

Moving forward to Communicative Proficiency: A Comparison between CET-4 Listening Comprehension Tests and IELTS Listening Subtest*

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Abstract—The current research attempts to compare the specific degrees of communicative properties of two types of College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) listening comprehension (before and after 2006 reform) in the light of IELTS (International English Language Test System) listening subtest, to know how well each of these three tests matches student's learning expectation and requirements, and to investigate student's psychological perception on them. This paper also tries to explore to what extent that 2006 reform has improved the communicative proficiency of CET-4, in terms of listening test. Based on quantitative and qualitative methods, it makes a comparative analysis between three listening subtests: old CET-4, new CET-4 and IELTS. Research subjects are 121 students from an international joint education program in a university in Beijing. Investigations into their performances are recorded and analyzed, together with a questionnaire survey. The present research finds that listening comprehension in new CET-4 has high degree of similarity with that in IELTS, particularly in testing of English communicative competence. With substantial amount of communicative properties, new CET-4 is a valid tool to measure student's listening proficiency.

Index Terms—CET-4, IELTS listening, comparison, communicative proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

College English Test (band 4), issued by the Ministry of Education in 1985 in mainland China, has gradually become a large-scale national examination, and is commonly recognized as one of the standardized English examinations. Every year, CET-4 is held twice in June and December respectively, and millions of college students have been involved in this large-scale language test. A CET-4 certificate or grade report is critical for most college graduate, for many companies or business demand good CET-4 record when recruiting new employees. In 1990s and the early periods of 21 century, some colleges and universities even made it a regulation that graduate cannot be granted a diploma if he fails to pass CET-4 after four-year college study. Therefore, as the most massive and influential standardized national English test, CET-4 has deep positive influence on student's English learning, yet at the same time it has been criticized for its negative back-wash effect on college English teaching and learning. Arguments on its back wash effects, both positive and negative, have never ceased. A large number of researchers strongly attacked its glaring inability in assessing students' real communicative proficiency and even demand total abolishment. In 2006, the Ministry of Education in China launched a racial reform to this traditional test, aiming at developing an effective assessing instrument with relatively high reliability and validity, to test student's real language proficiency. Therefore, there are old CET4 (before December 2006) and new CET-4 (from December 2006 on). Is this reform successful? Is the new CET-4 more communicative than the old one? What is student's response to the new CET-4? The present study starts with the CET-4 listening comprehension, making a comparison between three listening subtests, intending to explore answers to these research questions.

The present writer chooses IELTS listening subtest as the frame of reference, for IELTS is widely recognized as a large-scale ESL test that offers comprehensive examination for candidates, concerning reading, writing, listening and speaking components. In 2011, over 150 million candidates around the world have taken IELTS, and among them over 300,000 Chinese test-takers have received this international test in 48 test centers. China takes up around 50% of IELTS candidates in Asian area and applicants even have to wait in long lines to register.

In China, as the result of economic development and globalization, more than 1000 international joint education programs like "2+2" program or "3+1" program have been gaining increasing popularity. Programs like this will

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generally provide IELTS preparation course, consulting service for school application and visa application, guidance on security principles in the target traveling country, etc. The subjects of this study are just from one of these international joint education programs. They are 121 students from the International School of North China Electric Power University. They will work under a “2+2” program, that is, 2-years' preliminary study in China, and two-years' follow-up study in some prestigious British universities, like Cardiff University, University of Bath, University of Manchester, University of Edinburgh, or in some American universities, like Purdue University, Illinois Institute of Technology etc. They are supposed to take IELTS, and they should meet the corresponding requirements and get satisfactory score in overall language ability and in each of the four subtests. What the stakeholders expect to gain from specific score is reliable assessment of the applicant's academic competence in their forthcoming study abroad. They are required to pass CET-4 in the first semester, and IELTS in the third semester. Compared with undergraduates in other departments, they are among those few people who are familiar with all these three tests and feel more naturally when asked to answer questions from the questionnaire.

According to Dunkel (1986), this goal (the development of communicative competence and oral fluency) is achieved by putting the horse (listening comprehension) before the cart (oral production). In other words, the key to achieving proficiency in speaking is developing proficiency in listening comprehension. However, among the four language competence (listening, speaking, reading and writing), listening is very hard to be assessed and has long been neglected. The easiest way of assessing a student's listening competence is a comprehension test. Therefore, the reliability and validity of listening test, especially validity, are critical in accurately measuring a student's listening competence.

In terms of listening test, a lot of academic research has focused on the theoretical construction and micro issues, including textual features, accents, varieties of examination questions, etc. In mainland China, researchers have great concern on CET-4, but they are most interested in the exploration of effective ways of improving college English teaching and test skills. Most researches are theoretical assumptions or field investigation for the whole test, far from focusing on listening comprehension section. Researches specifically focusing on listening section are very rare, especially those on the communicative properties of listening section. However, with the unprecedented trend of economic, political and cultural globalization, communicative properties of a test serve as important criteria of assessment in a lot of teaching institutions and organizations.

Therefore, this research attempts to explore: 1) if subject's listening performance in new CET-4 closer to that in old CET-4, or closer to that in IELTS; 2) what kind of expectation most students have for listening proficiency test. This research is assumed to answer these questions and provide reference framework for the CET-4 reform.

1. The classification of listening test and basic concepts of communicative listening proficiency test

The classification of listening test is based on that of language test classification. According to Buck (2001), there are three types of language tests: discrete-point approach test, integrative approach test and communicative approach test. In discrete-point approach, language competence is tested by individual items or questions. Generally, each question or item focuses on one individual language point. The multiple choice question is the most-frequently used testing instrument. Integrative approach test, on the contrary, is the measurement of test-takers' overall competence in combining all language units and functions, and the typical form include dictation and cloze. These two are exactly opposite ways of testing, both with their strengths and weaknesses, among which the most obvious limitation lies in lack of authenticity. And there is no interaction between test-takers and test. Consequently, these tests cannot objectively reflect student's real language proficiency and communicative competence. Communicative approach test aims at testing student's language competence in various events and their ability to use the target language effectively. Bachman (1990) developed the concept “communicative language ability” and later constructed a whole systematic framework for communicative approach test. With the development of social economy and technology, communicative approach test has been the most popular way of language ability assessment.

In terms of communicative listening ability test, reliability and validity should be first guaranteed, at the same time, authenticity, interaction and backwash effect to practical teaching cannot be neglected. Some believe it is not hard to keep a communicative test valid, but that is far from the case of reliability. In fact, if test designers keep strict limitation to the sentence length or word limit of reference answer, for example, to set the word limit for answer to subjective questions, the reliability of test will be greatly improved. The theoretical construction determines the form of listening test. In test designs, equal weight may be placed on knowledge (understanding how the language works theoretically) and proficiency (ability to use the language practically), or greater weight may be given to one aspect or the other. According to Buck (2001), equal weights should be placed on test-takers' knowledge and proficiency. In test design, properties including accent, language length and speed should be governed by the principle of authenticity and interaction. Where do the questions should be put (before listening or after listening)? How to introduce the listening passage in a brief way? What font or size is appropriate? Minor properties like these seem unimportant, actually, they are very influential in the real event. Successful communicative testing could trigger high motivational learning behavior and positive backwash effect.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

143 first year students from the International School of North China Electric Power University in Beijing are chosen

to participate in this research. They are from four classes, and working for the coming CET-4 in June 2013. However, 9 of them had access to the testing material in high school, 13 of them fail to attend all the three tests for field trip or sickness leave. Consequently, 121 students come out to be the subjects of present study.

B. Research Methods

The main tools include listening comprehension test (one old CET-4 test paper, one new CET-4 test paper and one IELTS test paper), a questionnaire (subjects' view about old CET-4, new CET-4, IELTS and their learning expectation)

1) Listening tests: the testing materials include one old CET-4 test paper (June 2006), one new CET-4 test paper (June 2012), and Cambridge IELTS 4 test paper. The chosen test papers have been carefully examined to meet the need of being examination tools. The purpose of listening test is to compare subjects' language competence reflected in each test.

2) Questionnaire: the questionnaire focuses on subject's view on CET-4 (old and new) and IELTS, their realistic requirement for English listening before and after 4 years' under-graduate study, subjects' after-class listening practice, subject's suggestion for listening class and CET-4. The purpose of the questionnaire is to know how well each of the tests matches subjects' learning expectation and requirements, and to know subject's view on CET-4 reform.

C. Data Analysis

Three separate listening tests were processed within two weeks (from May 25th, 2013 to June 19th, 2013), then each subject completed the designed questionnaire.

1. Correlations

Subjects' scores in these three tests are firstly collected and analyzed in terms of correlation coefficient, together with theoretical analysis of these three test papers. As internationally acknowledged, correlation coefficient from 0.9 to 1 means very high correlation; from 0.7 to 0.9 means rather high correlation; from 0.4 to 0.7 means medium correlation, from 0.2 to 0.4 means low correlation; 0.39 and below means negligible correlation. Because these three test papers are scored in different ways, the Z value should be calculated. The correlation coefficients of these test papers are like follows:

R (between new CET-4 and IELTS) = 0.46

R (between new CET-4 and old CET-4) = 0.21

R (between IELTS and old CET-4) = 0.17

Therefore, it is obvious that the New CET-4 has medium correlation with IELTS, old CET-4 nearly has negligible correlation with IELTS. What might be surprising is the low correlation between old CET-4 and new CET-4, although they have much similar level of difficulty. One thing that cannot be denied is the correlation between new CET-4 and IELTS is at medium level. A possible reason for this is the huge gap of difficulty level between them: CET-4 is much easier than IELTS.

2. Theoretical analysis of test papers

The comparison of physical properties of these three test papers can be shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1:
COMPARISON BETWEEN CET-4 TEST PAPERS AND CAMBRIDGE IELTS TEST PAPER

| | Theoretical Basis | Accent | Mean length | Discourse features | Question and task |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Old CET-4 listening comprehension (June 2012) | Structuralism | American Accent | 235 words(the mean of all passages) | Written English | Multiple choice |
| New CET-4 listening comprehension(June 2012) | Structuralism+Communicativeness | American Accent | 241 words(the mean of long conversation, passage and compound dictation) | Written English+Spoken English | Multiple choice+blank filling |
| Cambridge IELTS 4 listening subtest | Communicativeness | Diverse Accents | 365 words(the mean of four listening sections) | Written English+Spoken English | Blank Filling, Chart, Table, Multiple Choice |

According to Table 1, the new CET-4 test paper works as a transition between old CET-4 and IELTS. The new CET-4 features a great majority of multiple choice questions, inheriting the tradition of the old CET-4. Both of them prefer after-listening questions to before-listening questions, no background noise or visual hints. The typing and layout of letters is uniform, no changes in color or size. In terms of content, new CET-4 is much closer to IELTS, particularly in the long conversation, which renders comparatively more authentic dialogues in real events. There is an increasing tendency of question-answers (30%), which would to some extent trigger psychological interaction from the test-takers, indicating benign back wash effect in test design and English language teaching.

To sum up, the new CET-4 has shown great distinction from the old CET-4 in listening comprehension, and it is also evident theoretically that new CET-4 has much greater similarity with IELTS in communicative properties.

Secondly, in listening test, the level of difficulty could be determined by various factors, like accent, length of the passage, speed, and question types. A strange result from the questionnaire is that over half of the subjects (54%) think

that it is the new CET-4 that presents the most difficult listening test, not IELTS, although their perception is contradictory to their performance in specific test. With face to face interview with some subjects, the real reason comes out. It is firstly due to the uncertainty and ambiguity of human psychology, and also caused by the different test form: IETLS test-takers have after-reading listening task (for example, test-takers are given 40 seconds to read the introduction or background of a listening task before the listening begins), new CET-4 has before-reading listening task (test-takers listen to the passage or conversation before they move on to the questions). Therefore, some test-takers bear lower anxiety when dealing with IELS listening task, compared with that in dealing with new CET-4 listening tasks. These findings would be definitely meaningful in guiding listening test design.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Needs Analysis

In this survey, needs analysis is realized in the questionnaire where students answer relevant questions about their intention and purpose of English learning, as well as their perception and suggestions to CET-4.

The questionnaire is composed on the basis of Richards' (1983) classification of listening purposes: in terms of purpose, listening could be classified into social interaction listening, informative listening, academic listening and entertainment listening. Learner's daily practice of English listening is closely related to the content and form of listening task. At the same time, subject's English listening practice might not definitely match their original listening purpose. Therefore, survey questions on listening practice are presented in this questionnaire, together with open-ended questions for students' listing of alternative choices. All 121 subjects attended this survey, with 9 of them not returning their response, and 6 of them not finishing all the questions. Finally, 106 pieces of valid questionnaires are collected and analyzed, and the results (how many times that all respondents make a certain choice) are as shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2:
PRACTICE AND PURPOSES OF ENGLISH LISTENING

| Practice of English listening | Times of Choice | Purpose of English listening | Times of Choice |
|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| A. English tests | 79 | A. To pass CET-4 | 86 |
| B. Listening to English lectures and reports | 44 | B. Be able to understand English lectures and reports | 33 |
| C. Communicate with English native speakers and socialize | 64 | C. Be able to communicate with English native speakers | 79 |
| D. Talk with English speakers in phone, taking notes, listening to English news, announcements at international airports etc. | 66 | D. Be able to understand all kinds of English information(phone talk, English news, English broadcasting or announcements, etc) | 84 |
| E. Entertainment (watch English movies, listening to English songs etc) | 48 | E. Be able to understand English entertainment products. | 35 |
| G. Job interview | 43 | | |

From Table 2, it is obvious that whether in listening practice or in listening purposes, English test is in the most dominant position. That is, most subjects are instrumentally motivated English learners (86 times), naturally, their listening practice is for CET-4 certificate. Therefore, for test designers, they should bear in mind that CET-4 has powerful impact on student's learning, then they should always adjust their test design to elicit positive backwash effect. Secondly, it is quite surprising that subjects have quite low frequency (44 times) in listening to English lectures and reports, with similar low expectation in understanding English lectures (33 times). Having face-to-face interviews with involved subjects, we get to know that due to subjects' misunderstanding of the word "English lectures", a lot of students do not regard English class as "English lecture", and there is very limited number of English academic lectures in their life, so they do not tick this choice in questionnaire survey. There are also some students who do not render "understanding English lectures and reports" as their listening purpose because in their minds one of the ultimate purpose of English learning is to master communicative proficiency in this language, and understanding English lectures and reports is just one minor part of communicative proficiency. Thirdly, according to Table 2, we can see students almost put equal weights on "understanding all kinds of English information" (84 times) and "passing CET-4"(86 times), and much similar weight has been put to "communicate with English native speakers"(79 times), which indicates that most subjects, though with highly instrumental motivation of getting CET-4 certificate for future career, have very positive expectation of mastering real language competence. Therefore, for test designers, they should give priority to "language competence" or "communicative competence" to design satisfactory English test.

As for teachers and teaching, what stand out are student's criteria in judging if he/she is a qualified teacher. About 46% of respondents think that a qualified teacher should be a CET-4 expert, helping them to get this obligatory certificate; only about 19% of them thinks that a qualified teacher should put emphasis on improving student's real language abilities, not merely on helping them passing CET-4; another 35% of them put equal weights on these two aspects and attempt to achieve a compromise between two contrastive stands. Therefore, we still can conclude that students are under huge pressure to pass CET-4, yet they still hope they could master real language proficiency. That's why IELTS is very popular with Chinese students, for its authenticity in listening task, conversation topic, background knowledge and its scientific design in "after-listening" task and featured visual hints. In one word, IELTS listening

subtest is so close to real life, and it can test student's real language competence in authentic environment.

B. Back Wash Effects

When testing has certain effects on foreign language teaching and learning, they are called wash back (Hughes, 1989). If testing has positive effects on language teaching and learning, it is called positive wash back. Generally speaking, the more influential the testing is, the stronger its back wash effect would be. The huge wash back of CET-4 on language teaching and learning is not negligible. The key is how to promote its positive back wash effects on college English teaching, or how to match CET-4 with students learning needs. New CET-4 has made considerable reform in negotiating student's pressure of getting CET-4 certificate with their needs in improving real language proficiency. From the questionnaire statistics, 79% of subjects strongly prefer new CET-4 listening comprehension, whereas only 17% of them prefer old CET-4 to new CET-4, other 4% of subjects has no definite preference and they think there is not great difference between these two.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

By comparing 121 students' performance in listening subtests of old CET-4, new CET-4 and IELTS, together with analysis of the questionnaire survey, the present research has findings as follows:

Compared with old CET-4, new CET-4 is closer to IELTS in all aspects. With substantial reform in form and content, its communicative property has been greatly improved to assess students' real language proficiency in authentic event.

From questionnaire survey, we can conclude that students have contradictory learning needs: on the one hand, they have high expectation in improving communicative ability and real language proficiency, as reflected in their admiration of IELTS; on the other hand, bearing the pressure of getting CET-4 certificate for future career, their learning behaviors are driven by strong instrumental motivation and all other learning needs would be second to it.

Compared with old CET-4 listening comprehension, students prefer new CET-4 because it presents much authentic testing tasks with a choice of question forms. Besides, test designers added long conversation to new CET-4, which often focus on real-life situations in English-speaking countries, for example, going to spend winter vacation in Florida, or to book air tickets via Booking.com.

To sum up, the CET-4 reform has increased its communicative attributes and achieved great success, although we still have very large room to make improvement in specific details. Chinese test designers could benefit a lot from IELTS professionals, but it does not mean we just "transfer" IELTS into China without any change. CET-4 and IELTS have their own distinct testing purposes. IELTS aims at testing students' competence when they travel or study in English-speaking countries, while CET-4 is supposed to be a valid assessment of student's comprehensive English ability after two year college English learning. It works as an effective means to guarantee that college English teaching and learning will be always guided by College English Curriculum Requirements (2007). Therefore, CET-4 might keep its distinct content and form, supported by specific theoretical construction and test paper design.

In theoretical construction, the new CET-4 should bear greater communicative properties. In test paper design, we can design more interactive questions, like table filling, note-taking, short answer questions, item matching, short summary writing, and multiple choice questions. We should also limit the length of the answer to ensure the reliability of the test. As it's commonly accepted that the authenticity should never be neglected, therefore, test designers should choose spoken English with background noise and various accents. In test paper layout, some practical skills, like adding brief introduction before students move in real listening, or presenting before-listening questions, would greatly lessen test-takers' tension and anxiety.

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