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# A Study of the Washback Effect of the Listening Test of College English Test (Band 4) on Chinese Students' Self-Regulated Learning

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## **Abstract**

This study conducted a questionnaire survey to collect 202 college students' perspectives on the washback effect of the listening test of College English Test Band 4 (CET4) on students' self-regulated learning (SRL) and used SPSS 25.0 for data analysis. The findings indicate that a majority of the participants agree that the CET 4 listening test has a positive washback effect on their SRL attitudes, learning approaches, and learning habits. Additionally, some participants believed that the difficulty of the CET 4 listening test exceeded their expectations, resulting in a negative washback effect on their English learning. The findings of this study propose relevant implications to enhance the positive washback effect of CET 4 exams on students as well as offer corresponding suggestions for CET 4 teaching and learning in higher education.

## **Subject Areas**

**Higher Education** 

## **Keywords**

College English Test Band 4 (CET4), Listening Test, Washback Effect, Listening Learning

# 1. Introduction

Language testing is an important part of language teaching and learning, as it can influence both the macro level (society and education system) and the micro level (individual teachers and students), thereby guiding language teaching and learning [1]. Any test, regardless of its scale, will exert an impact on a particular demographic [2]. The washback effect is one of the test impacts, referring to the

impact of tests, especially large-scale high-stakes tests, on teachers' pedagogy and students' academic performance [3]. The washback effect is not only one of the crucial indicators for evaluating the proficiency of testers and teaching, but also an integral part of examining the construct validity of a test [4].

The washback effect is increasingly recognized in language testing with an increasing number of empirical studies focusing on its effect on high-stakes tests (e.g. CET 4, CET 6, IELTS, TOEFL, etc.). CET 4 is a national educational test hosted by the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education in China. As a widely influential and high-stakes language test, it has a great influence on college English teaching in China [5]. According to the score composition of the CET 4, the listening test occupies 35% of the total score, which underscores its importance.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the washback effect on the macro-level, confirming its positive impact in helping colleges and universities reform their teaching methods and improving the design of high-stakes tests [6] [7]. However, studies regarding the specific field of the CET test and its washback are lacking. Few studies have focused on the washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on the micro-level, specifically regarding to the students' self-regulated learning (SRL) of listening. Chinese college students, as a vast population of EFL learners, may not receive adequate guidance from their instructors and advisors in universities and colleges, making it essential to implement SRL as a complement to their learning process [8].

Research from a student's perspective can not only reveal the challenges and obstacles they will encounter in their learning and testing, but also provide suggestions to adjust teaching and exam design that enable education more scientific. Hence, this exploratory study aims to investigate the washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' SRL of English listening and provide possible implications of CET 4 teaching to instructors in universities. The findings will bridge the existing research gaps in this field and more specifically, disclose the underlying correlation between the CET 4 listening test and its washback. Practical suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning CET 4 will be provided to amplify the favorable outcomes of the test.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1. Washback Effect

Hughes presented a clear definition of the washback effect, indicating that it is the impact of tests on both teachers' teaching and students' learning [9]. He emphasized that the washback effect could have both positive and negative impacts on teaching and learning, revealing its dialectical impact. Scholars later proposed 15 hypotheses about language test washback, providing further insight into the impact of testing on teaching and learning [3]. In addition, more studies have expanded on this conceptualization, delving deeper into the role of washback. For instance, Bachman and Palmer noted that washback effects may be

exerted on the test itself, society, the teaching system, and the individual [10], while Andrews added its effects on the testing system and examination system [11].

According to Hamp-Lyons, the washback effect is generally neutral, but it can become either positive or negative [5]. If a test enhances teaching and learning from some perspectives, it has a positive washback effect, otherwise it has a negative one. Heaton and Hughes express similar views [9] [12]. For the positive washback effect, some scholars proposed the differentiation criterion, which states that as long as a test strengthens students' motivation to learn, it has a positive washback effect regardless of the test results [3]. Additionally, previous studies noted the harm of the negative washback effect and offered solutions. Madaus argued that the negative washback effect could lead teachers to focus on test skills rather than students' inner abilities [13]. Heaton suggested that tests should align with the teaching syllabus to avoid the negative washback effect [12]. Therefore, tests have both positive and negative washback effects, and the extent of each depends on the researcher's perspective and criteria [4].

To conclude, washback is the impact of testing on teaching and learning. As the concept improved, its theme expanded, and the mechanism of its role became more refined. In this study, we believe that the washback effect pertains to the impact of language testing on teachers and students, particularly the CET 4 listening test's impact on students' SRL for listening learning.

# 2.2. CET 4 and Listening Test

The National University English Examination Committee stated that the College English Test (CET) is a nationwide English teaching examination charged by the Ministry of Education [14]. The CET consists of Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6) to measure college students' comprehensive English proficiency as well as serve to enhance English teaching and learning at universities. Currently, it is one of the most distinguished large-scale English tests in China.

The Teaching Requirements for University English Courses published by the Ministry of Education states that the goal of English courses is to cultivate students' comprehensive English application ability, particularly listening and speaking skills, enabling students to communicate effectively in English in their future work and social interactions [15]. The requirement reflected in the CET 4 is the listening test, which has undergone several reforms and now comprises three parts. Table 1 shows the information of the CET 4 listening test.

**Table 1.** The information of the CET 4 listening test.

Section	Score	Question types	Time
News reports	7%		
Long conversations	8%	Multiple choice questions	25 minutes
Passage	Passage 20%		

# 2.3. The Washback Effect of the Listening Test of CET 4

Previous studies explored the washback effect of CET 4 listening tests on both teacher instruction and student learning sides. Several studies integrated qualitative and quantitative data collection using questionnaires and interviews, revealing that the positive washback effect outweighed the negative effect on students [16] [17]. Zhang applied classroom observation to further highlight the impact of teachers on the washback effect [18]. A three-year longitudinal study by Shi supported the idea of the long-lasting impact of the washback effect from a longitudinal perspective [19]. However, some studies indicated that certain students did not view the test as a reflection of their true level, and as a result, experienced a greater negative washback effect than a positive one [20]. To address this issue, related studies proposed collaborative solutions to enhance the positive washback effect [21] [22].

Hence, this exploratory study mainly focuses on the washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' SRL of listening, and the following two research questions are proposed in this paper:

RQ1. What is the effect of the washback effect by the CET 4 listening test on students' SRL of listening?

RQ2. In what ways does the listening test have a washback effect on students' SRL of listening?

### 3. Method

## 3.1. Participants

The present study adopted convenience sampling. A total of 250 college students sampled from a key normal university in Zhejiang Province were recruited to complete the questionnaire. We confirmed that all the participants passed the CET 4 test and informed them of their basic rights. The consent was obtained before the formal research. All 250 questionnaires were successfully distributed and recovered, with a valid sample of N = 202 students (94 men and 108 women) obtained after discarding invalid data. Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the participants.

#### 3.2. Instruments

A self-report questionnaire is employed in the present study, which is deemed appropriate because the information needed involves attitude, affective responses, and participants' own behavior [23] [24]. Based on the hypothesis of the washback effect [3] and the PPP model by Hughes [25], together with the previous questionnaires by Wang [26] and Zhong [17], we designed the present questionnaire. An academic colleague was invited to offer insights and feedback to improve the validity of the questionnaire. Altogether, 23 items were included in the questionnaire. the scale is in the form of a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree", 2 indicates "disagree", 3 indicates "relatively agree", and 4 indicates "strongly agree". Table 3 illustrates the detailed information of the

**Table 2.** The demographic profile of the participants.

Categ	Category		Percentage		
Gender	male	94	46.53		
Gender	female	108	53.47		
	two	66	32.67		
Grade	three	75	37.13		
	four	61	30.20		
Profession	science	126	62.38		
Profession	arts	76	37.62		
Overall score of	(0, 425)	21	10.40		
	[425, 500)	80	39.60		
CET 4	[500, 575)	62	30.69		
	[570, 650)	39	19.31		
	(0, 121)	20	9.90		
	[121, 150]	94	46.53		
Score of listening test in CET 4	[151, 180]	58	28.71		
test iii OL1 4	[181, 210]	18	8.91		
	[211, 219]	12	5.94		

**Table 3.** The information of the questionnaire.

Category	Item
Basic information of the participants	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
The overall perspective of students and the washback effect of the CET 4 listening test	6, 7, 8, 9
The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning attitude	10, 11, 12, 13
The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning approach	14, 15, 16, 17, 18
The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning habit	19, 20, 21, 22, 23

## questionnaire.

Before the formal research, a pilot study was conducted to confirm the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Altogether, 50 participants were recruited to complete the survey. We analyzed the 42 valid data and reported that the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the questionnaire was 0.940 (overall 23 items), indicating its high internal consistency. The KMO coefficient was 0.946 (overall 23 items), indicating high validity.

# 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire survey was completed in November 2023. We obtained the consent of 250 participants and distributed the questionnaire, 202 valid data (effective rate 80.8%) were obtained after the inspection. To reveal the correlation between the washback effect and the CET 4 listening test, the collected data was imported to SPSS 25.0 for quantitative analyses. Descriptive statistics such as the basic information of participants were reported and interpreted. The mean and standard derivation were reported to reveal the correlation of the washback effect. **Figure 1** shows the basic procedure of the research.

# 4. Findings and Discussion

# 4.1. The Overall Perspective of Students and Washback Effect of the CET 4 Listening Test

Table 4 shows the data of the overall perspective. The mean value of question item 6 is 1.74, and among the participants, 172 students were dissatisfied with the content of the CET 4 listening test, with a ratio of 85%. It is indicated that most students agree that the difficulty of the CET 4 listening test exceeds their level. This result is aligned with the results of the study that there is a correlation between students' language proficiency level and their attitudes toward the difficulty of the CET 4 listening test. The mean value of question item 7 is 3.18, and most of the students think that the multiple-choice question type is acceptable, while 15% of the students are dissatisfied with the question type of Grade 4, which does not reflect the students' real level [17]. The mean values of question

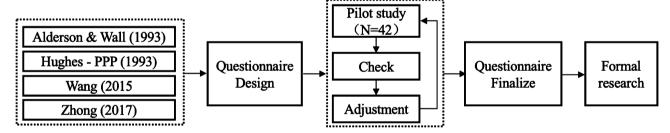


Figure 1. The procedure of the research.

Table 4. The overall perspective of students and the washback effect of the CET 4 listening test.

Questions	Strongly disagree	Relatively disagree	Relatively agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
6. I am satisfied with the content of the CET 4 listening test.	47%	38%	9%	6%	1.74	0.860
7. I am satisfied with the question types of the CET 4 listening test.	8%	7%	44%	41%	3.18	0.881
8. The effect of the CET 4 listening test on my English listening learning is more favorable than unfavorable.	7%	8%	43%	42%	3.20	0.865
9. The CET 4 listening test helps to improve my English listening skills.	5%	9%	45%	41%	3.22	0.811

items 8 and 9 are 3.20 and 3.22 respectively, showing that most students point out that the CET 4 listening test can promote their English learning in general.

# 4.2. The Washback Effect of the CET 4 Listening Test on Students' Learning Attitude

Table 5 shows the data of the attitude perspective, the mean value of question item 10 is 3.18, which together with the ratio shows that most of the students believe that the CET 4 listening test can give them the motivation to learn English (regardless of whether the result is good or bad), and this result is inconsistent with that by Zhong [17]. It is demonstrated that the selected participants are in the key colleges and universities in Zhejiang Province, and the students' sense of self-improvement is relatively higher than other universities. Therefore, the result of the CET 4 listening test can have a strong washback effect on the students to encourage them to study further. The mean value of item 11 is 2.55, and most of the students' choices are centered between relatively disagree and relatively agree, which indicates that the difficulty of the CET 4 listening test has weakened the students' interest in learning English listening to a certain extent. The mean values of items 12 and 13 are 3.21 and 3.19 respectively, which shows that most students agree that the CET 4 listening test will make them pay more attention to their studies and that they need extracurricular tutoring. Similar results can be found in the study of Yan [27].

# 4.3. The Washback Effect of the CET 4 Listening Test on Students' Learning Approach

**Table 6** shows the data of the learning approach perspective. The mean value of question items 14 and 17 is 3.19 and 3.18 respectively, which shows that most of the students believe that the CET 4 listening test can prompt them to evaluate English listening learning behavior. The self-reflection is significant in SRL, as a component of the sequence. However, with SD = 0.907 and 0.968 respectively, the distinctions among the participants vary sharply, indicating that not all students master the approaches of SRL in CET 4 listening learning. The mean value

**Table 5.** The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning attitude.

Questions	Strongly disagree	Relatively disagree	Relatively agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
10. The CET 4 listening test has made me more motivated to learn English listening.	5%	12%	43%	40%	3.18	0.833
11. The CET 4 listening test has made me more interested in English listening.	13%	35%	36%	16%	2.55	0.914
12. The CET 4 listening test will make me pay more attention to English listening study.	10%	3%	43%	44%	3.21	0.913
13. I will feel dissatisfied if my teacher fails to arrange relevant CET 4 listening tutorials	4%	10%	49%	37%	3.19	0.775

of items 15, 16, and 18 are 3.15, 3.28, and 3.25 respectively, and most of the students' choices are centered between relatively agree and strongly agree, showing that the CET 4 motivate students to adjust their learning approaches. The value of all the items exceeds the value of relatively agree (3), proving that the CET 4 listening test enables students to think about whether their study approaches are in line with the requirements of the test, and to further adjust their study plans and self-monitoring. Similar results can be found by Wang [26].

# 4.4. The Washback Effect of the CET 4 Listening Test on Students' Learning Habit

Table 7 shows the data of the learning habit perspective. The standard derivation if items 21 and 23 are 0.925 and 0.929 respectively, which are higher than the others. For items 21 and 23 investigating whether students will exercise more after taking the test, the responses by students vary drastically as some students have no intention to further prepare for other large-scale English tests. Therefore,

Table 6. The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning approach.

Questions		Relatively disagree	Relatively agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
14. The CET 4 listening test prompted me to evaluate my English listening learning behavior.	9%	6%	42%	43%	3.19	0.907
15. The CET 4 listening test has made me value the use of learning methods that help me improve my listening skills.	8%	7%	47%	38%	3.15	0.869
16. The CET 4 listening test prompted me to think about how I can improve my English listening skills.	6%	8%	38%	48%	3.28	0.854
17. The CET 4 listening test motivated me to consciously monitor my English listening study.	11%	6%	37%	46%	3.18	0.968
18. The CET 4 listening test prompted me to take the initiative in organizing my English listening study plan.	8%	6%	39%	47%	3.25	0.892

Table 7. The washback effect of the CET 4 listening test on students' learning habit.

Questions	Strongly disagree	Relatively disagree	Relatively agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
19. The CET 4 listening test has prompted me to spend more time training my English listening skills.	6%	8%	42%	44%	3.22	0.883
20. The CET 4 listening test will have a big impact on my English listening studies.	7%	6%	43%	44%	3.24	0.854
21. The CET 4 listening test will make me increase my English listening practice frequency outside the classroom.	9%	6%	36%	49%	3.25	0.925
22. The CET 4 listening test has prompted me to do targeted English listening training.	5%	9%	44%	42%	3.23	0.815
23. The CET 4 listening test has prompted me to learn appropriate test-taking skills before the test.	10%	5%	41%	44%	3.19	0.929

they denied the increase of the exercise. In addition, the mean values of question items 19, 20, and 22 are 3.22, 3.24, and 3.23 respectively, which exceed the scale value of relatively agree, proving that the CET 4 listening test can make students think about whether their study habits are in accordance with the requirements of the test, urging them to spend more time on listening training, as well as to make some adjustment. The studies of Wang and Zhong have similar results [17] [26].

#### 5. Conclusions

## 5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

# 5.1.1. Suggestions from the Student Perspective

Firstly, it is important for students to develop skills in self-evaluation and SRL throughout their college life. To improve their listening abilities in college English classrooms, students should actively seek out opportunities to practice listening and adopt effective learning methods [26]. This includes not only SRL, but also cooperative learning such as forming listening support groups with peers of similar levels, where students can study together and overcome the limitations of SRL.

Secondly, students should explore different learning methods to cultivate their interest in English listening. This can be achieved by watching foreign TV series, engaging in daily conversations with classmates in English, and other techniques [17]. By consistently practicing their listening skills, students can boost their confidence and achieve positive outcomes in CET 4 English listening tests.

Lastly, it is crucial for students to understand the objectives, format, and purpose of the CET 4 listening test. They should strive to acquire a strong mastery of news and terminology and actively seek out opportunities to apply this knowledge in their daily conversations, thus improving their overall listening abilities.

#### 5.1.2. Suggestions from the Teacher Perspective

Teachers have a responsibility to foster the right attitude towards learning. It is not enough to focus solely on test-taking rather teachers should encourage creativity, enthusiasm, and innovation in their students during listening exercises. By incorporating different teaching methods, such as intensive and extensive listening, teachers can guide students in developing the necessary skills and techniques. Classroom activities like presentations, group readings, and picture descriptions can further support students' listening skills [7].

In addition to classroom instruction, teachers and students should prioritize daily communication and address any difficulties or mental barriers to English listening. By doing so, students can gain a stronger sense of self-efficacy and motivation. Teachers should act as facilitators and provide support, including providing learning materials and methods, and encouraging students' progress. Teachers are responsible for setting a positive learning environment that fosters listening and language acquisition.

### 5.1.3. Suggestions from the Test Setting Perspective

Firstly, the CET 4 listening test poses difficulties for students due to the high level of content. Most students taking the CET 4 exam are in their freshman year and are in the process of transitioning from high school to university. Since the listening test format and content are different from the college entrance examination in most regions, it is challenging for some students to adapt [17]. Hence, it is recommended to consider selecting materials and vocabulary that are moderately close to the transition stage of high school and university to promote a positive washback effect.

The CET 4 English listening test is a national English proficiency test with high influence that comprises multiple-choice questions only. Yang and Chen argued that multiple-choice questions have a negative impact on teaching when compared to subjective questions, which have better validity and a more positive long-term effect on teaching [20]. Although dictation questions were present in the CET 4 listening test from 2006 to 2015, they were eliminated in the new version of the reform. Nonetheless, other high-efficiency English proficiency tests (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL, and TEM) have dictation questions in the listening section. Therefore, it is recommended to develop subjective questions in the subsequent test propositions.

#### 5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study explored the washback effect of the listening test of CET4 on students's SRL, there are several limitations that should also be addressed. Firstly, the study had a limited number of participants. Future research could use larger samples and quantitative methods to further explain the rationale. Secondly, the present study just analyzes the basic statistical indicators including mean and standard derivation. Future studies can better delve into the underlying correlations and conduct some models to reveal the reasons.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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