

## Original Paper

# Exploration of the Washback Effect of the CET-4 on English Teaching

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### Abstract

*The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), as a widely participated standardized English proficiency test in Chinese universities, exerts a profound and multidimensional influence on college English teaching. This study systematically explores the washback effect of CET-4 on teaching objectives, content, methods, resources, and students' learning strategies. The research finds that CET-4 produces a significant bidirectional washback effect. This study aims to provide theoretical reference and practical pathways for promoting a positive interaction between college English teaching and CET-4, and for deepening the reform of English teaching.*

### Keywords

*CET-4, Washback Effect, English Teaching, Test Impact*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Significance

Since its inception in 1987, CET-4 has developed into one of China's largest-scale and most socially recognized standardized foreign language proficiency tests. This examination not only serves as a periodic assessment of college students' English abilities but also deeply permeates the college English teaching system in practice, significantly guiding and constraining the setting of teaching objectives, the selection of teaching content, the application of teaching methods, the arrangement of teaching pace, and even the psychological state of teachers and students. This phenomenon is defined in the field of language testing research as the "Washback Effect." With the deepening of globalization and the trend towards internationalization in higher education, there are clearer and higher demands for the comprehensive English application abilities of talents, especially in cross-cultural communication and language use within professional contexts. Against this backdrop, the longstanding debate surrounding CET-4—whether it has promoted substantive reform in college English teaching or has reinforced the

tendency of "examination-oriented education"—remains unresolved. Therefore, systematically and dialectically examining the multidimensional washback influence of CET-4 on college English teaching and analyzing its internal mechanism of action hold important theoretical value and practical urgency for effectively guiding the test to play a positive role, correcting potential deviations in teaching, and ultimately achieving a virtuous cycle of "promoting learning and teaching through testing."

### *1.2 Research Objectives*

This study aims to transcend simplistic value judgments regarding the washback effect of the CET-4. Through an integrated approach combining theoretical analysis and empirical evidence, it seeks to systematically explore the multidimensional impact mechanisms of CET-4 within the college English teaching system and propose constructive pathways for optimization. The specific objectives encompass three levels:

Firstly, to systematically delineate the practical impacts of CET-4 across key aspects of college English teaching. By examining multiple specific dimensions—including the setting of teaching objectives, the organization of teaching content, the implementation of teaching methods, the operation of evaluation systems, and students' learning strategies and behaviors—the study aims to comprehensively present the concrete effects and manifestations of the test on teaching practices.

Secondly, to dialectically analyze the dual manifestations of CET-4's washback effect and their generative mechanisms. The research will conduct an in-depth analysis of its positive effects—such as clarifying teaching objectives, promoting innovation in teaching methods, motivating students, and driving the development of teaching resources—and its negative effects—such as intensifying the examination-oriented tendency in teaching, narrowing teaching content, fostering utilitarianism in students' learning strategies, and oversimplifying the evaluation system. It will further investigate the underlying logic and driving forces behind these effects.

Thirdly, to construct a multi-stakeholder collaborative optimization framework based on the research findings. Targeting various stakeholders including educational policymakers, university teaching administrators, frontline teachers, and test development institutions, the study proposes practical and feasible strategies and recommendations. These specifically include: promoting the reconstruction of the teaching philosophy towards "integrating learning with application," innovating a diversified and comprehensive evaluation system, enhancing teachers' assessment literacy and reflective capabilities, and guiding the test itself towards a more competency-oriented and contextualized direction. The ultimate goal is to achieve synergistic development and positive interaction between testing and teaching.

By accomplishing the aforementioned research objectives, this study aspires to provide a systematic analytical framework for understanding the complex relationship between CET-4 and college English teaching. It aims to offer theoretical foundations and practical references for optimizing the test's washback effect and deepening the reform of English language instruction.

### *1.3 Research Methods and Thesis Structure*

This study primarily employs the methods of literature research and case analysis. By systematically reviewing and commenting on classic theories and empirical research concerning the washback effect of language testing, particularly focusing on literature related to CET-4 and other English competitions and placement tests (Fu, 2025; Wu, 2025, etc.), the theoretical framework for this thesis is constructed. Regarding the thesis structure, it will first review the core concepts and theoretical foundations of the washback effect, then elaborate in detail on the specific impacts of CET-4 on teaching from both positive and negative dimensions, and finally, based on the preceding analysis, propose a set of systematic optimization strategies and future prospects.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation**

### *2.1 Definition and Classification of Washback Effect*

The washback effect, also known as "test consequence," refers to the various influences that language testing exerts on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). This is a neutral concept, and its direction of influence can be either positive or negative. Positive washback effect means that testing can promote teaching reform, guide teaching to focus on important language abilities and skills, and stimulate the enthusiasm of teachers and students. Negative washback effect refers to situations where testing causes teaching behaviors to deviate from established educational goals. For example, an excessive focus on test-taking techniques to cope with exams, neglecting the practical application of language, can lead to a separation between "learning" and "using" (Wu, 2025).

### *2.2 Theoretical Models of Washback Effect*

To deeply analyze the mechanism of the washback effect, scholars have proposed various models. Hughes' (1993) "Participants – Processes – Products" model has been widely influential. This model posits that the influence of testing acts upon participants (teachers, students, administrators, etc.), alters their teaching or learning processes (e.g., choice of teaching content, adjustment of methods and strategies), and is ultimately reflected in the products (e.g., real changes in language ability). Bailey (1996) proposed a dynamic cyclical model, emphasizing that the washback effect is not a unidirectional linear process but rather a continuous cycle of interaction and mutual adjustment among teaching, learning, and testing. These models provide a solid theoretical framework for this study to analyze how CET-4 changes the overall teaching ecology by influencing the behaviors of teachers and students.

### *2.3 Review of Relevant Domestic and International Research*

Domestic research on the washback effect of CET-4 has accumulated rich findings, generally acknowledging the dual nature of its influence. Studies point out that CET-4 plays a significant role in standardizing teaching and providing clear objectives, but it can also easily lead to the "examination-oriented" nature of teaching (Wu, 2025). In recent years, research perspectives have gradually expanded to other types of English tests. For example, research on the "National English Competition for College Students" found that competitions can motivate learning but may also foster

utilitarian preparation strategies (Wang, 2024). Research on the "TEM-4 Listening Test" reveals the differential washback effects of the test on learners of different proficiency levels (Yang, 2025). In the field of writing, the introduction of the ETIC (English Test for International Communication) model has been proven to effectively overcome the drawbacks of traditional "template writing," demonstrating the positive guiding effect of test construct innovation on teaching (Pan Shijie et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on "English Placement Tests" and "Culture-loaded Terms in the Postgraduate English Entrance Examination" enriches the discussion of washback effect from the dimensions of educational fairness and cultural teaching, respectively (Qi Yulin, 2025). Overall, existing research provides multiple perspectives for this topic. However, there remains space for in-depth exploration regarding how to systematically integrate the relationships among teaching, testing, and learning to construct a long-term benign interaction mechanism.

### **3. The Positive Washback Effect of CET-4 on Teaching**

#### *3.1 Clarifying Teaching Objectives and Providing Standardized Guidance*

The CET-4 syllabus provides clear, tiered requirements for vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and skills in listening, reading, writing, and translation. This offers a relatively unified and clear target reference system for college English teaching nationwide. Teachers formulate teaching plans and determine teaching priorities and difficulties based on the syllabus, making teaching activities more targeted and systematic. For instance, the explicit vocabulary requirements in the syllabus prompt teachers to pay more attention to the breadth expansion and in-depth explanation of vocabulary in teaching, and guide students to master effective strategies such as word formation and contextual memorization (Fu Ronglin, 2025). This standardized guidance, to some extent, ensures basic teaching quality and narrows the teaching gap between different institutions and regions.

#### *3.2 Promoting Innovation and Diversification of Teaching Methods*

To help students meet the CET-4 requirements more effectively, teachers are compelled to reflect upon and innovate traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods. Mere knowledge transmission is gradually supplemented or replaced by methods that emphasize student participation and language use, such as task-based language teaching, communicative language teaching, and project-based learning. For example, in listening teaching, teachers increasingly incorporate authentic audio-visual materials and design tasks like simulated dialogues and listening note-taking; in reading teaching, they focus on training higher-order skills like skimming, scanning, and critical analysis (Wu Junxia, 2024). Particularly noteworthy is that, to address the pain points in writing instruction, research has attempted to introduce the "integrated construct" of ETIC, placing writing tasks in specific workplace or problem-solving scenarios, giving students a clear authorial identity and communicative audience, effectively stimulating writing motivation and reducing template reliance.

#### *3.3 Motivating Students and Fostering Autonomy*

The status of the CET-4 certificate as a "hard currency" in academic evaluation, degree conferment, and

job hunting constitutes a powerful external incentive. This social recognition drives students to invest more time and effort in learning English. Many students develop detailed preparation plans, actively increase extracurricular reading and listening practice, and participate in activities such as English corners, speech contests, and online learning communities (Wang, 2024). In this process, students not only improve their language knowledge but, more importantly, develop autonomous learning abilities, time management skills, and perseverance.

### *3.4 Driving the Development of Teaching Resources and Teacher Competence*

Universities commonly regard the CET-4 pass rate as an important indicator of English teaching quality. Schools increase investment in building or upgrading language laboratories and self-study centers, and introduce rich English learning software, databases, and online course platforms. Simultaneously, to enhance teaching effectiveness, schools also pay more attention to the professional development of English teachers. By organizing workshops, funding conference attendance, and encouraging teaching reform research, they aim to improve teachers' language proficiency, assessment literacy, and teaching research capabilities (Wu, 2024). This examination-driven aggregation of resources and optimization of teaching staff objectively improves the hardware and software environment of college English teaching.

## **4. The Negative Washback Effect of CET-4 on Teaching**

### *4.1 Examination-Oriented Tendency and the Alienation of Teaching Objectives*

When CET-4 scores are linked to excessive benefits, teaching easily slides into the quagmire of utilitarianism, with "passing the exam" as the ultimate goal. Under this orientation, the teaching focus shifts from "cultivating language ability" to "imparting test-taking skills." In the classroom, teachers spend considerable time analyzing past exam patterns, summarizing "high-frequency test points," and teaching "universal templates" and "quick-fix techniques." Writing instruction becomes "template filling," listening practice turns into a "keyword catching game," and reading teaching concentrates on "quick problem-solving methods" rather than deep text comprehension. Although such teaching may boost exam scores in the short term, it severely deviates from the essence of language learning, which is to achieve effective communication, leading to students who are "high scores but low ability," unable to use English flexibly in real-world scenarios.

### *4.2 Narrowing of Teaching Content and Lack of Cultural Dimension*

In pursuit of "efficient" exam preparation, teaching content is often strictly limited to the exam syllabus and past papers. Chapters in textbooks rich in cultural connotations and critical thinking value may be skipped, while language knowledge, cultural background, academic writing norms, and other content not directly linked to the exam are marginalized. A prominent example is that although the "College English Teaching Guide" and postgraduate entrance examinations (e.g., the translation section) increasingly emphasize the English translation of traditional Chinese culture-loaded terms to enhance cultural dissemination capability, daily college English classrooms rarely systematically incorporate

such content. Students know little about the English expressions for cultural concepts like "Dragon Boat Festival" or "Confucianism," forming a "Chinese cultural aphasia" (Qi, 2025). The narrowing of teaching content confines students' knowledge horizons and weakens the humanistic and educational function of English education.

#### *4.3 Utilitarianism in Students' Learning Strategies and Psychological Anxiety*

Under the pressure of high-stakes testing, students' learning strategies exhibit clear characteristics of utilitarianism and superficiality. Vocabulary learning equates to rote memorization of word lists, neglecting understanding and use in context; listening and reading training simplifies to repeated practice with past papers, without focusing on strategy summarization or background knowledge accumulation; writing preparation means memorizing model essays and templates, lacking training in independent thinking and expression (Wang, 2024). While such strategies may cope with fixed question types in standardized tests, they do not help build a solid language system or sustainable learning ability. More importantly, high-stakes testing brings immense psychological pressure to some students, especially those with weaker foundations. Research shows that low-proficiency learners are more prone to anxiety, decreased self-confidence, and even a sense of "learned helplessness" during preparation, which in turn further hinders their language learning (Yang, 2025).

#### *4.4 Simplification of the Evaluation System and Concerns About Educational Equity*

The dominant position of CET-4 often makes it the "sole criterion" for evaluating students' English level and even comprehensive ability, forming a single evaluation model of "one exam decides everything." This model overlooks the progress, effort, creativity, and classroom participation demonstrated by students during the learning process, which contradicts the developmental and diversified principles of modern educational evaluation. From an equity perspective, students from areas with weaker educational resources may be at a disadvantage from the starting point of preparation, and the commercialization of test-taking skill training may exacerbate this inequality. Furthermore, the excessive pursuit of scores may also trigger academic misconduct, harming educational fairness (Lin Dunlai et al., 2025).

### **5. Strategies and Suggestions for Optimizing the Washback Effect of CET-4**

#### *5.1 Reconstructing the Teaching Philosophy: From "Exam-Oriented Teaching" to "Competency-Based"*

The fundamental transformation lies in reshaping the value orientation of teaching. The primary goal of college English teaching should be to cultivate students' ability to effectively use English for communication, learning, and problem-solving in real-world scenarios. CET-4 should be regarded as one of the diagnostic tools for assessing the achievement of this core objective, rather than the teaching baton. Teachers need to balance "exam requirements" and "ability cultivation" in teaching, boldly integrate authentic materials (such as English news reports, academic lectures, and international organization documents), design project-based learning tasks, and embed language training into specific contexts of major learning and cross-cultural communication to achieve the integration of

"learning and using" (Fu, 2025; Pan et al., 2025).

### *5.2 Innovating the Evaluation System: Establishing a Diverse and Comprehensive Evaluation Ecosystem*

To counteract the overreliance on high-stakes summative testing, a fundamental shift towards a more holistic and dynamic evaluation paradigm is imperative. The proposed reformed system integrates formative and summative assessments, utilizing both quantitative metrics and qualitative descriptors to paint a fuller picture of student learning and development.

Central to this reform is the re-calibration of CET-4's role within academic assessment. Its scores should be contextualized as one component of ability demonstration, rather than being treated as the definitive or sole indicator. This de-emphasis helps alleviate the excessive pressure associated with a single exam and redirects focus towards sustained learning progress.

Concurrently, process-oriented evaluation must be strengthened and systematized. This involves the formal incorporation of diverse learning artifacts and performances into the assessment framework. Key elements include continuous classroom engagement, collaborative group projects, cumulative learning portfolios, oral presentations, and reflective reading notes. Collectively, these components provide a multi-faceted record that captures students' effort, incremental progress, critical thinking, and comprehensive literacy development far beyond what a final exam score can reveal.

Furthermore, to enhance relevance and diagnostic value, the development and adoption of institution-specific competency assessments should be encouraged. Universities, leveraging their unique disciplinary strengths and aligned with their students' specific academic or career trajectories, can design or select diagnostic tools that measure English proficiency in more authentic, context-rich scenarios. These tools not only offer more precise and actionable feedback for personalized learning but also better prepare students for the real-world language demands they will face (Wang, 2024).

### *5.3 Enhancing Teachers' Assessment Literacy and Reflective Teaching Ability*

Teachers are the crucial link connecting testing and teaching. Enhancing teachers' language assessment literacy is paramount. Education departments and universities should provide systematic training to enable teachers not only to scientifically interpret exam syllabi and score reports but also to master modern testing theories, possess the ability to design high-quality classroom tests and assessment tasks, and provide students with effective feedback that promotes learning. Simultaneously, encourage teachers to engage in "action research," examining the impact of exams on their own teaching with a researcher's attitude, actively exploring teaching strategies to mitigate negative washback and strengthen positive washback, and becoming proactive agents in teaching reform (Lin Dunlai et al., 2025).

## **6. Conclusion**

### *6.1 Summary of Research Conclusions*

Through a systematic review and analysis of theoretical and empirical literature, this study reveals the

complex and profound washback influence of CET-4 on college English teaching. This influence exhibits a distinct dual nature. On the one hand, by providing clear standards, motivating teachers and students, and driving resource investment, it has played a significant positive driving role in standardizing the teaching foundation and promoting methodological innovation. On the other hand, its high-stakes nature can easily induce the examination-oriented, narrowing, and utilitarian tendencies in teaching, leading to negative consequences such as the alienation of teaching objectives, the absence of cultural dimensions, the superficiality of student strategies, and the oversimplification of the evaluation system. The relationship between CET-4 and teaching is not simply one of "promotion" or "hindrance," but rather a dynamic interaction that requires careful guidance and management.

### *6.2 Research Limitations and Future Prospects*

This study is primarily based on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature. While it synthesizes findings from multiple empirical sources, its scope is inherently limited by the lack of original, large-scale primary data. Consequently, the research cannot fully capture the nuanced variations in washback effects across different geographical regions, diverse types of higher education institutions, or distinct student demographic groups.

To address these limitations and advance scholarly understanding, several promising avenues for future inquiry emerge. Longitudinal research would offer particularly valuable insights by tracking the English language development of student cohorts over an extended period, from matriculation through graduation. By systematically correlating students' CET-4 preparation experiences with their long-term language proficiency outcomes, such studies could more accurately reveal the sustained and evolving impact of the test.

Additionally, comparative multi-group studies are essential to move beyond generalized conclusions. Systematic investigations contrasting washback manifestations between research-intensive and teaching-focused institutions, between English majors and non-language specialists, and across diverse regional educational contexts would provide a stronger empirical foundation for developing context-sensitive pedagogical strategies and institutional policies.

A further critical direction lies in the deeper integration of educational technology. Future research should engage with advancements in artificial intelligence, learning analytics, adaptive testing, and automated evaluation systems. Examining how such technologies can reshape test design, personalize feedback, and foster more interactive and dynamic assessment environments holds significant potential for enhancing positive washback and contributing to the development of a smarter, more responsive educational ecosystem in which teaching, learning, and assessment operate in a constructive, synergistic relationship.

As a defining element of China's foreign language education landscape, CET-4 exerts a complex and far-reaching influence. Addressing its multifaceted impact requires sustained, collaborative engagement from all stakeholders—including educational policymakers, test developers, institutional leaders, teachers, and learners. By grounding these efforts in the fundamental goal of fostering substantive



language competence and holistic intellectual development, it becomes possible to adopt a more reflective and proactive stance toward the test's role. Such a shift is essential to moving college English instruction beyond examination-driven paradigms, thereby enabling it to more effectively support both national educational priorities and the comprehensive growth of individual students.

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