



The Washback Effect of Reformed CET 6 Listening Comprehension Test

Xie Jiamin¹

Lu Jinyan²

Ma Tianyi³



() Corresponding Author

^{1,2,3,4}Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

⁴Email: 1254731655@qq.com

Abstract

In China, the English Test Band 6 (CET6) is a national test that is used to assess the English proficiency of test-takers by the state with unified questions, unified fees, and unified organization of tests. It is held twice a year. This test has had a great impact on college students and college teachers. It was introduced in 1978. In 2016, the Ministry of Education reformed CET-6, especially in listening tests. The reformed listening test not only brings scenes and dialogues closer to daily life but also emphasizes the examination of students' comprehensive English listening and speaking ability. From the perspective of learners, this paper draws on the theoretical models and empirical results of washback at home and abroad and studies the backwash of the reformed English CET-6 listening to learners' listening learning through a questionnaire. To do the survey, the paper was surveyed by quantitative research methods with 60 samples in several public universities. After the collection and analysis of data, the authors have affirmed and determined this test has a significant washback effect on student learning.

Keywords: CET-6, Reformed listening comprehension test, Washback, English listening learning, Language assessment, Listening test.

Citation | Xie Jiamin; Lu Jinyan; Ma Tianyi (2021). The Washback Effect of Reformed CET 6 Listening Comprehension Test. Asian Journal of Education and Training, 7(1): 70-73.

History:

Received: 30 November 2020

Revised: 4 January 2021

Accepted: 21 January 2021

Published: 10 February 2021

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Publisher: Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

Acknowledgement: All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study was reported; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained.

Ethical: This study follows all ethical practices during writing.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This article makes up for the gap in the field of the washback effect of reformed CET-6 listening comprehension, the authors conducted a quantitative research and the found out that this test has a significant influence on student listening learning.

1. Introduction

According to Alderson and Wall (1993) washback is also known as backwash, usually refers to the positive or negative impact of testing on teaching in the field of applied linguistics (cited in Li (2018)). Its impact can be both positive and negative. Recently, this academic term has attracted attention in the fields of education research and language research.

In recent years, domestic and foreign researchers have focused on the washback of popular English tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, Test for English Majors, and College English Test in China. Because these are massively popular English exams. Researchers believe that these popular tests have a great impact on the teaching and learning of teachers and students. The research results not only guide the correct direction of language teaching but also promote the richness of test washback. These studies have sublimated the teaching methods and learning process to a certain extent.

As we all know, in China, CET-4 and CET-6 are national English tests for non-English majors and graduate students. These two tests have been implemented for 42 years since 1978. The College English Test has been recognized by society and has become one of the standards for recruiting college graduates by personnel departments at all levels, which has produced certain social benefits. However, compared to previous studies, most scholars have studied the impact of CET-4 backwash on teaching more than CET-6. They ignore the importance of CET-6 and its impact on learning. In the most recent reform in 2016, compared with CET-4, CET-6 can evaluate test-takers' English ability more effectively. Especially the listening part is also the biggest change compared with reading, translation, writing, and speaking. It emphasizes listening practice so that teachers and students can realize that language is a tool of communication. Moreover, more and more people have gradually begun to pay attention to the CET6 score. This study aims to determine what degree does the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension test exert washback on students' English learning.

2. Literature Review

Alderson and Wall (1993) first addressed the washing effect of language testing in detail and in a systematic manner. He put forward fifteen hypotheses of washback effect and outlined the general outline of the research in this field: testing affects teaching, analysis, test material, test process, student study method, study method, pace and order of teaching and learning, degree and depth of teaching and learning, attitudes towards teaching and learning, the essential test has a washback effect. Then, the test will have varying degrees and type of repercussive consequences on various teachers and students (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). Hughes (1989) described the washback as "the influence of language testing on teaching and learning" and emphasized the positive and negative impacts on teaching and learning of language tests (p. 1). Prodromou (1995) claimed washback to influence the test of teaching methods either directly or indirectly. Washback is a subset of the effect of the test on culture, school programs and people (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Language assessment techniques also have a major backwash effect on language teaching methods in China (Huang, 2019). To date, with the robust advancement of foreign language education, CET-6 has been used as an authoritative language examination in China and as a reference level test to test the examiner's individual and thorough language competence.

The College English Test is a national English test administered by the Ministry of Education of China. Its purpose is to objectively and accurately measure the actual English ability of college students and provide evaluation services for college English teaching. It is a large-scale standardized test and a "standard-related norm-referenced test." Yang and Weir (1998) mentioned that the College English Test (CET) is the national standard test for non-English majors in China. It was put into use in 1987. Its purpose is to improve the English quality and English teaching quality of Chinese college students, and provide objective and accurate evaluation. Since its establishment in 1987, CET has played an important role in my country's English teaching. Scholar Zhang (2008) believes that among the five abilities of English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, listening should be the core and key to sustainable development; only by grasping listening, can students' independent learning and sustainable learning be solved. The issue of development capacity. After the reform in 2016, the college English Band 6 listening test is more demanding, which aims to better detect the listening level of students, maximize the positive backwash effect of the test, and avoid its potential adverse effects. After the reform, the level 6 listening test questions were adjusted as follows: the short dialogue and essay dictation parts were cancelled, and academic lectures were added. The new question type has the following characteristics: (1) The proposition materials are all selected from the original English materials, covering a wide range of topics (2) The speaking speed is faster, the sentence structure is complicated, and there are many long and difficult sentences. (3) The listening materials are only displayed once (Chen, 2019). In view of the greater changes in the listening question types of CET-6 after the reform, in order to overcome the negative impact of the test, we should conduct an in-depth and comprehensive study on the aftereffect of the test.

However, Wang (2018) pointed out that, most of washback studies of CET at present are conducted by combining CET 4 with CET 6, and some other researchers just analyzed reformed CET4. After reviewing some international and domestic theoretical researches, Li (2018) also found that although many studies have focused on the washback effect of CET-4 listening, IELTS listening, TOEFL listening, there are few theoretical and empirical studies on the washback effect of reformed CET-6 listening comprehension test. Consequently, the need has arisen for additional research into this particular area of washback effect of reformed CET-6 listening comprehension test. Therefore, this article tries to explore the washback effect of reformed CET-6 listening comprehension test on college students' listening learning behavior.

3. Main Research

The current study focuses on the latest listening test of the CET-6, following the guidance of previous theoretical and observational studies, as it is viewed as the most updated feature among comprehensions. This chapter includes research purpose, research methods and data collection, questionnaire investigation, and questionnaire design.

3.1. Research Purpose

This study aims to determine to what effect has the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension test been validated for English language learning by students.

3.2. Research Methods and Data Collection

The research uses a method for investigating the topic of research. The compilation and analysis of data include one form of the method, namely a questionnaire, and the analysis of data is quantitatively performed.

The research will collect the data from students who participated in CET6 in December 2020 through a questionnaire survey, and analyze the collected data to further elaborate and demonstrate the backwash effect of the latest Band 6 listening test on students.

3.3. Questionnaire Investigation

3.3.1. Participants

Participants of the questionnaire survey are 60 college students with no major restrictions from several public universities in China. In principle, most public universities in China are required to take the CET-6 exam. These universities have set up college English listening courses. These students are taught a course called "New Standard College English Listening and Speaking" by their English teachers. All college students surveyed participated in the reformed CET-6 at least once. The actual number of participants will be 45 women and 15 men (75% and 25% respectively).

3.4. Questionnaire Design

The design of the questionnaire is used to explore one research question: What's the overall level of the washback effect of reformed CET-6 on students' listening learning? The questionnaire was designed based on the fifteen washback hypotheses developed by Alderson and Wall in 1993 as well as the questionnaire used by Lizhuo in 2018. It was divided into two parts. The first part collects personal information, including their gender and whether they have taken the CET-6 which was held in December 2020. Another part is multiple choice questions survey three aspects of the overall level of the washback effect. Questions 1-4 aims to identify respondents' common perceptions of the reformed listening comprehension, questions 5-17 explore the overall washback of the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension on students' learning, including the influence of CET-6 listening on listening learning behavior and strategies of students, questions 18-20 explore the washback effect of the three different listening questions' types.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of questionnaire investigations will be presented and discussed in this section to identify the washback of the new CET-6 listening comprehension.

The first question was designed to identify the main reasons why they attending the new CET-6. As we can see from Table 1, the majority of those who take CET 6 is to test their English proficiency, followed by those who think it is helpful for job hunting, and those who take CET- 6 to meet graduation requirements. From the results of this question, we can know that the CET-6 is important for college students and the washback effect is noticeable.

Table-1. Reasons to take part in CET-6 distribution.

Options	Total	Percentage
get credits	7	11.86%
meet graduation requirements	24	40.68%
test your English level	30	50.85%
find a job	27	45.76%
interested in it	13	22.03%

Question 2-4 investigate the common perception towards new CET-6 listening comprehension. 67.8 % of respondents think that the new CET-6 listening comprehension types are very general, only 3.39% of respondents are very satisfied with the new listening comprehension types. 42.37% of respondents perceived the authenticity of CET-6 listening materials such as accent, background sounds is general and only 18.64% feel it quite real. Regarding the difficulty of the CET-6 listening test, almost half of the respondents think it is quite hard.

Table-2. The nature of the impact of the CET-6 listening test.

options	Total	Percentage
Completely positive effect	8	13.56%
The positive effects outweigh the negative effects	36	61.02%
The negative impact is greater than the positive impact	3	5.08%
completely negative	0	0%
had no effect	12	20.34%
other _____	0	0%

Then comes to question 5, which can explore the washback degree of the new CET-6 listening comprehension. The results are shown in Table 2.

61.02% of respondents think that CET-6 listening' positive effects outweigh the negative effects. Therefore, students' perception towards washback of the new CET-6 listening comprehension turns out to be positive. 13.56% of students believe that comprehension generates positive washback. There are 5.08% of students who take the view that the negative impact is greater than the positive impact. However, there are also 20.34% of respondents think that CET-6 listening test did not affect them. In general, the result shows that the washback of the new CET-6 listening comprehension has existed and it has a positive impact on students more than a negative impact.

Also, 64.41% of students would continue studying listening even after taking part in CET-6, CET6 Reference materials /English audiobooks/English news, film, radio, music, and other audio and video materials are the top three choices with the most people choosing them. After taking part in CET 6, 37.29% thought studying listening is very important, and the same proportion took place on the quite important choice, they would still spend at least half an hour on listening study. It is worth mentioning that more than half of the interviewees agree that the CET-6 listening test contributes to the improvement of their listening skills.

The questionnaire also explores the attitudes of the students to the reformed CET-6 listening test. There are 3 questions. Question 11 to Question 13 applies to the attitude of students towards the outcomes of the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension.

The reactions to the findings of the reformed CET-6 listening test vary from those of Questions 11, 12, and 13. However, most agree that after testing they feel anxious to see the high percentage (47,46%) of their choices in Question 11 compared to the much higher proportion in Question 12 (52,54 %) which aims at examining whether students think a reformed CET-6 listening student must have a high level.

However, the percentage figures (37.29 %) of Question 13 are comparatively smaller than the percentage of the previous two, but the effects of the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension stimulate the enthusiasm for the English listening learning of college students.

In this study, students' learning strategies, including the creation of vocabulary accumulation, listening to English audio resources (broadcasting, television, songs, etc.), knowledge of English culture, and mock-test activities similar to the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension, were examined by the questionnaire. Listening strategies for the English learning of students impacted by the reformed CET-6 listening comprehension was quantitatively discussed from Question 14 to Question 17.

Question 14, 15, 16, and 17 probe into four distinct strategies for listening learning employed by college students. The percentage of statistics represents a decrease in the frequency of use, from memorizing words (Question 14), doing past exam papers or mock-tests (Question 17), practicing learning skills via English broadcasts, news or songs (Question 15), to learning cultures in English-speaking countries (Question 16).

Extending vocabulary is the first and most basic item to learn to listen to English, which is prevalent among college students. They prefer to do previous CET-6 papers or some mock tests to become familiar with test types and content, as well as to learn English grammar at the same time. The utilization of listening materials in the English edition is 35.59 %, not far from the 37.29 % in Question 16.

The two most unusually used strategies to enhance English listening are auditory material of 50.85 % in English and statistics of 37.29 % in learning cultures of English-speaking countries. This reformed CET-6 listening comprehension has a profound impact on students' listening learning strategies and increases their listening abilities to obtain a significant result in comprehension through different listening tactics.

5. Short Conclusion

The results of the degree of washback not only further affirm the presence of the washback of the current CET-6 listening comprehension test on student learning but also show that this test has a significant influence on student learning.

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