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(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**WASHBACK EFFECTS OF REFORMED COLLEGE ENGLISH
TEST GRADE 4 (CET4) ON EFL LEARNING**He Che ^{1*}, Shaidatul Akma Adi Kasuma ¹,¹ School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia

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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1060020This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Washback, a key concept in language testing, examines how high-stakes exams influence teaching and learning. In China, the College English Test Band 4 (CET4) plays a crucial role in shaping students' English learning experiences. However, few studies have explored how students perceive and respond to the revised CET4 in real contexts. This study investigates undergraduates' attitudes toward the reformed CET4 and its washback effects on EFL learning in China. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys (N=300) and follow-up interviews (n=8) at a Chinese university. Data were analyzed via SPSS (descriptive/inferential statistics) and thematic analysis. Students perceived the reformed CET4 as challenging yet valuable, particularly listening/speaking sections. Positive washback included diversified learning strategies and skill prioritization, though test-driven learning persisted. Results inform CET4's alignment with international standards and pedagogical implications for balanced language assessment. The test generally promoted essential skills like listening and speaking. Overall, the revised CET4 has a positive impact on EFL learning. While students appreciate its improvements, the difficulty remains an issue. Adjustments could help balance language skill development more effectively.

Keywords:

The Reformed CET4; Washback; Undergraduates; EFL Learning

Introduction**Research Background**

Language assessment plays a crucial role in education by measuring proficiency and evaluating instructional effectiveness. Standardized tests—including NMET, TOEFL, GRE, and PETS—

assess language skills while significantly influencing teaching and learning practices. A key consequence is washback, which impacts classroom activities, curriculum design, and study habits (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Positive washback fosters skill development, whereas negative washback may restrict learning to test-specific content, narrowing educational objectives (Cheng, 2005; Green, 2007). Research indicates that washback effects vary across contexts, affecting curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and student motivation (Watanabe, 2020; Gu & Xu, 2023). Consequently, understanding these effects is vital for developing balanced assessments that enhance learning outcomes.

In China, the College English Test Band 4 (CET4), introduced in 1987 as a national EFL assessment for non-English majors, has profoundly shaped college English curricula. It has undergone multiple revisions to align with evolving educational policies (Jin & Yang, 2006). As a high-stakes test, CET4 assesses English proficiency and provides feedback to stakeholders (Cheng, 2008). While it has improved English education and supports national development goals, critics contend that it reinforces “teaching to the test,” wherein high scores may not reflect genuine language ability (Zheng & Cheng, 2008; Qi, 2005; Jin, 2014). This debate positions CET4 centrally in discussions on language assessment in China.

Washback has been extensively studied for high-stakes exams (e.g., TOEFL iBT, IELTS, university entrance tests), revealing diverse impacts on pedagogy and student engagement (Barnes, 2016; Green, 2017; Salehi & Yunus, 2012). Although earlier CET4 versions were analyzed for effects on discrete skills (e.g., listening, writing), research on how recent reforms influence EFL learning processes and student attitudes remains limited (Qi, 2005; Zou, 2015). Thus, despite CET4's significance, the washback of its latest iterations on student learning is underexplored.

Prior studies have examined washback dimensions such as curriculum, teaching methods, and materials. Alebachew and Minda (2019) observed that teacher-made tests can demotivate students, reducing engagement with broader content. Hung (2012) found e-portfolios promoted peer learning but increased anxiety. High-stakes exams consistently influence teaching strategies, highlighting the need for teacher training to mitigate test-related pressures (Ramezaney, 2014). Nevertheless, the impact of CET4 reforms on undergraduate EFL learning—particularly regarding student perspectives and long-term language development—requires further investigation.

Recent CET4 reforms aim to align with real-world language demands, emphasizing integrated skills over isolated knowledge (Wang, 2023; Zhan & Andrews, 2014). While designed to generate positive washback, outcomes are mixed. Shuang-jun (2009) noted improved skill development in medical colleges but reinforced test-oriented mindsets among teachers. Wang (2023) reported that revised listening sections encouraged effective strategies yet promoted rigid test preparation, potentially limiting communicative competence. Zhan and Andrews (2014) further indicated CET4's strong influence on study choices, favoring vocabulary memorization over meaningful language use. Although self-reported data are common in washback research, Shih (2009) cautions that such data may reflect perceptual biases rather than actual proficiency gains.

Given the diversity in students learning experiences and exposure to the reformed CET4, this study investigates the test impact on undergraduate EFL learning in China. To address limitations of self-reported data, a mixed-methods approach (surveys and interviews) provides a comprehensive analysis of CET4 washback. Ultimately, this research explores the interplay between language testing and learning to offer empirical insights for assessment and educational practices.

Research question

Based on the identified research gaps, the study addresses the following primary research questions:

1. What are undergraduates' attitudes toward the reformed CET4?
2. What are the washback effects of the reformed CET4 on EFL learning from the perspective of undergraduates?

Research Objectives

1. To quantify undergraduates' perceptions of the reformed CET4 across three dimensions: perceived difficulty, acceptance of structural changes, and recognition of its importance.
2. To identify the washback mechanisms of the reformed CET4 on EFL learning, specifically examining: Shifts in learning strategies and time allocation.
 - Re-prioritization of language skills (listening/speaking vs. reading/writing)
 - Changes in learning depth, breadth, and goal orientation.

Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical overview of the key concepts and existing research pertinent to this study. It will sequentially discuss: (1) the concept of washback, (2) an introduction to the College English Test Band 4 (CET4), (3) previous studies on washback effects of major language tests globally, and (4) previous studies specifically investigating the washback effects of CET4 in China.

Introduction to CET4

Mandated by the English Teaching Syllabus for Colleges, the College English Test Band 4 (CET4) serves as a crucial annual assessment of English proficiency for undergraduate students in China. It is typically a compulsory requirement for second-year students across diverse academic disciplines. The exam evaluates skills in listening, reading, grammar, translation, and writing. Since its inception in 1987, CET4 has undergone multiple revisions to enhance its capacity to assess practical language abilities and align with evolving educational objectives.

Initially, CET4 placed significant emphasis on reading comprehension and grammar knowledge, with listening skills receiving comparatively less attention. Subsequent reforms progressively strengthened the listening component, reflecting its growing importance. A major overhaul in 2016 introduced an optional oral assessment to address the critical gap in evaluating communicative competence. Consequently, the current CET4 structure comprises five core sections: Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Grammar Structures, Cloze (or Translation, depending on the specific format), and Writing. Students achieving a score above 425 become eligible to take the separate oral test, which assesses spoken proficiency.

The evolution of CET4's format and structural focus through key reforms is summarized in Table 1 below. This table highlights the shifting emphases and introduction of new task types aimed at fostering a more comprehensive assessment of language skills.

Abbreviation	Item Description	Implied Shift/Change
LCP	Increased Focus on Listening Comprehension	Greater weighting and/or complexity in listening tasks.
RCP	Reduced Emphasis on Reading Comprehension	Relative decrease in focus or weighting on traditional reading sections.
CSC	Exclusion of Short Conversations (Listening)	Removal of shorter dialogue/listening tasks, potentially replaced by longer formats.
NPM	Introduction of New Testing Format: Paragraph Matching	Addition of a task requiring matching information across text sections.
NPT	Implementation of Novel Test Approach: Paragraph Translation	Introduction of paragraph-level translation as a core skill assessment.
TVS	Holistic Assessment of Vocabulary and Structure	Integrated testing of vocabulary and grammar within context, moving beyond discrete items.
EST	Expanded Coverage of English-Speaking Test	Development and broader implementation of the optional oral proficiency test.

Table 1: Key Changes in CET4 Format and Structure Through Reforms

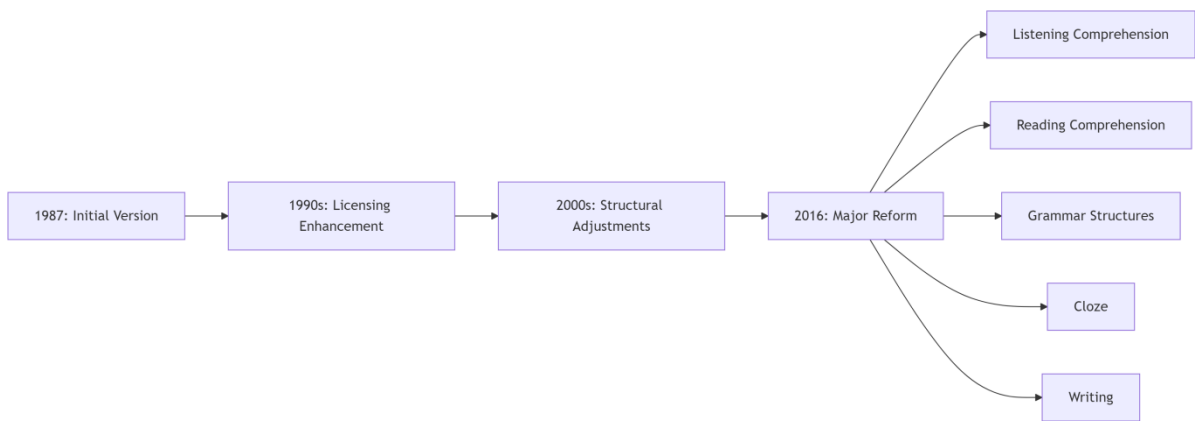


Figure 1 Key Changes in CET4 Format Through Reforms

Research Evolution and Multi-Dimensional Perspectives on the Global Examination Feedback Effect

The washback effect - that is, the profound impact of testing on teaching and learning (Hughes, 2003) - has become a core issue in the field of applied linguistics. Early research focused on its bidirectional mechanism: positive feedback can promote skill development and effective learning strategies (e.g., Chen & Webb, 2017), while negative feedback is prone to causing exam-oriented training and curriculum narrowing (e.g., Buyukkeles, 2016). With the expansion of research paradigms, scholars have gradually revealed its dynamic essence: from merely focusing on teaching practice (Buck, 1988) to the interactive influence between learning behavior and educational policies (Shohamy, 1992; Messick, 1996), and thus a multi-dimensional analysis framework was formed.

The research on the feedback effect of international high-risk examinations is particularly enlightening. Take the TOEFL iBT as an example. Barnes' (2016) case in Vietnam confirmed that the test design directly reshapes the classroom teaching model and student experience. Umashankar's (2017) research on oral language tests in Sri Lanka exposed the squeeze of test-taking skills on real language expression. The cultural adaptability contradiction of such examinations is more prominent in the Asian context: Korean scholars Kim & Park (2023) found that although the IELTS computer-based test mode enhances digital literacy, it exacerbates the Language Testing gap among institutions with uneven resources.

Recent research has further broken through traditional boundaries, delving deeper into social culture, technological integration, and the complexity of situations:

The social and cultural perspective reveals how examinations reconstruct educational equity. Wong Katagiri (2023) analyzes how the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) strengthens class differentiation through the reproduction of cultural capital; Chatterjee (2024) criticized the institutional exclusion of dialect learners by the testing system dominated by English in India, pointing out that "language testing is actually an invisible carrier of power discourse" (Comparative Education Review).

Technological innovation is reshaping the path of the reaction effect. Lee et al. (2024) verified the double-edged sword effect of AI writing review tools in Taiwanese classrooms: although they optimized language form feedback, they inhibited rhetorical creativity; The adaptive testing experiment in Bangladesh (Rahman & Singh, 2023) further indicates that technological empowerment may widen the motivation gap among learners.

Localization practices highlight the contextual dependence of counteraction. The real mission assessment promoted by Atmojo (2021) in Indonesia has demonstrated that practices such as community interviews can break down the barriers to examinations. A meta-analysis of China's CET4 (Han, 2023) indicates that the positive feedback from the reform of listening and speaking is significantly stronger than that of the translation module, confirming the key impact of the difference in skill orientation (System).

These advancements all point to a core consensus: the backlash effect has evolved from a linear causal model to a dynamic ecosystem (Han, 2023). In this system, examination design, teachers' initiative, technological tools and cultural context form a mutually restrictive force field (see Figure 1). For instance, the long-term tracking of university entrance examinations

in Turkey (Kelestill, 2023) shows that its feedback effect even penetrates to the level of learners' identity recognition, confirming the profound proposition that "testing is the process of socialization". This complexity calls for more context-sensitive research methods - especially for high-stakes tests like CET4, it is necessary to coordinate the symbiotic relationship among assessment validity, social equity and technical ethics in the reform design.

Method

Respondents

This study involved 300 undergraduate students from a university in Shenzhen, China, who had recently completed the revised CET4 exam. Due to practical constraints, such as limited access to detailed demographic data, strict stratified sampling was not feasible. Instead, students were randomly selected from various faculties to ensure diverse representation of non-English majors. Among the participants, 51% (n=153) were male, and 49% (n=147) were female. For follow-up interviews, eight participants were selected from the survey group to ensure a balanced representation of gender and English proficiency. Based on CET4 scores, participants were categorized into three groups: high (above 550), intermediate (425-550), and low (below 425). From these groups, three males and five females were chosen randomly. This approach aimed to enhance the integrity and objectivity of the data collection process, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of washback effects across different proficiency levels.

Instruments

This study utilized a survey adapted from Wang (2016) to examine the influence of Foreign English Teachers (FETs) on students' English learning. The questionnaire consisted of four parts: demographic data, attitudes toward the revised CET4, and its influence on EFL learning. The last two sections used a five-point Likert scale, ensuring structured responses. The survey demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .912$), exceeding the .70 criterion.

To further investigate washback factors and validate survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview protocol was developed based on questionnaire results and included five key questions regarding the CET4 reform's content, rationale, impact on learning strategies, and student recommendations. Both the survey and interviews were conducted in Mandarin to ensure participants could express their thoughts accurately. Translations were verified through back-translation procedures to maintain accuracy and reliability. The interview questions were informed by language assessment washback studies (e.g., Hughes, 2003; Green, 2007) and tailored to address specific CET4 reforms.

Procedures

To evaluate the need for eliminating, adding, modifying, or ordering the items, rephrasing of the instructions and clarity-enhancing changes in the style of print were made. A pilot study was conducted involving 20 students, focusing on the clarity, relevance, and organization of the questionnaire items. Through the pilot study, feedback from students on the wording and organization of questions was received, which emphasized aspects in need of revision: simplifying highly sensitive terminology and rearranging questions for a more logical flow. Based on these findings, adjustments were made to enhance overall readability and ensure that questions aligned with students' experiences. Following the pilot, paper questionnaires were distributed to 300 students with the invaluable assistance of several English teachers. Finally,

interviews were meticulously organized and conducted during the leisure time of eight participating students to gather in-depth insights.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data gathered were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) . Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were utilized to assess students' attitudes towards the reformed CET4 and its influence on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Initially, the researcher employed SPSS to examine students' perceptions of the CET4 with regards to difficulty, test format, and significance. Subsequently, a comprehensive examination of the washback effects of the reformed CET4 on EFL learning was conducted, covering dimensions such as learning methods, content, objectives, depth, and breadth. Following the online interviews, transcriptions were converted to text, and the researcher extracted useful information, conceptualizing the data for further analysis.

Findings

In this section, the findings are discussed in terms of two aspects: undergraduates' attitudes towards the reformed CET4 and the reformed CET4 washback on EFL learning.

What Are The Attitudes Of The Undergraduates Towards The Reformed CET4?

Difficulty

Table 2 presents the attitudes of students towards the perceived difficulty of the reformed College English Test Band 4 (CET4) across different components, including the Whole Test, Writing, Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Translation, and Speaking. The findings reveal that 64.4% of respondents strongly agree or agree with the overall high level of difficulty, while 37.3% express uncertainty. In contrast, only 3.3% disagree with the difficulty level. The average mean score for the Whole Test, approximately 4, indicates a predominant consensus on its challenging nature. Regarding Writing and Translation, opinions are divided, with more than half of the respondents expressing uncertainty. Conversely, Listening Comprehension and Speaking components score above 3.5, indicating their perceived difficulty. In summary, the study underscores an overall increase in difficulty in the new CET4. While there is divergence in views on Writing and Translation, there is a consensus on the challenging nature of the Speaking and Listening components.

Items	N	Percent (%)			Mean	SD
		5+4	3	2+1		
The Whole Test	290	64.4	30.7	3.3	3.95	0.94
Writing	290	37.3	58.8	4.3	3.49	0.90
Listening	290	75.6	13.2	6.8	3.97	1.09
Comprehension	290	50.4	24.6	4.1	3.97	0.95
Reading Comprehension	290	41.0	52.0	7.8	3.49	1.00
Translation	290	75.8	8.0	16.2	3.91	1.21
Speaking	290					

Table2 Students' Attitudes Towards The Difficulty Of The Reformed CET4

(The difficulty of the whole CET4 and following items in reformed CET4 is higher than the former one,

5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=not sure, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree)

Note: 5+4=the sum of the figures of 5 and 4; 2+1=the sum of the figures of 2 and 1.

In interviews, students noted that the reformed CET4' s focus on Chinese cultural content requires a broader vocabulary and a deeper understanding of culture in English. Some students felt the increased difficulty better reflects their improving English skills and supports their language growth. The students' original comments are as follows:

S1 (Female, 20, Business Major): Compared to the previous CET4, I feel that the translation section now requires a broader vocabulary, especially for English expressions related to traditional Chinese culture.

S2 (Male, 21, Engineering Major): The new test format is definitely more challenging. I think it pushes us to develop a better understanding of Chinese cultural content in English.

S3 (Female, 22, Economics Major): S4: I don' t know much about the details of the CET4 reform, but I think it should be made a bit harder. Students' English skills have generally improved, so a more challenging test could better reflect their abilities and encourage them to keep progressing.

Test Format And Structure

The results presented in Table 3 demonstrate a predominantly favorable reception from students towards the increased emphasis on Listening Comprehension (LCP) and the decreased emphasis on Reading Comprehension (RCP) in the updated CET4. The removal of Short Conversations in Listening Comprehension (CSC) led to a balanced distribution of agreement and disagreement. Newly introduced test formats, such as Paragraph Matching (NPM) and Paragraph Translation (NPT), were positively received by a significant portion of students. The assessment of Holistic Assessment of Vocabulary and Structure (TVS) was accepted by half of the students, while opinions varied on the Expanded Coverage of English-Speaking Test (EST). In general, the majority of students expressed agreement with most aspects of the revised CET4, indicating a generally positive response to the implemented changes.

Items	1+2		3		4+5		Mean	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
LCP	47	16.2	81	27.9	162	55.9	3.61	1.22
RCP	67	23.1	69	23.8	154	53.1	3.39	1.38
CSC	135	46.6	12	4.1	143	49.3	3.00	1.46
NPM	80	27.6	60	20.7	150	51.7	3.36	1.25
NPT	73	25.1	48	16.6	169	58.2	3.55	1.33
TVS	56	19.3	93	32.1	141	48.6	3.51	1.25
EST	127	43.8	29	10.0	134	47.2	3.06	1.52

Table 3: Students' Attitudes Towards The Test Format And Structure Of The Reformed CET4

(What kind of influence did the reformed CET4 test format and structure have on you? 1=completely negative, 2=mainly negative, 3=no influence, 4=mainly positive, 5=completely positive)

Note: 1+2=the sum of the figures of 1 and 2; 4+5= the sum of the figures of 4 and 5

In the context of students' perspectives on the factors affecting the reform of the CET4 format and structure, they contend that the former format did not adequately reflect students' proficiency and areas for improvement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Furthermore, they assert that it diverged from international language assessments. The reform aims to move away from a test-focused approach to English instruction and address the problem of passive engagement with the language. This sentiment is apparent in the following excerpts.

S4: I think the purpose of the reform is to get closer to some international English tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL. The previous CET4 deviated from those international tests and ignored the investigation of students' actual communication ability, which is not conducive to the economic and cultural exchanges between China and the world.

S5: I think previous CET4 did not examine oral English, which led to students not focusing on the improvement of oral English ability. Now the new English test is to encourage students to improve their comprehensive English ability.

They think that TVS (Holistic Assessment of Vocabulary and Structure) can cultivate their practical ability to use English and help them get rid of rote learning. An interviewee mentioned:

S6: I think this will help us memorize words. We can do some test papers, then accumulate the words in the test papers, and at the same time master their usage.

There is a divergence of opinions among students regarding the exclusion of short conversations in listening comprehension (CSC) and the expanded coverage of the English-speaking test (EST) in the reformed CET4. Some students have less positive attitudes toward the reformation of listening comprehension and the increased emphasis on the speaking test due to the perceived difficulty in improving these two sections, leading to a certain degree of learning pressure.

Importance

The data presented in Table 4 indicates that a majority of students, more than two-thirds, either strongly agree or agree that the CET4 is essential to their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Approximately 14.8% of respondents express uncertainty about the significance of the reformed CET4, while 14.53% strongly disagree or disagree that the CET4 is important to their EFL learning. The mean score of 3.89, which is close to 4, suggests that most students consider the revised CET4 to be important. This data implies that the CET4 exam has a positive impact on students' English learning. The revised College English Test (CET4) is seen as a tool that can improve learners' comprehensive skills and aid in the implementation of the English Teaching Syllabus for undergraduate students.

	The importance of the reformed CET4				
	1	2	3	4	5
N	23	19	43	87	118
%	7.93	6.6	14.8	30.0	40.7
Mean	3.89				
SD	1.23				

Table 4: Importance Of The Reformed CET4 From Students' Perspective

(CET4 is important to your EFL learning. 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)

What Are The Washback Effects Of The Reformed CET4 On EFL Learning From The Undergraduates' Perspective?

As illustrated in Table 5, the revised College English Test Band 4 (CET4) has demonstrated a favorable effect on various aspects of English language acquisition. All average scores for the measured variables surpass 3.0, indicating that the revised CET4 has a more positive influence on students' English learning, particularly in terms of learning objectives, depth of learning, and breadth of learning. This observation is consistent with the findings of Deng's research in 2018, which suggests that the modified CET4 can directly impact learners' content, methods, and depth of learning. Additionally, students who receive lower scores often adapt their learning strategies to improve their overall skills, enabling them to successfully pass the examination. Some students have provided the following statements:

S7: *I think my learning objective has changed. Passing CET4 is my goal of learning English.*

S8: *I have constantly improved my learning method, and they will be more flexible.*

S9: *I think my depth of study has changed. I often do intensive reading of CET4 to enhance my reading ability and listen to the CET4 original listening material to understand English.*

Items	1+2		3		4+5		Mean	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Learning objectives	14	4.8	100	34.5	176	60.7	3.76	0.92
Depth of learning	25	8.6	91	31.4	174	60.0	3.72	1.02
Breadth of learning	17	5.9	103	58.6	170	58.6	3.79	1.03
Learning content	9	3.1	136	50	145	50.0	3.67	0.85
Learning method	23	7.9	108	37.2	159	54.8	3.67	0.99

Table 5: The Reformed CET4 Washback On Various Aspects Of Learning

(What kind of influence did CET4 has on the aspects of your English language learning? 1=completely negative, 2=mainly negative, 3=no influence, 4=mainly positive, 5=completely positive)

Note: 1+2=the sum of the figures of 1 and 2; 4+5= the sum of the figures of 4 and 5

The perspectives above reflect personal experiences and highlight both positive and negative impacts of the revised CET4 on EFL learning. 8.6% of students reported a notably negative or predominantly negative impact on depth of learning, followed by learning methods (7.9%), breadth of learning (5.9%), learning objectives (4.8%), and learning content (3.1%). However, positive effects outweigh negative ones overall.

According to Table 6, speaking is considered the most essential skill, with listening at 22.4% and reading at 19.3%. Listening is also the most challenging to improve (36.2%), followed by speaking (25.1%), while only 7.93% struggle with reading and writing. For skill improvement, 43.1% prioritize speaking, followed by listening (30.7%). Reading (20%) receives the most practice time, while speaking ranks last. The new CET4 motivates students to expand vocabulary, enhance proficiency, and increase language awareness. Exam preparation fosters progress and breakthroughs, reinforcing English learning as a long-term goal.

Items	Listening		Speaking		Reading		Writing		Translation	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The most important to study	65	22.4	119	41.0	56	19.3	23	7.9	27	9.3
The most difficult to improve	105	36.2	73	25.1	23	7.93	23	7.93	66	22.8
Skills want to improve	89	30.7	125	43.1	31	10.9	34	11.7	11	3.8
Most time spent for practice	57	19.7	50	17.2	65	22.4	67	23.1	51	17.6

Table 6: Students' Attitude Towards The Basic English Skills

During the interviews, a number of students conveyed their perspectives and methods for improving fundamental skills. Some participants emphasized the advantages of conversing with non-native speakers and listening to English music in order to enhance their listening and speaking abilities. Furthermore, in anticipation of the listening and speaking assessments, they employed particular listening strategies. As articulated by certain students:

S6: *My learning strategy is to listen to English songs." "I try to understand the meaning of lyrics.*

S3: *My learning strategy is communicating with foreign people when I play online games. I can practice English listening and speaking while talking to them.*

Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to the two key questions: (1) What are the attitudes of undergraduates towards the reformed CET4? and (2) What are the washback effects of the reformed CET4 on EFL learning from the undergraduates' perspective? The findings reveal both positive and negative perceptions among students, aligning with and expanding upon prior research.

Attitudes of Undergraduates towards the Reformed CET4

The findings suggest that students generally perceive the reformed CET4 as a challenging but valuable assessment of their language skills, particularly due to its increased focus on listening, speaking, and culturally relevant translation. These changes align with Zhang's (2016) study, indicating that the reform addresses the limitations of the previous CET4 format by incorporating elements that reflect the evolving societal and educational landscape. The integration of extended reading passages and more complex listening components now requires students to adapt by increasing their reading speed and developing focused listening strategies, skills essential for real-world language use. The emphasis on traditional Chinese cultural content in the new translation element might be intimidating for students unfamiliar with such context, thus motivating them to acquire vocabulary and cultural knowledge. The speaking test corroborates earlier insights of Kholmurodova (2020), who emphasized the significance of English in testing speaking capabilities as part of task performance. The positive responses to promote the change suggest that, from a very conceptualized point of view, the reformed CET4 serves a pertinent mechanism through which comprehensive language skills can be built.

Apart from developing proficiency, students view the CET4 as important for making them competitive in the domestic job market or gaining admission to institutions for further studies abroad. Notably, even students who do not show great intrinsic motivation toward English tend to treat the CET4 seriously and invest considerable time studying English or engaging in English-related activities. They believe that English language courses linked to the CET4 will raise their actual language proficiency in the language being tested and manifestly serve as a reliable means of measuring their true competence in English. The increased challenge undoubtedly requires more instructional support to help students cope with these more demanding expectations.

Washback Effects of the Reformed CET4 on EFL Learning

The reformed CET4 has encouraged students to adopt diverse learning strategies to meet exam demands. Some reported engaging in English movies and music, enhancing listening comprehension, aligning with Hsu's (2015) findings that curriculum changes in Taiwan led students to explore innovative learning methods. Expanding learning strategies bridges the gap between formal study and practical use, enriching EFL learning. However, findings also reveal persistent test-driven learning. Many students prioritize passing CET4 over proficiency, echoing Ren's (2018) concern that exam-focused goals limit communication skills and broader language development.

Another key washback effect is students' perception of skill importance. Speaking is increasingly valued for real-world interaction, supporting Ömer's (2015) argument that listening and speaking are often undervalued in EFL contexts. The focus on these skills likely stems from CET4 reforms. In contrast, students find translation easier due to frequent class practice, while listening is perceived as the hardest, likely due to longer, faster-paced audio materials in the new CET4 format.

Unlike Zhang (2016) and Ren (2018), who examined exam-driven approaches, this study highlights how students' perceptions of difficulty and skill importance shifted with test modifications. Increased listening and speaking practice aligns with Jin's (2019) findings and

supports CET Committee decisions, bringing CET4 closer to international standards and addressing functional language use in a globalized world.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the revised CET4 is largely perceived positively, with students viewing it as an appropriate and valuable assessment that enhances EFL learning. The test format encourages targeted practice in key areas, particularly listening and speaking, contributing to well-rounded English proficiency. The study indicates that the revised CET4 effectively aligns with students' learning needs, directing skill development toward practical applications.

Regarding washback effects, the reformed CET4 generally motivates students, reinforcing its role as a meaningful measure of language ability. It not only supports language acquisition but also improves learning attitudes, making English study more goal-oriented. However, students noted that classroom practice should better integrate practical language use, suggesting room for further improvements in curriculum coverage.

Despite these insights, the study has limitations. As data were collected from a single university, findings may not be fully generalizable. Additionally, self-reported data may introduce bias, and the absence of teacher perspectives limits a more holistic understanding. Future research should include broader samples and classroom observations to gain a more comprehensive view of CET4's washback effects on language learning.

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