation practice (e.g. the rate and sequence of learning, the degree and depth of learning, the amounts and types of learning, the content of learning, the aspects of learning, etc.); and 3) outcomes, which include factors such as improved performance or superficial learning behaviors. The unbroken lines represent the direct relationships between the three main categories and the dotted lines indicate the direct relationships between the sub-components among the three categories.

Figure 3. 1. A tentative model of learner washback



Summary

This chapter reviews the literature for the understanding of washback, specifically about learner washback. The first part of this chapter addresses different notions related to the term washback. In the second part of this chapter, I go through theoretical discussions for washback to help understand the mechanism of the washback phenomenon, especially the mechanism of learner washback. The third chapter deals with findings from empirical studies for components that may be considered in the present study. Finally, according to the review of the theoretical discussions and empirical studies, I develop a tentative model of learner washback to guide the present study. However, considering the constraints of time and limited access to data (like the students' test results), I can only consider some of the aspects of wash-back in my analysis.

Chapter Four: Methodology and Data Collection

Introduction

This chapter will address the reasons for using a qualitative research approach and adopting classroom observations and participant interviews as the main research instruments in the present study. Then, characteristics of the sample are detailed, which involve the following aspects: the university, college English classes, teaching plans for each of the four sampled classes, and the 12 participants. Finally, the strategy for the data analysis is described.

4.1 Research approach and instruments

In this research, a qualitative methodology was adopted for two reasons. Firstly, the selection of the qualitative approach is determined by the topic and nature of this research. This washback study is to inquire about students' perceptions and actions related to CET-4. Thus, students' own views and constructs about CET-4, and what happens in students' real lives become essential to this study. The application of a qualitative approach, as claimed by washback researchers such as Watanabe (2004), would help me to elicit phenomenological data that represent the world view of participants being investigated, to use participants' own constructs to structure the research, to employ participant and non-participant observation to acquire firsthand, sensory accounts of phenomena as they occur in real world settings, to construct descriptions of total phenomena within their contexts and to generate from these descriptions the complex interrelationships of causes and consequences that affect their behavior toward and beliefs about CET-4, and to use a variety of research techniques to amass the data. Secondly, I am most comfortable and familiar with the qualitative method of inquiry. In this research, I tried to reveal what issues exist with respect to CET-4 as they were by minimizing the intrusion on participants' perceptions and actions.

In terms of instruments, many researchers propose methodological triangulation. In methodological triangulation, more than one procedure is used for collecting data, for example, classroom observation, interview, questionnaires (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Bailey, 1999; Denzin, 1970, Messick, 1996; Van Lier, 1988). Among these techniques, the importance of classroom observation has been argued for by many researchers. Affected by research in washback study, I had planned to use classroom observation as the main instrument for data collecting, combined with the other instrument of participant interviews. However, during the pilot study, I found it possible to observe only superficially what students are doing in the classroom, but it is hard to know what they are thinking, especially in the teacher-centered classrooms in China where most of the time students just keep silent and listen to teachers talk. The crowdedness of the classroom added to the difficulty of classroom observation. Furthermore, students reported that they usually did CET-4 preparation after class. Therefore, it would be still harder to track what the students do outside of the English classroom. In light of all these, I decided to depend on student interviews as the main instrument and to use classroom observation to provide additional information for rich description and to triangulate what was said by the participants.

4.2 Sampling

4.2.1. The university

Due to time and financial constraints, there is only one university included in this study. The reasons for sampling the target university are that: 1) this university is one of China's key universities; 2) it has a large population of CET-4 takers in this city; 3) I used to work and live on this campus for about one year; hence, I am quite familiar with the context of CET-4 and college English teaching and learning in this university; 4) I had very convenient accommodation and transportation; and 5) it was easier for me to get access to school policy and get support from classroom teachers.

4.2.2. The four classes from four different departments

There are four classes sampled for classroom observations in this study, two classes from Level-1 English class and two from Level-2. The four classes were from four different academic departments, which represented respectively the School of Life Science and Technology, the School of Information Technology and Engineering, the School of Economics, and the School of Hydropower and Information Engineering. To make them identifiable, I named the four classes according to the same order presented above into L1(A), L1(B), L2 (A), and L2(B). The population in the four classes differed. There were 58 students in class L1(A), 49 in L1(B), 51 in L2(A), and 60 in L2(B). The process of sampling the departments was: 1) dividing all academic departments in this university into two strata: a) science and technology, and b) humanities; 2) selecting four departments by considering the proportion of departments in these two strata; and 3) dividing English classes into two groups: Level-1 English classes and Level-2 English classes; and 4) by considering English teachers' willingness to help, selecting two classes in Level-1 and two classes in Level-2 and making sure that all four classes were from the four different departments. During the sampling process, Level-3 classes were excluded because students in Level-3 had taken CET-4 at the end of the second term of their undergraduate study, namely, one term before the study was conducted.

4.2.3. The 12 participants

The 12 participants were sampled from the four observed classes. I sampled four interview participants from each observed class according to the following criteria: 1) having not taken CET-4 before; 2) considering the gender ratio in the class; 3) talkative; and 4) willing to give a consent letter. Refer to Table 4.1 for detailed information for each of the sampled participants.

Table 4. 1. Information for each of the 12 interview participants

No.	Participant	Gender	English Class Level	Academic Department	Interest In English
1	Yin	F	L-1(A)	L.S.	Strong (for studying abroad)
2	Shang	M	L-1(A)	L.S.	No Interest
3	Yu	M	L-1(A)	L.S.	No Interest
4	Hao	M	L-1(B)	I.T.	Strong (English is useful)
5	Xin	M	L-1(B)	I.T.	No Interest
6	Huan	F	L-1(B)	I.T.	Strong (in English itself)
7	Fei	M	L-2(A)	S.E.	Strong (for studying abroad)
8	Xiang	F	L-2(A)	S.E.	Strong (both in English itself and for studying abroad)
9	Qin	F	L-2(A)	S.E.	Medium
10	Jia	M	L-2(B)	H.I	Medium
11	Wen	F	L-2(B)	H.I	Medium
12	Hai	M	L-2(B)	H.I	Medium

Abbreviations:

H.I=School of Hydropower & Information Engineering; L.S=School of Life Science & Technology

S.E. =School of Economics; I.T.=School of Information Technology & Engineering

4.3 Preparation for data collection:

4.3.1. Ethical review

I did a comprehensive ethical review with the Ethics Committee of Memorial University to ensure that I would respect the confidentiality of the participants, work within the guideline of the Ethics Committee of Memorial University, and contribute to the work of washback studies.

4.3.2. Getting access to the classes and participants

Before I entered the research field, I sent a letter to the Foreign Languages Department of the sampled

university to explain the purpose of this study, the significance of this study to the sampled university, some potential harms, the participants involved in this research, the process and duration of this study. As well, I got a written consent from the department head.

After that, I interviewed one administrator of the Foreign Language Department in charge of the academic affairs to get a clear understanding of the university policies concerning CET-4, of the local English teaching curriculum, and some other information related to college English teaching in this university. Besides, I told the administrator the criteria of my class sampling and asked for help to talk to classroom teachers who would like to help with the data collection.

With the help of the administrator, I selected four classes according to my criteria for sampling. Subsequently, I sent each of the four classroom teachers a letter to explain the significance of this study to their teaching and their students' English learning. I also informed them of the duration, process, number of student participants for each class, and other help I would need from them. I told them I could send them the final paper or a summary of this study once they asked for it. I also got the written consent from each of the four teachers.

After I got the consent letter from the classroom teacher, I was permitted to enter the classroom. At the end of the first class, the teacher briefly introduced me to the students. Then, during the ten-minute break time, I went to the front and took about five minutes to give a short introduction about myself and the purpose of the study. Besides, I told each class that I needed four volunteer participants for interviews. As well, I declared the criteria for sampling the participant candidates and the work involved for each participant. When the class was over, there were usually more volunteers than I needed. Therefore, I talked to each of them about their possibility of time for the interviews and selected four volunteers with the strongest interest in this study. After I chose the four participants, I talked to all of them to make sure

they understood the general idea of my study and what I needed from their participation. Then, I handed a consent letter to each of them and asked them to read it until all of them were pretty sure about the content of the consent letter before they signed and returned the letters to me. I assured them that I would not identify them in the final paper. I told them they could see the final paper or a summary of it if they wanted to. I also told them the process and duration of each of the two interviews. After that, I wrote down each of their study schedules, means of contact, and arranged the first interview with each of them.

4.3.3. Pilot study

Before I formally started my research, I did a pilot study in one of the sample classes by conducting two classroom observations for the reading and writing class, one informal interview with the classroom teacher, and two informal interviews with the students in that class. The purpose was to get myself familiar with the environment, to make the students get used to seeing me around, and to make some adjustments for my proposed study according to the local setting.

After the pilot study, I decided to adjust my proposed study by depending mainly on interview data instead of on observation as planned before. According to washback literature, as mentioned above, classroom observation is emphasized by researchers in recent years. However, practice in the real classroom observation showed that this instrument was not the ideal one for this study. This realization was based on two reasons. Firstly, during my observation, I found it very difficult to find out what each individual student was doing because of the crowded classroom conditions. I thought that data collected through the two observations could only give a very superficial description about what was going on in the classroom. Secondly, during the pilot study, I interviewed informally two students during the break time. I asked them whether they worried about CET-4 and whether they had started CET-4 preparation or decided to prepare for it. According to their answers, students usually spent a lot of time preparing for CET-4 after class. Thus, I found it was impossible to track what most students were doing after class

simply by observation. Thus, I decided to depend mainly on interviews to collect data and use classroom observation as a complementary instrument.

4.4 Process of data collection

4.4.1. Getting started

Before I entered the classroom, I conducted one interview with each of the four classroom teachers. The purpose was to know their specific schedule for that semester, the materials used in the classroom, and their specific classroom actions for students' CET-4 preparation, so as to help me make rich descriptions about the setting of this study and to adjust my data collection to be used later. According to the interviews, one teacher in level-1 and two teachers in Level-2 said they were going to have a simulated CET-4 test in the classroom about three weeks before students would take CET-4. The other teacher in Level-1 was reluctant to give a simulated test in his classroom because he thought the Department of English did not want the teachers to do that. But he told me he would give a lecture on CET-4 in his class. Based on their introductions, I decided to rearrange my data collection process for each class using the following steps: 1) one round of observation for the reading and writing class; 2) one round of observation for the listening and speaking class; 3) the first round of interviewing with the 12 participants; 4) one round of observation for the CET-4 training class; and 5) one round of interviewing with the 12 participants.

4.4.2. Observations

Classroom observations were used only as a complementary instrument for data collection in this study. As mentioned above, observation was conducted three times in each of the four sampled classes. One for Reading and Writing class, one for Listening and Speaking class, and one for CET-4 training

class. The first two rounds of observation proceeded during the first two weeks in November of 2004. The third observation occurred during the last two weeks of the following month. Each observation lasted about two 45-minute periods, with a 10-minute-break between each period. During the first two rounds of observations, I used a structured checklist to observe systematically what happened in the class, specifically, to collect evidence for what was happening to the students in terms of the content of their learning, interactive and non-interactive activities, classroom attendance, duration of each of the activities, and other behaviors of the students. During the observation for CET-4 training, I did not use the structured checklist and just paid attention to the procedure of the teaching and students reactions to the teacher's lecture. While the observation proceeded in the classroom, I made great efforts to allay intrusion by sitting in the corner of the classroom, and took careful notes on what I observed.

4.4.3. Interviews

I used interviews as the main instrument for data collection. There were two rounds of interviews during the study. The first round of interviews followed the first two rounds of classroom observations and the second round of interviews followed the third round of classroom observations. The purpose of the first round of interviews was to find out from the students themselves how they were thinking and what they were doing concerning CET-4 before the teacher offered their help with their preparation. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to look into, from the students themselves, how they were thinking and what they were doing concerning CET-4 after they got help from their English teachers.

Interviews proceeded in the language they used, and in the environment they felt comfortable and were most familiar with. I used Chinese, the students' native language, to do the interviews throughout the research. In each interview, I began by asking the question: "Does CET-4 have influence on your English study?" I followed this grand tour question (Spradley, 1979) with probing the following issues:

- 1) Have you started or decided to prepare for CET-4? If no, why not? If yes, when did you or do you

plan to start? Why?

- 2) What are the most important factors that will determine your score of CET-4? Why? What will be the foci of your CET-4 preparation? Why?
- 3) Do you think that studying the college English textbook can help you take CET-4? Why? How have you been dealing with or how are you going to deal with it? Why?
- 4) What is the total time you spend on English study each week? Which part takes most of your time? Listening? Speaking? Reading? or Writing? How have you been dealing with or how are going to deal with these different parts? Are your strategies affected by CET-4 in any way?
- 5) Do you think your English ability has been improved or impeded through CET-4 preparation? If no, why? If yes, in which parts? Listening? Speaking? Reading? or Writing? or others?
- 6) Have there been or would there be any change in your English study if there were no CET-4?

I audio-taped each interview and transcribed myself in order to become more familiar with the data.

The transcriptions formed the major portion of the data I would use in my analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

As presented above, data in this study included two parts: observation and interview data. Due to time constraints and the reliability of observation data caused by the difficulty of controlling them, observation data were not analyzed in detail but only used as a source for rich description and confirmation for information obtained through interviews. The other part, interview data, was analyzed by using Spradley's (1979) ethnographic methods. The analysis process involved three steps: 1) analyzing the data for each interview; 2) comparing the first round data with the second round data for each participant; and 3) analyzing comprehensively all interview data.

The first step of data analysis for individual interviews started right after the first interview ended.

During the analysis, I tried to let domains and themes emerge by themselves from the data. When I finished the analysis for the first interview data, I compared the domains and themes emerging from the data with the general research questions to find what aspects of the research questions might not be covered or could not be fully answered by the interview data. According to the result of this comparison, I adjusted the specific interview questions for the next interview. This process continued till the end of the second round interviews. In the second step, I compared the domains and themes emerging from the first interview with the ones from the second interview with each participant to find all domains and themes that had emerged from interviews with each participant. Subsequently, I listed out all domains and themes for each participant. In the last step, I compared domains and themes emerging from the 12 participants to find the most frequently addressed ones and analyzed the relationships between different themes.

4.6. Trustworthiness

In order to establish the trustworthiness of the results of this study, I used data triangulation. I used interviewing, participant observation, and review of relevant documents as principle data collection techniques in this study. I kept a personal journal documenting my on-going struggles with the process and the data and my insights, comments, concerns and ideas. I also kept a process record so that I could review where I had been and where I needed to go.

In terms of the main instrument used in this study, I interviewed the 12 participants twice. Also, I interviewed one academic administrator of the Foreign Languages department. The administrator interviewed was also one classroom teacher teaching students in their second academic year. He had been in such a position for about two years and was quite familiar with the university policies and local English teaching curriculum of the university. Besides, I interviewed the four English teachers to get a general idea about the setting in each class. I made informal interviews with students during the class break time

to confirm what I was not sure of during my observation.

As for the complementary instrument, observation, I did not analyze all data collected in detail. However, data collected in this way were not discarded. Those data helped me to make rich descriptions for the setting of this study. Besides, it helped me to rethink what topics to include, what topics to confirm, and what topics to emphasize during the interviews which followed. Also, those data confirm the information gathered through interviews.

Chapter Five: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I will detail the most prominent six themes that have emerged from the analysis of the data collected in the present study, mainly by interviewing 12 participants and conducting classroom observations. To make the findings more specific and descriptive, each theme is organized with several supportive subthemes. Refer to Table 4.1 for a summary of each theme and their supportive subthemes.

Theme 1: Influence of CET-4 in middle school	1.1. Motivation of test preparation 1.2. Affecting participants' perceptions of the difficulty level of CET-4
Theme 2: Sources of CET-4 influence in university and their effects on participants	<u>2.1. The university</u> <u>2.2. Academic departments</u> <u>2.3. English teachers</u> <u>2.4. Peer students</u>
Theme 3: Time	3.1. Total time spent on CET-4 preparation
Theme 4: Class attendance and classroom behaviors	<u>4.1. Class attendance</u> <u>4.2 Classroom behaviors</u>
Theme 5: Vocabulary study	<u>5.1.Enlarging vocabulary through extensive reading</u> <u>5.2. Studying some sections of old test papers</u> <u>5.3. Memorizing the vocabulary in college English textbooks</u> <u>5.4. Studying the CET-4 vocabulary book</u>
Theme 6: Practicing separate skills prescribed in CET-4 test	<u>6.1. Test practice</u> <u>6.2. Additional preparation</u>
Theme 7: Results of test preparation	<u>7.1. Progress in vocabulary study</u> <u>7.2. Progress in listening</u> <u>7.3. Progress in reading</u> <u>7.4. Little progress in writing and speaking</u>

Table 4.1 Summary of Theme and Supportive Subthemes

Theme 1: Influence of CET-4 in middle school

All of the 12 participants reported that information on CET-4 came to them for the first time when they were in middle school. They reported different sources of CET-4 information, such as their English teachers, class advisors, and parents or other relatives. In terms of their reactions to CET-4 in middle school, 7 participants said they did not give any thought to CET-4 at that time but just took it as a name for a certain test. The other five participants reported the effects they felt about CET-4 in different aspects and to different extents.

1.1. Motivation for test preparation

One participant, Fei, reported that, in middle school, influence from his English teacher and class advisor pushed him to make full preparations for CET-4. According to Fei, his English teacher and class advisor asked the students in his class to prepare for and take CET-4 before their graduation, so as to benefit their performance in the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), the exam for the English subject in the National College Entrance Exams. As he went on, in the end, although not all students in their class were allowed to take CET-4 by the school administration, most of them, including himself, had finished memorizing the 4200 CET-4 words and going through all old CET-4 test papers available at that time.

1.2. Effect on participants' perceptions of the difficulty level of CET-4

Four other participants reported that the influence from middle school had some effects on their perceptions of the difficulty level of CET-4 and language abilities to be tested. According to Xia and Wen, when they first heard about CET-4 in middle school, they imagined by themselves that CET-4 must be a very difficult test. Another two participants Hua and Qin perceived the difficulty level of CET-4 in the opposite way because their teachers told them directly that CET-4 was not difficult. Besides forming the first perception of the CET-4 difficulty level, Wen also imagined the content of the test. According to her, CET-4 must not focus on vocabulary, grammar, or reading, as the NMET did, but mainly test English listening and speaking.

Theme 2: Influence of CET-4 in university

Most participants reported that, as soon as they entered the university, they began to receive CET-4 information from different sources, such as peer students, English teachers, academic departments, student advisors, test training companies, bookstores, and parents or other relatives. Of those sources, the university policy, academic departments, English teachers, and peer students were reported to have obvious influence on their test preparation and English study.

2.1. The university

The university mainly affected participants through its policy related to CET-4 that

all undergraduate students should take CET-4 at the end of the third term and pass the test during their four years of undergraduate study. According to the 12 participants, all of them heard this policy from their student advisors, teachers, and other students, and no one heard or read this policy directly from the school administration. However, this policy still influenced participants directly concerning their English study in the following ways: causing test anxiety and motivating all participants to prepare for the test.

2.1.1 Causing test anxiety

The first influence of the school policy on the participants was related to test anxiety. Six participants, Yin, Shan, Yu, Xin, Wen, and Hao, reported that the school policy aroused their anxiety for the test. For example, Yin said that, when she heard the school policy, she started to worry about getting the certificates of her graduation and bachelor degree. This worry started from the first term when she first confirmed the school policy. Yu said the pressure was so big for him that he could hardly bear it. Hao reported that he could not imagine what would happen to him if he failed the test and could not get his graduation certificate or bachelor degree.

The other six participants, Jia, Hai, Hua, Xia, Fei, and Qin, said that the school policy put a little pressure on them. However, the pressure was not powerful enough to bring about anxiety. For example, Hai said, he could feel the pressure of CET-4, but he never worried about the test because he was confident in his English. Hua said she never took CET-4 as something major. According to her, to pass CET-4, she only needed to

use a small part of her English ability to cope with the test. Hai said that, since it was a demand from the university, what she should do was only to follow others and it was unnecessary to worry.

2.2. Academic departments

During the interviews, all of the 12 participants mentioned the influence of CET-4 from their academic departments. According to their descriptions, academic departments influence them in three ways: 1) passing on the school policy related to CET-4; 2) giving them test pressure; and 3) helping them prepare for CET-4.

2. 2. 1. Passing on the school policy related to CET-4

Of the 12 participants, six participants, Xia, Hao, Qin, Yu, Jia, and Hua, reported that their academic departments were an important source for them to know that the school policy was that all students had to pass CET-4 at the end of the third term. According to these participants, in the first month when they came to the university, the student advisors told them the school policy related to CET-4 in weekly students meetings. According to Xia, Yu, Jia, and Hua, what they had heard about CET-4 from middle school was first confirmed by the student advisors.

2. 2. 2. Giving students test pressure

In terms of test pressure from their academic departments, three participants, Fei, Xin and Shan, did not mention this issue. Four participants, Jia, Wen, Qin and Hua, said that their departments tried to put pressure on them, but they did not care much about it

because they were confident in their English. All the other six participants mentioned that they were pressured by their academic departments in different ways.

Hai and Hao reported that the CET-4 mobilizing meetings made them feel great test pressure. According to Hai, before the mobilizing meeting at the beginning of the third term, he did not worry about CET-4 and just prepared in a casual way. In the mobilizing meeting, according to what was said by some departmental administrators and former takers of CET-4, he realized CET-4 was more important than he had thought and what he was doing was not enough. This meeting aroused his worry over the test and pushed him to study in a more intensive way than before.

Hao said that, in the first term, he started to worry about CET-4 preparation after he was asked to attend the CET-4 mobilizing meeting for second year students. In the meeting, to call students' attention to the test, some departmental administrators announced that students were not allowed to have their own computers in case they would spend too much time playing computer games and thus affect their test preparation. The nervous atmosphere created by the department, according to Hao, aroused his anxiety over the test from the first term.

Four participants, Xia, Hao, Yin, and Yu, reported that they felt test pressure from student advisors' talks in weekly student meetings. Xia, Yin, and Yu were pushed to worry about the test from the first term when they heard their student advisors talk about the test in weekly student meetings. According to Xia, her student advisor's comments

about the importance of CET-4 contributed to her feeling that CET-4 is everywhere. Yin started to take CET-4 into serious consideration when she heard from the student advisor that students were not allowed to buy their own computer before they passed the test. Yu reported that the greatest test pressure after he entered university was from his student advisor.

2.2.3. Providing help with test preparation

During the contacts, six participants, Hai, Xin, Wen, Hao, Yu, and Qin, mentioned that their departments tried to offer some help with their test preparation through CET-4 mobilizing meetings, student advisors, or departmental Student Unions.

Four participants, Hai, Hao, Xin and Wen, thought that what their department did was useful for their preparation. According to Hai, he learned a lot in the CET-4 mobilizing meeting from the introductions of some former test takers about their test preparation strategies. Instructed by those students, Hai adjusted his test preparation soon after the meeting. Hao also claimed the usefulness of those introductions. According to him, those introductions gave him a general impression on what CET-4 preparation should involve. Xin also mentioned the student advisor's suggestions on how to prepare for CET-4. According to Xin, he accepted the student advisor's suggestion on how to study CET-4 words. For example, he said he followed the student advisor's suggestion to pay more attention to the 1300 words which most frequently appeared in former CET-4 papers. Besides, when he was studying English words, he did not pay much attention to the pronunciation or spelling of words and just focused on their Chinese meanings and

usages. The other participant, Wen, mentioned the help she received from her student advisor. According to her, encouraged by the student advisor, students in her class practiced one set of former CET-4 papers together each week. This practicing together, as Wen said, gave her the atmosphere of real testing.

The other two participants, Qin and Yu, mentioned the help from the student advisors, but they doubted the usefulness of the help. According to Qin, the student advisor asked the departmental Student Union to provide help with students test preparation. Pushed by the student advisor, the Union organized a CET-4 vocabulary quiz and required students who failed the quiz to memorize CET-4 vocabulary together each Friday morning. As Qin said, she was not sure whether what the Union did was helpful for students CET-4 preparation. Besides, she found many students who were forced to memorize words at a prescribed time and place complained about the rigidity of this rule.

Yu said that, at the end of the second term, the student advisor suggested that students memorize CET-4 vocabulary during the summer vacation and buy some former CET-4 papers. However, Yu disliked the student advisor's suggestion on vocabulary study. As he said, whether it is useful or not, he suggested that we memorize the CET-4 vocabulary.

2.3. English teachers

2.3.1. Helping students with their CET-4 preparation

In terms of the influence of CET-4 on students from their English teachers, no participants reported that their English teachers put much test pressure on them, but most participants reported their English teachers helped them with their test preparation in different ways.

Two participants, Jia and Wen, reported that their English teacher helped them understand the construction of CET-4. According to Jia, he had no idea about the construction of CET-4 in the first two terms. The teacher's introduction to CET-4 construction at the beginning of the third term helped him know about the form of CET-4 for the first time. Wen had had a look at the form of CET-4 during the holidays before the third term. The introduction given by the teacher was reported to help her have a clearer understanding about the construction of CET-4.

Three participants, Yu, Xin, and Hao, reported that their English teachers provided them general strategies for CET-4 preparation. According to Yu, his English teacher suggested that test preparation should involve two parts: memorizing CET-4 vocabulary and practicing former CET-4 papers. According to Yu, the suggestions from his teacher contributed to his change in preparation strategy to memorizing CET-4 vocabulary and test practice. Xin reported that his English teacher suggested that students use former CET-4 papers instead of mock CET-4 papers, and that listening can be improved through intensive study in the last month. Due to the teacher's suggestion, Xin spent more time

than before studying listening during the last month of his preparation. Hao also reported his English teacher influenced his preparation plan. According to Hao, the English teacher said that listening and reading could be improved in the last month, but vocabulary study should depend on accumulated daily work. Therefore, Hao spent the first months memorizing English words and did not prepare for reading until the last month.

Three participants, Wen, Hai, and Xia, reported their English teachers gave them suggestions on CET-4 word study. According to these participants, their English teachers suggested they study words in former CET-4 papers instead of memorizing words in the CET-4 vocabulary book. According to Wen, the teacher said that students should pay attention to the spelling of all words which appeared in former CET-4 papers. Due to the influence of the teacher, in the last month of her preparation, she read for new words in the Vocabulary and Structure sections and Reading sections in old CET-4 papers. Hai said that he stopped using the CET-4 vocabulary book but instead took up former CET-4 papers to study CET-4 words after he heard his teacher's suggestion. Xia presented that, in her last month of preparation, influenced by her English teacher's suggestion, she started to study carefully reading passages in former CET-4 papers and to copy down the good expressions or sentences which she thought she might be useful for her own writing.

Six participants, Shan, Yu, Xin, Jia, Wen and Hua, mentioned that their English teachers offered some help with their writing. One kind of help was related to the written

assignments given by the teachers. All of these six participants said that their English teachers assigned them short compositions from former CET-4 papers and gave them feedback, which was reported to be very useful for these participants' writing preparation. With the help of the teachers' feedback, two participants, Wen and Jia, reported that their writing improved a lot. Besides getting helped through teachers' feedback, two participants, Wen and Qin, also reported preparation strategies offered by their teachers related to writing. Wen said that her English teacher told the students that, to improve their writing, they could try to memorize some short English passages, or put down each word they could hear when they were practicing listening. Wen thought her teacher's suggestion should work. However, she could not follow her teacher's suggestion due to time constraints. Qin's English teacher suggested putting down each word during listening, so as to improve her spelling and listening as well as to benefit her writing. By following her teacher's suggestion for about one month, she found her listening improved a lot, while not much progress was made in her writing.

Hua and Fei mentioned that their English teachers occasionally talked about reading skills in class. However, they thought their teachers' comments were not helpful for them because they had learned from their middle school teachers about those skills.

1.2.4. Peer students

Peer students, which included both students within the target university or students in other universities, were reported to be the most important source of CET-4 influence. According to most participants' descriptions, peer students affected most participants in

three ways: 1) telling them the school policy related to CET-4; 2) motivating them to take actions to prepare for the test; and 3) offering them test preparation strategies.

2.4.1 Informing most students about the school policy

Most participants reported that peer students, especially students within the university, were an important source for them to get information related to the school CET-4 policy. This influence mostly took the form of leisure chatting. Of the twelve participants, except for Fei and Hua, all other ten participants mentioned that they heard the school policy about CET-4 from other students' leisure chatting. Seven participants, Hao, Xin, Hai, Qin, Wen, Shan, and Yin, said that, in the first days when they entered university, they overheard other students talk about the school policy that all undergraduate had to pass CET-4 and that the time required to take the test was at the end of the third term. The information about the school policy related to CET-4 from peer students, according to the six participants, came to them from about one month to one year earlier than that from other sources, such as their student advisors or English teachers.

2.4.2. Motivating most participants to take actions to prepare for CET-4

Besides transmitting information on the school policy to the participants, peer students were also reported to have motivated most participants to start preparation or work more intensively towards the test. The influence of peer students in this aspect mainly took two forms: verbal encouragement and peer competition. About seven participants reported the influence of peer students on their test preparation. According to

Qin, peer competition affected her decision on whether to prepare for the test or not. As Qin said, she had decided not to waste time preparing for the test because she thought her English was good enough to pass CET-4. However, as the test was approaching, almost everybody else in their classes was busy with the test, no matter how good these students' English was. Driven by other students' preparation, Qin took action to prepare for the test in the last three months.

Yu reported the influence of peer competition and his student friends' verbal encouragement on pushing him to work at the test. As Yu said, he had been reluctant to prepare for the test, though he was unconfident in his English and worried a lot about the test. The reasons for his reluctance were, as he said, on one hand, he never learned how to prepare for a test; on the other hand, he disliked test preparation. However, according to Yu, as the test was approaching, almost everybody else in the class was working hard at the test. Seeing others hard work, Yu started to feel uncomfortable about his lack of reaction to the test. At the same time, Yu's student friends, seeing no sign of preparation from him when the test was approaching, started to worry about him and encourage him verbally to work towards the test. As Yu said, the push from these two sides drove him to take actions to prepare for the test.

Yin reported that peer competition stimulated her into making the decision to prepare for CET-4. According to Yin, although she had been feeling the influence of CET-4 from different sources since her middle school, preparing for CET-4 was still an abstract idea for her in the first term of the university. However, during an on-campus English activity,

she heard one student show off that she had passed CET-4 in middle school. This flaunt made her feel shameful about herself. As she said, I asked myself if these people had passed it in middle school, why hadn't I even started to prepare for it? With this stimulation, Yin decided to prepare for the test and began to learn from others' test preparation strategies.

Xia reported that peer competition pushed her to take action earlier than planned. According to Xia, she had decided to start her preparation at the beginning of the third term. However, at the end of the second term, when she saw many other students had started their preparation, she was driven to begin her preparation three months earlier than planned.

Jia also reported the same influence of peer competition. As he said, during the first year in university, he had thought about making a plan to prepare for the test. However, test preparation was still an idea in his mind till the end of the second term, and he had no idea about when to start the preparation. From the beginning of the third term, when he found so many other students had started CET-4 preparation, he simply followed others to take actions for the test preparation.

Hai explained that peer competition pushed him to study more intensively than before. According to him, he had started his preparation in a casual way in the second term. However, at the beginning of the third term, hearing about how others were preparing for CET-4, he felt what he was doing was not enough and started to study in a

more intensive way.

2.4.3. Providing test preparation strategies

Peer students were an important source for test preparation strategies. According to most participants' descriptions, they learned CET-4 preparation strategies by seeing what most other students were doing, or going directly to other students for suggestions on how to prepare for the test. Except for Fei and Qin, all the other ten participants reported that they knew from other students the appropriate starting time, duration, or key aspects for CET-4 preparation.

Four participants reported that the starting time and duration for CET-4 preparation were affected by other students. According to Shan and Hao, after they had made their decisions to prepare for the test, they turned to other students for suggestions on how to prepare for it. One of the suggestions they received was about the starting time and the duration for the preparation. The suggestions they got were similar. Both of them were advised that it was useless to start the preparation too early and they should only use the last three or four months in the third term. Two other participants Xin and Hua consulted their cousins, former takers of CET-4 studying in other universities. Xin was advised to make full use of the last three months to prepare for CET-4. Hua was told that she only needed to work intensively in the last month before the testing day. These suggestions had great influence on their test preparation starting time and preparation duration. Refer to Table 1.1 for detailed information about this issue.

Ten participants learned from other students about the key aspects of CET-4 preparation. Affected by other students, most participants gave great weight to CET-4 vocabulary study. Most participants simply followed others' suggestions or what other students were doing. For example, in Wen's first days at university, she found many students in senior grades studying CET-4 vocabulary, which gave her an impression that, to prepare for CET-4, she should work hard at CET-4 vocabulary first. When she started her preparation, she just followed what others were doing and gave great weight to memorizing the 4200 CET-4 words. Another participant, Hai, also simply followed others' suggestions to give weight to vocabulary study. According to him, during the first two terms in university, he had started his preparation in a casual way without paying much attention to vocabulary study. However, when he heard some high scorers' test preparation strategies, he decided to follow their suggestions to give great weight to vocabulary study and to prepare in a more intensive way.

Some participants, such as Xia, Yu, and Yin, took a critical attitude when other students suggested they give great weight to vocabulary study. However, they returned to the ways suggested by other students during their preparation. For example, Xia doubted the value of memorizing the CET-4 4200 words when she first heard about it and directly started her test practice. However, she found it hard to move on due to so many new words in the test papers. Hence, she returned to others' suggestions to memorize the 4200 CET-4 words. About one month later, when she had almost finished one CET-4 vocabulary book, she found test practice much easier for her.

When Yu heard the suggestion of the importance of memorizing the 4200 CET-4 words, he doubted that learning those words by rote would help him pass the test. Therefore, he continued to learn words through extensive reading without spending special time memorizing CET-4 vocabulary. Another participant, Yin, started her preparation with old test practice and just memorized the CET-4 vocabulary in a casual way. In the end, when both of them found their scores improved little during their test practice, they started to spend special time working hard at the 4200 CET-4 words.

Besides being reminded of the importance of memorizing the CET-4 vocabulary, all of the ten participants were advised of the key role of test practice in test preparation. According to Hao, when he turned to other students for suggestions, all of them emphasized that test practice was the most important thing for test preparation. Therefore, he decided to finish practicing 20 sets of mock CET-4 papers in no more than four months. Another participant, Xin, was told by his cousin that vocabulary study was important for the test preparation. However, as the cousin suggested, test practice was more important than that. Another participant, Hua, was advised by her cousins that it was unnecessary to spend too much time preparing for CET-4. What she had to do was only to practice crazily several sets of former CET-4 papers in the last month before she took CET-4.

Theme 3: Time

3.1 Total time spent on CET-4 preparation

All participants reported the starting time and the duration of their test preparation.

Refer to Table 3.1 for detailed information of total time spent by different participants.

Term	Starting Time	Months of Preparation	Participant (s)
Term 1 (Sept. 2003-Jan. 2004)	Nov.	25	Fei
Term 2 (Mar. 2004-Jul. 2004)	Jun.	7	Xia
Term 3 (Sept.2004-Jan. 2005)	Sept.	4	Hao, Xin, Wen
	Oct.	3	Yin, Hai, Shan, Qin
	Nov.	2	Yu, Jia
	Dec.	1	Hua

Table 3.1 Total time spent by different participants

Six participants, Yin, Yu, Xin, Jia, Shan and Qin, said that the university policy requiring a pass on CET-4 for graduation forced them to spend more time on English. According to Yin, due to the pressure of CET-4, she had to spend a lot of time on listening and vocabulary study. If there were no such a demand to take CET-4, according to Yin, she would save more time for other courses Yu said that he was not

interested in English at all. As he said, he would not touch English if the university did not force him to take the test. According to Shan, if there were no such test to direct his English, he would not know how to study his English. Therefore, he would not spend much time on English. Qin said that, to prepare for CET-4, she had to spend a lot of time on vocabulary study and test practice, which she would not have done if there were no requirement from the university.

The other six participants, Wen, Hai, Hao, Hua, Xia, and Fei, said their total time spent on English study was not affected by the school policy. Some participants, such as Wen, Xia, and Hua, said they would not reduce their time on English because of their interest in it. Some participants said they would not reduce their time on English because it would be very important for their future. For example, Xia, Fei, and Hao said that they wanted to pursue further study abroad. Therefore, English study would be very important for them. Besides, Hao, Wen, Hua, and Xia reported that having good English would give them an advantage of pursuing a well-paid job.

Theme 4: Class attendance and classroom behaviors

According to classroom observations, there was a high rate of college English classroom absence. Besides, some participants were observed preparing for CET-4 by themselves in English classes. However, findings from participant interviews could not provide evidence that CET-4 caused the high rate of classroom absence of some students in-class actions related to CET-4 preparation. Refer to Table 4.1 for the numbers of

students absent from English classes and information related to some students' classroom behaviors.

	Level-1 (A)		Level-1 (A)		Level-2 (B)		Level-2 (B)	
Total Student Number	58		49		51		60	
	No. of Students Attended	No. of students preparing for CET-4 in class	No. of Students Attended	No. of students preparing for CET-4 in class	No. of Students Attended	No. of students preparing for CET-4 in class	No. of Students Attended	No. of students preparing for CET-4 in class
Reading & Writing	46	0	31	0	21	1	51	0
Listening & Speaking	49	1	36	0	25	1	50	0
CET-4 Instruction	28	0	45	0	28	1	51	2

Table 4.1. Class attendance and in classroom behaviors

4.1. Classroom attendance

In the interviews, only two participants said they usually skipped English classes. One participant, Xin, indicated that he usually skipped English class to prepare for CET-4. There were two reasons for his frequent absence from the English class. On one hand,

he did not think the teacher spent much time addressing test-taking or preparing strategies, which were regarded as very important for his CET-4 preparation. On the other hand, according to Xin, although attending English class could help him with his vocabulary and grammar study, it was thought to be too slow a way to improve his English in these two aspects. Therefore, he preferred to skip English class to study CET-4 vocabulary and test-preparing and test-taking strategies by himself.

Another participant, Shan, reported that he did not skip the English class due to the influence of CET-4. On the contrary, he thought CET-4 had pushed him to attend the English class more often than before he started his CET-4 preparation. As he said, he usually skipped the English class because he was not interested in the class. He said that the English class is too boring, especially the reading and writing class. Besides, he complained that attending English class was useless for developing his real English competence. As he reported, “after so many years of English study in this way, I still can not speak English or communicate with native English speakers”. Therefore, he usually skipped English class to study for other courses. However, as he added, since he decided to start his CET-4 preparation, he never missed any listening classes. The reason was, as he reported, anyhow, I am practicing my listening.

4.2 Classroom behaviors

Classroom observations also disclosed another phenomenon that some students memorized CET-4 vocabulary in English class. Of the 12 interview participants, Yin was observed memorizing CET-4 vocabulary in a listening class about two weeks before she

took CET-4. Later on, in the second interview with her, she gave her reasons. According to her, in her early preparation, she did not give enough weight to vocabulary study. However, the more preparation she did, the more important memorizing CET-4 vocabulary seemed to her. When she decided to focus her preparation on vocabulary study, she found she did not have enough time to finish the CET-4 vocabulary. In order to make up as much as possible, she began to memorize CET-4 vocabulary at any time she possibly could.

Except for the three participants above, none of the other nine participants reported or was observed to skip the English class, nor was any other participant observed memorizing CET-4 vocabulary in the English class. Some even gave more weight to the English class due to the influence of CET-4.

Hai reported that, to prepare for CET-4, he depended a lot on the listening class for his listening preparation. Two other participants, Xia and Hua, thought the English class was very helpful for their CET-4 preparation and that attending college English class was another way of CET-4 preparation. The participant, Hua, appeared to be very extreme when she saw some students skip the English class to prepare for CET-4. As she reported,

In English class, especially in the reading and writing class, the teacher spends a lot of time on words, sentences, and translation. Some students don't think this can help much with their preparation. This is a silly idea. You know, words studied in this

way are more impressive than those memorized by yourself. You will find them available whenever you want to use them.

Theme 5: Vocabulary study

According to participants' descriptions, one of the most important parts of their CET-4 preparation was related to vocabulary study. The strategies they used for word study included: enlarging vocabulary through extensive reading; studying some sections of old test papers; memorizing the vocabulary in college English textbooks; and learning by rote the 4200 words in CET-4 vocabulary books.

5.1 Enlarging vocabulary through extensive reading

Two participants, Yu and Hua, said they depended on reading extensively to enlarge their vocabulary for CET-4. Yu doubted the usefulness of memorizing CET-4 words without putting them into context. Besides, he said his favorite way of studying English was to improve his English through reading. Therefore, at the beginning of his preparation, he refused to follow others' suggestions to memorizing words in CET-4 vocabulary, in which words were just a list of words without any sentence context. However, one month later, he found enlarging vocabulary through extensive reading was too slow a way. So, he changed his idea in the last two weeks of his preparation to memorize words in old CET-4 papers. Hua thought words memorized through rote learning were too easy to forget. Therefore, she insisted on enlarging her vocabulary

through intensive reading all through her study.

5.2 Practicing on old/mock CET-4 papers

Three participants, Wen, Xia, and Hai, used old CET-4 papers for vocabulary study in the last month of their preparation. Wen and Xia finished memorizing the 4200 words in CET-4 vocabulary books first. In the last month of their preparation, both of them followed their teachers' suggestions to use old CET-4 papers to check whether any words were missed. Both of them focused on two sections: the Reading section and the Vocabulary and Structure section. The other participant paid attention to all new words which appeared in old CET-4 papers.

5.3. Memorizing the vocabulary in college English textbooks

Another way of vocabulary study reported by participants was memorizing the vocabulary in college English textbooks. Three participants, Hao, Hai and Shan, reported that, besides memorizing words in the CET-4 vocabulary book, they also studied the words in college English textbooks. Hao and Hai said they went through all the new words in the vocabulary in two college English books. Shan said he only paid attention to those words marked as CET-4 words.

5.4. Learning by rote the 4200 words in CET-4 vocabulary books

Of the 12 participants, all ten participants other than Hua and Yu spent a lot of time memorizing by rote the 4200 words in CET-4 vocabulary books. According to their descriptions, all of the ten participants started memorizing the CET-4 vocabulary book

from the beginning of their preparation. Of these ten participants, five participants, Yin, Shan, Hai, Hua, Xia, Xin, continued their vocabulary memorization till the end of their test preparation. One other participant, Hao, stopped memorizing the vocabulary without finishing it from about one month before the testing day to give time for reading practice. Another participant, Hai, changed after the CET-4 mobilizing meeting to study CET-4 words in college English textbooks and old CET-4 papers.

Three other participants, Fei, Wen, and Xia, finished memorizing all of the 4200 CET-4 words one month before the testing day. According to Fei, he had finished memorizing the CET-4 vocabulary in middle school. As soon as he entered university, Fei found he had forgotten many of the words memorized earlier. Therefore, he picked up his CET-4 vocabulary study again. About one month before the testing day, Fei said he had gone through the 4200 words four more times.

Another participant, Wen, said she began her preparation with CET-4 vocabulary study. When she was studying CET-4 words, she spent about one hour each memorizing by rote the spelling and Chinese meanings of the words in a CET-4 vocabulary book. Another participant said the focus of the first two months test preparation was the 4200 CET-4 words. According to her, she finished memorizing the words in one CET-4 vocabulary book in a month. In the next month, she took up another CET-4 vocabulary book and finished memorizing the 4200 words a second time.

Theme 6: Practicing separate skills prescribed in CET-4 test

Another important part of all participants' test preparation was related to improving separate English skills prescribed in CET-4 listening, reading and writing. To improve those skills, all participants depended heavily on test practice. Besides, they did additional preparation in correspondence with these skills.

6.1. Test practice

All participants depended heavily on test practice. When they were practicing test papers, they differed in the following ways: purposes of test practice; materials; and what sections to include in their test practice.

Different participants practiced test papers with different purposes. Most participants said that, besides learning test taking strategies, the purpose of their test practice was more about improving language ability corresponding to the sections selected. For example, Yin and Wen mainly depended on practicing the Listening sections to improve their listening. Wen, Shan, Hai, Yu, Xia took the practicing of the Vocabulary and Structure sections as one way to memorizing CET-4 words. Besides, Xia copied down expressions from sentences from the Reading sections for her writing. Jia depended on practicing the Short Composition sections to improve his writing.

Only three participants, Hua, Fei, and Qin, said their purpose of test preparation was not related to the content of the papers. Hua and Fei said their purpose was only to

acclimatize themselves to the conditions of test taking. Qin said that her purpose was only for test taking strategies. As she said, when I am practicing test papers, I only pay attention to strategies and never care about the content.

During their test practice, participants differed in whether to use old CET-4 papers or mock CET-4 papers. Of the 12 participants, two participants, Fei and Hao, used mock CET-4 papers. Fei chose mock papers for two reasons. Firstly, he had finished most old CET-4 papers during middle school and he did not want to repeat that. Secondly, he thought mock CET-4 papers were more difficult than old CET-4 tests. Therefore, practicing mock papers would be more challenging for him. Hao chose mock papers only because he heard the English teacher and his department would use old papers to simulate some tests to help students with their test preparation. Another two participants, Huan and Qin, did not distinguish the two kinds of papers from each other and used both of them. All other eight participants followed others' suggestions and practiced old CET-4 papers.

Finally, during their test preparation, different participants covered different sections in the test papers. Three participants, Jia, Xia and Huan, practiced all sections of a set of papers. The other nine participants only practiced sections selectively. Refer to Table 5.1 for detailed information related to this issue. From Table 5.1, it can be seen that the first three sections were given great weight during participants' test practice and many participants skipped the Writing section while they were practicing.

Sections	Listening Comprehension	Vocabulary and Structure	Reading Comprehension	Short Composition*
Number of participants	9	10	11	3

Table 6.1. The number of participants and sections they included in test practice.

***Note:** Four other participants included the Short Composition sections a couple of weeks before they took CET-4.

6.2. Additional preparation

Besides practicing test papers, some participants did additional preparation related to English skills they were weak at. Refer to Table 6.2 for detailed information related to this issue. During the contacts, different participants described different methods they used to prepare those skills.

Skills	Listening	Reading	Writing
Number of participants	7	5	8

Table 6.2 The number of participants who did additional preparation related to different skills

During extra listening preparation, three ways were reported by the seven

participants: listening to authentic English; listening to recorded readings of the passages in college English textbooks; and training in listening by following a special listening textbook. Five participants reported that they listened to authentic English to practice their listening. Xia said that, to improve her listening, she always tuned into live English programs during class break. Shan reported that he always listened to live English programs on the Internet or watched English movies. Another two participants, Hai and Shan, said they listened to recorded readings of the passages in their college English textbook. The third method was reported by only one participant Xin.

As for extra reading preparation, three ways were reported by the five participants. One way was to use textbooks for the college English course or some other major course. For example, Qin read passages in the College English textbook to practice some reading skills. Wen and Hao used the Extensive Reading textbooks to improve their reading speed. Xia used one textbook in English used for her major course to practice her reading. Another way was to read authentic English. Two participants, Qin and Xia, reported using this method. For example Qin said that she spent about half an hour each day reading English magazines or other books written in English. According to Xia, besides reading English papers or English magazines, she also surfed the Internet and visited websites written in English. The third way was to practice some reading materials written in the format of the reading sections of CET-4. Only one participant, Xin, said that, besides practicing all reading sections in former CET-4 papers, he also finished 160 passages written in a similar format to the CET-4 Reading section.

In terms of preparation for writing, four ways were reported by eight participants. The first way was to cultivate their sense of English through reading others' writing. Five participants, Xin, Wen, Hao, Hua, and Xia, mentioned this issue when talking about writing preparation. Of these five participants, three participants, Xin, Wen, and Hao, mostly depended on reading sample writings of the Short Composition sections. Hua read out loud and memorized some short English writings each morning to cultivate her sense of English. Xia relied on extensive reading to reach this purpose.

The second way was to learn CET-4 writing skills from CET-4 preparing materials, which were used by two participants, Shan and Hai. According to these two participants, they did not make any other special preparation for CET-4 writing during their earlier preparation. The only thing they did was to read some guidebooks for CET-4 writing starting about two weeks before they took CET-4. The third way was to learn some typical expressions and sentence frames useful for CET-4 writing. Only one participant, Xia, reported using this method. According to her, she downloaded from the Internet 35 sentence frames and learned them by rote. Besides, during her test preparation, she copied down any expressions she thought useful for her writing and read them everyday. The last method was to practice writing. Only one participant, Jia, reported using this way. According to him, apart from finishing all of the Short Composition sections, he looked for some other topics to write on and gave his writings to his English teachers for feedback.

Theme 7: Outcomes

In the second interviews with all participants, when they were asked in what ways had their CET-4 preparation affected their English competence, all participants described how much progress they had made in vocabulary, listening, reading, writing, and speaking. According to their descriptions, after their CET-4, obvious progress was reported in their vocabulary, listening, and reading, and little was reported in writing or speaking. Refer to Table 7.1 for the reported progress after participants' test preparation.

Table 7.1. Achievement in participants' English study after their CET-4 preparation

	Vocabulary	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
GP	8	4	4	2	0
SP	2	4	2	0	2
NL	2	4	6	10	10

Abbreviations: GP= great progress SP=small progress NL= no or little progress

7.1. Progress in vocabulary

Ten participants reported their progress in vocabulary study. Of these ten participants, eight reported that their vocabulary had been enlarged greatly through test preparation. Of these eight participants, five reported that they found their vocabulary greatly enlarged even though they were not able to finish memorizing all of the 4500 new words in CET-4 vocabulary. Three participants finished memorizing the CET-4 vocabulary at least once before they took CET-4. For example, Fei had gone through the

4500 CET-4 words four more times in university. Xia said that, after she finished memorizing CET-4 vocabulary three times, she felt her vocabulary had climbed up a very steep stair. Wen said that she finished memorizing the 4500 words two weeks before she took CET-4. After that, she felt much easier when she was practicing former CET-4 tests.

Two participants said they made some progress in their vocabulary. For example, Jia reported that after two months of CET-4 vocabulary memorizing, he felt his vocabulary had been enlarged to some extent. Hai did not feel his vocabulary enlarged even after he spent some time memorizing words in a CET-4 vocabulary book. As he said, words memorized by rote were very easy to forget. Later, he changed to studying the new words in the English textbooks and the former CET-4 papers. About two weeks to CET-4 testing day, Hai said he could feel his progress in vocabulary study.

Two participants, Yu and Hua, did not report any progress in vocabulary. Yu said he did not realize the importance of spending special time on CET-4 vocabulary study until two weeks before he took the test. Therefore, two weeks work on CET-4 vocabulary helped little to enlarge his vocabulary. The other participant, Hua, said she never spent special time memorizing CET-4 vocabulary during her whole preparation. Therefore, she did not report her progress in vocabulary study.

7.2. Progress in listening

The second most obvious progress was in listening. Of the 12 participants, four participants, Hua, Xia, Jia and Fei, did not report progress in listening at the end of their

preparation. All other eight participants said they made progress in listening to different extents. Five participants, Shan, Hao, Xin, Qin, and Wen, reported that their listening had improved a lot after their CET-4 preparation. Among these five participants, three participants, Xin, Hao, and Qin, especially emphasized their achievement in this respect. Xin said that, at the beginning of his preparation, he could get at most 9 out of the 20 points for the listening section. However, at the end of his preparation, he could get as much as 15 points. Hao's report of progress in listening was based on his feeling. Although progress in listening can be seen from the marks he got in test practice, as he said, he could still tell his listening definitely improved. Qin also reported her great improvement in listening through one month of intensive practice. As she said, at the beginning of her practice, she could only get about 12 to 15 points for the listening section. However, things turned better one month later. As she said, she could get 19 points (out of the 20 points) for the listening section.

Three participants, Yin, Yu, and Hai, reported that they felt a little progress in their listening after their test preparation. According to Yin, listening preparation took most of her preparation time. Therefore, even without checking the result of her listening preparation, she still believed her listening improved. The other two participants, Yu and Hai, said that, before they prepared for the test, they never spent any time on listening. Therefore, they believe their time spent on listening practice definitely brought about improvement in their listening.

7.3. Progress in reading

The third kind of progress was in reading. Three participants, Xin, Xia, and Qin, announced that they made great progress in this respect after their CET-4 preparation. According to Xin, he had taken reading as one of his focuses during his preparation. To improve his reading, not only did he finish the reading sections in all former CET-4 tests, but also he practiced a lot of reading passages from other preparation materials. Through a lot of practice, Xin found his reading obviously improved. Another participant, Xia, mainly depended on vocabulary study to improve her reading. After about three months of intensive vocabulary study, she found her reading climbed up a very steep stair. Qin spent about one month on test practice. According to her, during her test practice, each day, she finished four passages in the reading section of former or simulated tests. In the last week of her preparation, when asked the results of her preparation, she said she felt her reading had improved a lot.

Two participants, Wen and Hai, reported that CET-4 preparation helped them make some but not much progress in reading. Both of them said that CET-4 forced them to spend time on reading practice. Hence, it was impossible that there were no progress. However, according to them, what had been improved in the practice was more about test-taking strategies than real English reading ability.

Very little evidence for improvement in reading could be found from the other seven participants' descriptions. Yin, Shan, Yu, Hua, and Jia did not mention any progress in reading at all when asked about the results of their preparation. Another participant, Hao,

had not reduced his worry about the reading section even by two weeks before he took CET-4. The other participant, Fei, said that CET-4 preparation did not give him much help with his reading. As he said, the reading section was very easy for him. Hence, he did not practice reading during his preparation.

7.4. Little progress in writing and speaking

In the contacts, all participants mentioned the effects of CET-4 on their writing and speaking. In terms of writing, only two participants, Jia and Xia, mentioned great progress in writing. Jia attributed his progress in writing to his test practice and help from his English teacher. As presented in Theme 6, Jia never skipped the Short Composition sections during test practice. Besides, he did additional writing practice and gave these papers to his English teacher for feedback. Through his own practice and the help of his teacher's feedback, Jia found his writing improved a lot at the end of his preparation. Xia said her progress in writing was the result of her test practice and learning of useful expressions and sentence frames. Also, she thought her sense of English helped her make improvements in writing.

All ten other participants reported little or no progress in writing. Some participants provided reasons for their failure in writing preparation. For example, some participants, such as Xin, Hao, and Yu, said they did not know how to prepare for CET-4 writing. Besides, during their English study, they seldom practiced writing. Yin said she counted on vocabulary study to improve her writing. However, when she was writing, she never knew how to use the CET-4 words she memorized during CET-4 vocabulary study.

Concerning speaking, only two participants, Jia and Hua, reported some progress in speaking and all the other ten participants reported no progress. According to these two participants, during their English study, they always practiced spoken English. Jia said her practice and progress in spoken English was partly the result of CET-4 influence. Hua said her practice and improvement in spoken English was not the result of CET-4 influence but her own interest in English.

Chapter Six: Discussion, Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the original form of CET-4 was affecting participants' perceptions and actions related to their study of the college English course and their English study before they took CET-4 (during the first three terms of their undergraduate study). In chapter five, the most obvious seven themes which emerged from the data were presented. In this chapter, the characteristics of these themes are explored in light of some concepts from the washback literature. Firstly, the seven themes are put into three categories based on findings from washback literature. Then, the findings related to the themes are discussed.

6. 1. Categories of themes

In washback literature, Wall (2000) divided components of washback into three categories: antecedents, process, and outcomes. Based on this division, the theme of influence in middle school and the theme of sources of CET-4 influence at the university and their effects on participants' fit into the first category. The theme of class attendance and classroom behaviors, the theme of vocabulary study, and the theme of practicing skills prescribed in CET-4 address the second category. The theme of results of test preparation belongs to the third category. Refer to Table 5 for the categorization of themes.

Antecedents	Process	Outcomes
Theme 1: Influence of CET-4 in middle school	Theme 3: time	Theme 7: Results of test preparation
Theme 2: Sources of CET-4 influence in university and their effects on participants	Theme 4: Class attendance and classroom behaviors	
	Theme 5: Vocabulary study	
	Theme 6: Practicing separate skills prescribed in CET-4 test	

Table 5: Categorization of themes

6. 1. 1. Antecedents

Findings from the study showed that different factors such as test stakes (attached to CET-4 by the school policy), academic departmental factors, English teacher factors, and student factors had influence to different extents on participants' sources of CET-4 information, test preparation motivation, and their beliefs and ways of CET-4 preparation.

Firstly, two factors, student factors and academic departmental factors, had great influence on students' sources of CET-4 information (the school policy that all undergraduates were required to take CET-4 and the time to take the test). According to the findings of this study, ten participants reported that they heard CET-4 information from other students and six participants reported they heard from their academic departments through their student advisor's talk in weekly student meetings. No participants reported they had seen or read CET-4 information directly from the

university.

Secondly, the university factor (the school policy factor), academic departmental factors (departmental administrators' pressure), student factors (peer competition, verbal encouragement, participants' individual motivations for English study) had great influence on participants' test preparation motivation. According to the findings of this study, the school policy had the greatest influence on participants' test preparation motivation. It drove all participants to prepare for and take the test. Besides, it brought about test anxiety to six participants. The second greatest influence in terms of test motivation was from peer students in the forms of peer competition or verbal encouragement. About seven participants reported that peer competition or verbal encouragement motivated them to make the decision to prepare for CET-4, start their preparation earlier than planned, or put their plan into action. The academic departments also had some influence on motivating participants' test preparation in the forms of departmental administrators' talks in CET-4 mobilizing meetings and student advisors' talks in weekly student meetings. Two participants were affected by the former factor and four other participants were affected by the latter factor. English teachers had little influence on motivating participants to prepare for CET-4.

Thirdly, student factors (former CET-4 takers' test preparation experience, participants' individual English study motivations), teacher factors (teachers' beliefs about test preparation) and academic departmental factors (student advisors' beliefs about test preparation) had great influence on participants' beliefs and ways of CET-4

preparation. Among these factors, former takers' test preparation experience had the greatest influence on participants' beliefs about and ways of test preparation. About ten participants learned test preparation strategies from other students, especially former CET-4 takers. Besides, about seven participants mentioned that their English teachers helped some of them with their preparation in some ways, for example, introducing to participants the format of CET-4, offering them suggestions on making test preparation plans, giving written assignment to help their writing preparation, and teaching skills related to reading or listening preparation. The academic departments also gave a few participants help by inviting some former CET-4 takers to introduce their test preparation strategies or giving students preparation strategies through the student advisors.

6. 1.2. Process

The influence of CET-4 increased as the testing day was approaching

CET-4 had very little influence on participants during their middle school. According to the findings, most participants did not report any influence of CET-4 on their English study. Only one participant, Fei, said his actions of English study were affected by CET-4. Four other participants reported that CET-4 only affected their perceptions of the difficulty level of CET-4.

The influence of CET-4 increased during participants' first two terms in university. As participants went to university, all participants started to receive information related to CET-4. Nine participants, Yin, Shan, Yu, Xin, Wen, Hao, Jia, Hai, and Xia, started to worry about the test. Six of them, including Yin, Shan, Yu, Xin, Wen, and Hao, even

reported test anxiety. With this test pressure, eight participants, Yin, Shan, Hao, Xin, Xia, Jia, Wen, and Hai, started to consult others or test preparation materials for test preparation strategies, and two participants, Fei and Xia, even started their preparation. CET-4 influence became very strong from the beginning of the third term. From that time, about three to four months before CET-4 testing day, seven more participants began their test preparation with CET-4 vocabulary study. From December, all participants except for Wen, who said she could not find enough time for CET-4 preparation due to pressure from other courses, started to spend more time practicing old or mock CET-4 test papers.

CET-4 had great influence on the content and intensity of participants' English study, while less of their time was spent on ways of their English study

Firstly, CET-4 had great influence on the content of participants' English study in terms of vocabulary study and test practice. According to the findings of this study, during the third term, especially the first three months, most participants spent a lot of time studying CET-4 vocabulary and test practice. Besides, from December, all participants increased their preparation by practicing intensively on more old/mock CET-4 papers each week. If there were no CET-4, according to most participants, they would not study CET-4 vocabulary books or CET-4 papers at all. One participant, Xin, said he would focus on college English textbooks. Four other participants said they would use some authentic materials such as live English programs or English magazines to improve their listening or reading.

Secondly, CET-4 had a great influence on the intensity of most participants' English study. According to their reports, they had to finish memorizing the 4200 CET-4 words and at least ten sets of former/mock CET-4 papers within one to four months. At the same time, during the third term, they were taking more courses than during each of the first two terms. Therefore, time constraints forced them to study in a very intensive way during the third term, especially during the last month. For example, Yu said he started to pay attention to the words and their usage when he was watching English movies during his test preparation. Shan said he began to take notes in a more careful way in English classes and review them after class.

Thirdly, CET-4 had influence on some, but not all participants' total time spent on English study. Six participants, Yin, Yu, Xin, Jia, Shan and Qin, said that the university policy forced them to spend more time on English. If there had been no CET-4 influence, their reasons for reducing their total time on English would have included pressure from other major course, low interest in English, and perceptions of the usefulness of test practice in helping them to improve their English ability. The other six participants, Wen, Hai, Hao, Hua, Xia, and Fei, said their total time spent on English study was not affected by the school policy. Factors influencing their total time on English study included participants' own interest in English and perceptions of the importance of English in employment competition and pursuing further study.

In addition, CET-4 had little influence on how participants learn English. According to the findings of this study, all participants depended heavily on individual study to

enlarge their vocabulary and improve English skills prescribed in CET-4. When they were studying vocabulary, all of them, except for Hua, depended heavily on learning by rote. Besides, when they were practicing skills prescribed in CET-4, most of them depended heavily on practicing items in CET-4 papers by using skills they learned from their middle school. Only one participant, Wen, said that, if there were no CET-4, she would create chances to practice her spoken English interactively with native English speakers.

CET-4 had some influence on participants' study in college English courses

With regard to participants' study in college English courses, firstly, CET-4 affected participants' English class attendance and their classroom behaviors. However, the present research could not identify to what extent CET-4 affected participants in two respects. According to the findings of this study, CET-4 influenced participants' classroom attendance. On the one hand, CET-4 pressure partly led to some participants' absence from English class. For example, one participant, Xin, said that CET-4 pressure forced him to spend a lot of time on test preparation. Besides, he found college English class was of little help in his test preparation. Therefore, he usually skipped English class to prepare for CET-4. On the other hand, CET-4 pressure caused some participants to attend English class more often than before. According to Shan, he usually skipped college English class because he thought English class too boring. However, as he decided to prepare for CET-4 in the third term, he started to depend on attending English listening class as part of his listening preparation. In addition, CET-4 affected some participants' classroom behaviors. During the classroom observation for the present

research, a few participants were observed to prepare for CET-4. However, only one participant reported that CET-4 pressure forced her to prepare for CET-4 in class. Findings from this study could not tell whether other participants did that only because of the pressure of CET-4.

Secondly, CET-4 influenced some participants on the weight they gave to college English courses after English class. Findings of this study could not identify how CET-4 influenced half of the participants in this respect. Only one participant, Xin, said CET-4 preparation forced him to ignore his study of the college English course. Five participants said CET-4 influenced them to give more weight to college English courses. Shan paid more attention to notes he took in English classes. Hao and Hai memorized vocabulary in the two college English textbooks. Hua and Xia depended on college English class to improve their listening and vocabulary.

6. 1. 3. Outcomes

CET-4 brought about participants' improvement in receptive learning and did not encourage their productive English learning. This study disclosed at least two reasons for these results. Firstly, participants' English study was influenced directly by the format of CET-4 construction. According to the findings of this research, during their test preparation, their focus was on skills prescribed in CET-4, such as Listening, Reading, Vocabulary and Structure, and Writing. Therefore, most of them did not spend time on speaking.

Secondly, during their study, participants were limited by their learning strategies in different language skills. According to findings of the present research, most participants focused on vocabulary study, listening, and reading while spending very little time on writing. Besides, they mainly depended on learning by rote to study vocabulary and doing multiple choice items to practice listening and reading. According to most participants, they were not sure how to prepare for writing. Therefore, little practice in writing led to little improvement in writing.

6.2. Implications

Discussions of the findings have implications for college English teaching and learning in the local university, CET-4 reformers, and washback researchers in the following aspects:

1. Most students received CET-4 information from academic departments or other students. The university administration gave very little direct information related to CET-4. Therefore, the target university should make their school policy public and easily accessible to students.
2. Most students felt great test pressure from the university and their academic departments. However, administration at these two levels offered very little help with students' test preparation. Help with their test preparation within the university mainly came from English teachers. However, the help from the

teacher was too limited to meet students' need. For example, most students did not know how to prepare for CET-4 writing and showed their need of more written assignments from their English teachers. Among all concerned to help students prepare for CET-4, the university and academic departments should work together with English teachers to offer students more help with their general test preparation strategies and technologies especially in students' weak areas such as writing. Besides, the university or academic departments could create more chances for CET-4 takers to communicate with former takers to make full use of their test preparation experience.

3. CET-4 pressure contributed to some extent to the absence of some students from English class. As well, other factors such as students' dissatisfaction with the college English class were also responsible for the high rate of class absence. To help lower the rate of English class absence and improve students' classroom behavior, college English teachers should improve their college English teaching according to students' needs.
4. The university should consider a plan for teacher training in order to help teachers improve their college English teaching or offer help with students' test preparations strategies. In terms of teachers' knowledge in test preparation strategies, the testing body should also be responsible and cooperate with local universities to train teachers how to teach test preparation strategies.

5. To reduce negative washback and produce more positive washback, CET-4 reformers should consider reducing the weight of vocabulary during any new test design and increase the weight given to writing and speaking. Besides, to encourage students to study college English more intensively, the content of CET-4 should be closely related to the college English teaching syllabus.
6. Further learner washback research can adopt the frame proposed by Wall (2000) to answer the following questions. What factors affected the perceptions and actions of learners' language study? To what extent and in what ways are students affected by those factors? To what extent is a test affecting students' class attendance and classroom behaviors? To what extent is a test related to any local language teaching syllabus? And finally, whether and to what extent are students affected in terms of their receptive and productive language learning?

Among the six implications, items 1 to 4 are suggestions for local educational settings. Item 5 is for CET-4 reformers. Questions in the last item are for future washback researchers.

6.7 Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. The first limitation is related to the duration of this study. Due to time and financial constraint, data collection only lasted for three months from three months before to one week before they took CET-4. Another

limitation is about the sampling. In this study, only one university was included. Therefore, the findings of this study can only represent learner washback within this university or other universities with the same educational conditions in the same city. The third limitation is with the methods adopted in this study. Due to the difficulty of controlling observations, data collected through observations were not fully analyzed and were mostly used as complementary information. Therefore, this study could not identify the extent to which CET-4 was responsible for the high rate of English class absence. Despite these limitations, this study is still disciplined in that I studied carefully for the rationale of this study, I made a careful proposal before the study, I used triangulation to guarantee the trustworthiness of this study, I made a disciplined data analysis by adopting Spradley's (1979) methods, and I discussed in detail the findings of this study and gave suggestions for local university, test reformers and washback researchers.

Conclusion

At this point, I have accomplished the purpose of this study to explore issues related to the old CET-4: whether CET-4 led to college students' high rate of English class absence; and whether CET-4 brought about receptive learning rather than productive learning. Through looking at students' perceptions and actions related to English study during the three months before students took CET-4, I found that: 1) different factors contributed to students' perceptions and actions in terms of the information they received about CET-4, test preparation motivation, and test preparation strategies; 2) the influence

of CET-4 increased as the test was approaching; 3) CET-4 had a great influence on the content and intensity of students' English learning but little on their ways of English learning; 4) CET-4 affected some participants' college English study, but whether there was more negative or positive washback can not be found from this study; and 5) CET-4 brought about receptive learning rather than productive learning. The findings of this study will be significant for the target university administration, CET-4 reformers and washback researchers.

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