

Washback Effects of the CET-4 Writing Test on College English Teaching and Learning: Research Trends and Key Issues

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Abstract

Washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning, particularly in high-stakes examinations. As one of the most influential national English proficiency tests in China, the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) has a significant impact on college English instruction, especially through its writing section. This study aims to examine the washback effects of the CET-4 writing test on college English teaching and learning by reviewing and synthesizing relevant studies from international journals and the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). The findings indicate that the CET-4 writing test produces both positive and negative washback. Positively, it promotes instructional improvement, clarifies teaching objectives, and enhances students' learning motivation. Meanwhile, negative effects such as exam-oriented teaching, mechanical learning strategies, and reduced creativity in writing are also observed. In addition, recent research highlights the growing role of digital tools and artificial intelligence in shaping new forms of washback. It is concluded that diversified empirical approaches and technological integration are essential for maximizing positive washback and improving college English writing instruction.

Keywords

CET-4 Writing Test; Washback Effect; College English Teaching; Language Assessment

1. Introduction

Any test, regardless of its scale, will have an impact on a specific object (Zou & Xu, 2014). As one of the most influential high-stakes English proficiency examinations in China, the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is a national examination under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. It is a large-scale and highly credible test (Yang, 2003). Among its components, the writing section has drawn growing attention for its washback effect. Therefore, understanding the washback of the CET-4 writing test is of particular significance for improving language assessment

and instruction.

According to statistics, students' scores on the CET-4 writing section have risen nationwide since 1990 (Jin & Yang, 2006), suggesting that the test has exerted a positive washback effect on college English instruction. However, given the inherently complex nature of washback, research must adopt a multi-dimensional perspectives. Therefore, author collected articles retrieved from international journals and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), this paper reviews and analyses both the positive and negative washback effects of writing assessment on the teaching and learning of college English.

2. Theories of Washback

2.1. Definition of Washback

With the growing awareness that language tests may have significant effects on teaching and society, educational measurement experts, led by Messick (1989), began to advocate that washback should be regarded as an integral component of test construct validity. Building on this perspective, Alderson and Wall (1993) published *Does Washback Exist?*, which confirmed the existence of washback and defined it as the influence of language testing on teaching and learning. They proposed fifteen hypotheses concerning language test washback, explaining how tests can affect teaching methods, content, sequence, pace, depth, and degree (Yuan, 2011). In the present study, washback is specifically defined as the influence of language testing on teachers and students, particularly referring to the impact of the CET-4 writing test reform on students' writing attitudes, strategies, and behaviors.

2.2. Classification of Washback

Heaton and Hughes pointed out that testing exerts both positive and negative influences on teaching and learning within the classroom. When a test promotes teaching and learning, it is said to have a positive washback effect. Conversely, when a test fails to reflect actual learning outcomes or to achieve instructional goals, thereby exerting adverse influences on teaching and learning, it demonstrates a negative washback effect (Heaton, 2000). Similarly, Madaus (1988) argued that examinations tend to produce more negative than positive effects, as teachers often focus on test-taking skills and strategies for improving scores rather than developing students' genuine language competence.

In contrast, Gu (2007) contended that the positive effects of testing outweigh its negative ones, primarily because testing promotes the implementation of teaching syllabi and enhances the motivation of both teachers and students. Yuan (2011) further suggested that examinations influence all aspects and stages of teaching, but the extent and nature of these influences vary among stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and institutions—and thus involve both positive and negative washback.

The determination of whether washback is positive or negative depends largely on researchers' evaluative criteria and perspectives.

3. Effects on Teaching

3.1. Positive Effects

Early research indicated that the CET-4 writing test promoted instructional improvement. Wu (2015) noted that both the CET-4 and CET-6 clarified teaching objectives, stimulated methodological innovation, and optimized instructional resources, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of college English instruction. These examinations encouraged teachers to align classroom practices more closely with curricular requirements and assessment standards, leading to more systematic and goal-oriented teaching design. Subsequent studies further supported these observations. Zhang (2017) reported that teachers increasingly valued writing instruction and made greater use of test feedback to refine teaching content, adjust instructional strategies, and address students' common writing problems in a more targeted manner.

Additionally, Wu (2025) pointed out that, in order to improve students' pass rates and enhance teaching quality, many colleges and universities have increased their investment in English teaching resources, including the introduction of writing courses, teacher training programs, and digital learning platforms. These institutional efforts have facilitated the reform of writing pedagogy and promoted more diversified instructional approaches. Collectively, these trends reveal that the CET-4 writing section, with its emphasis on topic-based prompts and holistic scoring, has gradually guided classroom instruction toward greater coherence, heightened learner awareness, and multiple drafting and revision practices, thus contributing to the development of students' overall writing competence.

3.2. Negative Effects

Nevertheless, researchers have identified considerable negative washback on teaching. Zhang (2017) argued that the uniform task types and rigid scoring standards of the CET-4 writing test have led teachers to prioritize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary accumulation over the development of students' communicative competence and discourse organization skills. As a result, writing instruction tends to focus excessively on form-oriented drills, model essay imitation, and fixed writing templates. Xu (2018) further noted that the dominance of test-taking strategies in classroom instruction has reduced opportunities for critical thinking, creative expression, and meaningful interaction, thereby constraining students' cognitive engagement in the writing process. In many cases, teaching practices are driven more by examination requirements than by pedagogical principles, which weakens the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills and

authentic language use. Overall, while the CET-4 writing test provides instructional direction and assessment benchmarks, it also risks narrowing the curriculum, homogenizing teaching content, and reinforcing exam-oriented instructional practices, potentially undermining the long-term development of students' comprehensive writing ability.

4. Effects on Learning

4.1. Positive Effects

The CET-4 writing test has been found to positively influence students' learning motivation and engagement. Feng (2020) reported that the test gave students clear goals and motivation to enhance their writing ability, improving overall English proficiency. Kong and Zhang (2021) found that vocational college students recognized the test's positive role in promoting learner autonomy, confidence, and sustained interest in English study.

Recent research has extended these findings by highlighting students' increasing use of online writing platforms and automated feedback tools, such as iWrite, in response to CET-4 preparation (Hu, 2023). These technological integrations not only enhance writing fluency but also diversify learning strategies, reflecting a new trend toward digital-mediated washback. Together, these studies demonstrate that the CET-4 writing test functions as a strong external motivator that encourages active participation and long-term commitment to English learning.

4.2. Negative Effects

At the same time, studies have documented negative learning behaviors resulting from test pressure. Xu (2018) argued that exam-driven learning suppressed creativity and imagination, producing mechanical and short-term study habits. Similarly, Emerging research further points out that the increasing availability of online model essays and AI-assisted writing tools may exacerbate formulaic writing and reduce students' sense of authorship (Xu, Hu & Su 2024). The scoring criteria of the test have led some students to adopt strategies that are detrimental to their long-term English learning. For example, in order to rapidly expand their vocabulary, students tend to memorize word lists mechanically rather than focusing on understanding and using vocabulary in context (Wu, 2025). The key challenge now lies in promoting students' critical awareness and authentic writing skills. This underscores the need to balance instrumental learning with the cultivation of communicative and intercultural competence.

5. Conclusion

Existing research in past two decades has achieved meaningful progress in understanding the CET-4 writing test's washback on English teaching and learning.

Studies have shown that the test can not only improve instructional quality but also can enhance students' motivation and engagement. Recent developments, especially in the LLM era, highlight a shift toward integrating technology to explore more automatic writing assessment methods.

However, several challenges still remain. Most prior research remains descriptive, with limited exploration of the mechanisms underlying washback or the interactive relationship between teaching and learning. Lack of longitudinal studies and insufficient attention to digital literacy restrict the depth of current findings. Furthermore, balancing the reliability of standardized assessment with the authenticity of communicative writing continues to be a major issue.

In the future, researches should adopt and integrated more diversified and empirical approaches, such as classroom observation, corpus-based writing analysis to gain a fuller understanding of the deeper reasons of washback, and then achieve further development in teaching and learning. In addition, incorporating technological perspectives will also be crucial, which may contribute to maximizing positive washback and guiding the evolution of college English writing education toward greater effectiveness.

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