

The Impact of College English Examination Reform on Students' Perceptions of the Importance of English

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Abstract: The reform of China's college English examination has yielded significant results since the inception of the reform and opening-up era, particularly in the formulation of examination syllabi and the development of examination systems. However, with the ongoing evolution of China's economy, society, and the gradual refinement of the English education system, persistent issues remain in the college English examination system. For example, problems like overly rigid examination content, insufficient coverage of knowledge, and a lingering trend towards exam-oriented approaches still exist in the modern examination system. Therefore, this article employs interviews to investigate the influence of college English examination reform on students' perceptions of the importance of English. Building upon the discussion and analysis of the interview data, the article proposes recommendations for optimizing the transformation of the orientation of English examination reform, harnessing the positive impact of examinations on students, and shifting the focus of examination reform towards practicality. These suggestions aim to provide strategic measures for furthering the depth of examination reform.

Keywords: Examination Reform, College Students, English Education, Perceptions

1. Introduction

Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, China has accelerated its integration with the international community, leading to increasingly frequent economic and cultural exchanges with various countries. In this context, English education in China, especially in colleges, has garnered greater attention. The primary goal of English major courses and public English courses in Chinese colleges should be to cultivate university graduates who possess both professional knowledge and strong English communication skills, as emphasized by Cai Jigang [1]. Therefore, within college English education, examinations play an indispensable role in assessing students' proficiency, allowing them to identify and address deficiencies, and enhance their overall competence. As a result, the reform of examinations in college English education has been a focal point. Over the past decade, whether through the addition of oral exams to the National College Entrance English Examination or the increased emphasis on students' oral and translation abilities in the Postgraduate Entrance English Examination, the reforms have leaned towards enhancing students' comprehensive English proficiency rather than merely assessing listening and writing skills. The ultimate goal of the reform in college English education examinations is undeniably to elevate students' overall English

proficiency, enabling them to better adapt to the contemporary globalized environment. Consequently, students are undoubtedly at the center of this reform. However, most previous research on college English education has predominantly focused on the failures and lessons learned [1], analyzing the current situation [2], exploring reforms in college English education [3], and addressing problems and corresponding strategies faced by college English education [4]. However, these studies have not approached the subject from the perspective of educational examination reform, neglecting to place the research focus on the core of college English education examination reform—the students. Therefore, this paper will explore, from the perspective of university students, the awareness of the importance of college English education under the backdrop of examination reform and propose strategies for improving college English education.

2. Current Status of College English Education Examination Reform

2.1. Reform of College English Education Examination Content

For an extended period, the focus of China's college English examinations has been on students' reading and writing abilities. The emphasis on these two areas has undoubtedly played a crucial role in improving students' grasp of basic English grammar, vocabulary accumulation, and enhancement of English reading skills [1]. However, while there has been an improvement in the English reading abilities of Chinese university students, many still face challenges in improving their listening and speaking skills, leading to the phenomenon commonly referred to as "deaf English" or "mute English" [5]. In response to this, recent reforms in some regions have aimed at enhancing students' oral English proficiency. The 2023 comprehensive reform plan for higher education examinations in Beijing includes an addition of oral examinations to the English college entrance examination (gaokao), with both oral and listening examinations accounting for a total of 50 points. Beyond the college entrance examination, reforms in English proficiency testing have also been introduced in the College English Test (CET) Band 4 and 6, placing a greater emphasis on assessing students' oral expression abilities. These reforms are gradually shifting the focus towards cultivating students' overall English competence, particularly in oral communication.

2.2. Reform of College English Education Examination Formats

In recent years, the format of college English examinations has undergone corresponding changes with the maturation of computer technology, transitioning from traditional offline examinations to online examinations. While online examinations were not widely used before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were primarily applied in qualification examinations [6]. However, in response to the pandemic, an increasing number of colleges have adopted online examination formats to meet health and safety requirements. Even after the pandemic, many colleges continue to retain online examination formats. Additionally, college English examinations are gradually shifting from traditional pen-and-paper examinations to computer-based examinations. For instance, many colleges leverage artificial intelligence technology to integrate English listening and speaking examinations, establishing platforms for machine-scored oral English examinations for high school and college English examinations [7]. Moreover, the composition section has incorporated listening machine-scored requirements, including a repeating section where candidates repeat dialogues heard through the computer's microphone, evaluating the standardization of candidates' oral skills. These reforms have made college English examination formats more flexible and diverse, catering to the demand for enhancing students' comprehensive English proficiency and meeting diverse needs.

2.3. "De-Examination-Oriented Reform" of College English Examination Reform

College English examination reform is gradually moving towards "de-examination-oriented reform". Historically, college students in China engaged in extensive mechanical practice to cope with various examinations, leading to limited improvement in foreign language proficiency. To address this issue, in September 2014, the State Council issued the "Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of College Entrance Examination Enrollment System," proposing the overall goal of reforming the enrollment system to "establish a classification-based examination, comprehensive evaluation, and diversified admission model, improve a fair, scientifically selective, and well-supervised system mechanism, and build a 'multilevel bridge' facilitating the connection of various levels and types of education and recognizing various learning achievements" [8].

In addition to national policies, some colleges have implemented corresponding examination reforms. For example, in 2023, Xi'an Jiaotong University announced that it would no longer consider scores from the College English Test (CET) Band 4 and 6 as conditions for degree conferment. Instead, the university is committed to developing a reasonable, diversified English evaluation system that aligns with the developmental needs of students' overall English proficiency. Xi'an Jiaotong University is not the first to take such a step; as early as 2001, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law became known as one of the earliest colleges to "decouple" from CET scores. In 2005, the Ministry of Education initiated the first reform since the introduction of the CETs, emphasizing that participation in the CETs has always been voluntary. Following this announcement, several colleges, including Tsinghua University, China University of Political Science and Law, Renmin University of China, and East China University of Science and Technology, successively declared the "decoupling" of CET scores from graduation and degree certificates. According to the Changjiang Daily, as of 2013, 18 colleges in Wuhan had achieved the "decoupling" of CET scores from degrees [9].

3. Interview Research on College Students' Perceptions of the Importance of College English Education under the Background of Examination Reform

3.1. Interview Subjects

The participants in the interviews are current college students, with each interviewee coming from different college backgrounds. Among the interviewees, 60% are enrolled in regular undergraduate institutions, 20% attend "Double First-Class" institutions, and the remaining 20% are from "Project 985" and "Project 211" institutions. Geographically, 80% of the interviewees study in Guangdong, 5% in Shanghai, and 15% in Beijing. The gender distribution is 60% female and 40% male. Interviewees are primarily in their second, third, and fourth years of college. Most have passed the College English Test (CET) Band 4 and 6, while a few have obtained a Test for English Majors (TEM) Grade Four Certificate or have not passed the CETs. The diversity in the interviewees' college backgrounds and English proficiency ensures the variety and credibility of the interview data.

3.2. Interview Methods

The average interview duration for each participant is 40 minutes. The project primarily involves face-to-face interviews, online communication, and phone interviews. Strict confidentiality is maintained during the interview process, with interview information kept confidential and used only for research purposes. The identity of the interviewees is also strictly protected, and interviews cease once saturation of information is reached. The study ensures reliability and validity through a semi-structured interview approach, asking interviewees about their views and suggestions on the importance of college English education in the context of examination reform.

3.3. Interview Questions

During the interviews, the focus is on the participants' perceptions, and the following key questions guide the discussions: (1) What are the benefits of college English examination reform in enhancing students' awareness of the importance of English? (2) Does the policy of decoupling the College English Test (CET) from degree requirements have any adverse effects on students' awareness of the importance of English? (3) What are the shortcomings of college English examination reform in China? (4) What suggestions do the interviewees have regarding college English examination reform?

3.4. Interview Results

After data compilation, the interviewees can be broadly categorized into three groups:

3.4.1. Impact of College English Examination Reform on Students' Awareness of English Importance

College English examination reform has influenced students' awareness of the importance of English in the following three aspects:

1. Reform in Examination Content: In the interviews, 40% of the participants believe that the increased weight of listening comprehension in the CETs (35%) has motivated candidates to pay more attention to practicing English listening skills, contributing to an improvement in students' foundational listening abilities. Another 30% of participants feel that the translation section in the CETs has addressed the historical neglect of translation in Chinese middle and high school English education, leading candidates to place greater emphasis on the comprehensive development of their English abilities.

2. Reform in Examination Format: 40% of the interviewees believe that the adoption of a blended format, combining online and offline elements by various colleges, has diversified examination formats. This flexibility not only accommodates the requirements of epidemic prevention but also better meets the examination needs of students who cannot return to campus, highlighting the increased importance of learning English even during the pandemic.

3. Policy of Decoupling CETs from Degrees: Fifty percent of the interviewees think that the announcement by certain colleges to decouple graduation certificates from CET scores enhances the perceived importance of English among students. Another 30% believe that the De-Examination-Oriented Education of college degree certificates from CET scores will encourage colleges to establish their own English assessment mechanisms based on their actual conditions, better adapting to the English learning needs of their students.

3.4.2. Impact of College Students' Interest in English on Awareness of Importance

In the interviews, 20% of participants express a strong interest in learning English, 20% have some interest, while 60% show little or no interest in learning English. Among those interested in learning English, 80% have passed the CETs, and 40% have obtained a Test for English Majors (TEM) Grade Four Certificate. In contrast, only 30% of those with little interest in learning English have passed the CETs. The data indicates that students' interest in learning English does impact their awareness of the importance of English from the perspective of obtaining professional certificates.

3.4.3. Perception that College English Examination Reform is Still too Exam-Oriented

Seventy percent of interviewees believe that both the CETs and other certificate examinations are overly exam-oriented, with the grammar knowledge and vocabulary points used in examinations not

aligning well with the English knowledge usable in daily life or during activities such as reading foreign newspapers or watching dramas, especially at the oral proficiency level.

In addition, 65% of participants believe that examination content should be more practical, allowing candidates to apply what they have learned not only in examinations but also in daily life or work. This approach is seen as more favorable for enhancing students' overall English proficiency, improving their comprehensive competitiveness after graduation, and enabling them to effectively apply the English knowledge acquired in their future careers or daily lives.

4. The Origins of Changes in College Students' Perception of the Importance of College English Education under the Background of College English Examination Reform

4.1. Shifts in Examination Reform Focus Leading to Changes in Examination Values

Since 2002, the Ministry of Education has been leading and promoting reforms in college English teaching, emphasizing a shift from a focus on "reading and writing" to "listening and speaking" to comprehensively enhance practical English abilities [10]. This has provided a general direction for college English examination reform. First, from the perspective of the English CET (Band 4 and 6) examinations, the listening section constitutes 35% of the total score, equal to the reading comprehension section, making it the most heavily weighted component. Additionally, colleges have introduced oral English examinations alongside traditional assessments of reading comprehension, writing, and vocabulary. Furthermore, both national English certificate examinations (CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, TEM-8) and postgraduate English examinations include translation tasks to evaluate students' translation abilities. From these adjustments in examination content, it is evident that the current college English examination reform places greater emphasis on the comprehensive development of students in the aspects of "listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation." This raises higher requirements for students' English learning and prompts them to prioritize the cultivation of their overall English abilities.

4.2. Changes in the Role of Examinations Promoting Students' Interest in Learning English

Firstly, from the perspective of learning motivation, students' interest in learning English is rooted in a love for the language and an appreciation for English culture, including songs, movies, literature, people, and culture. Overall, these expressions indicate a genuine interest in language and culture, demonstrating inherent characteristics of "intrinsic learning motivation" [11].

Secondly, concerning learning purposes, students' interest in learning English also influences their educational goals. Among those interested in learning English, 40% expressed intentions of studying or working abroad, while 30% hoped to pursue careers related to English, such as foreign trade, translation, or teaching.

Finally, the policy of decoupling the CETs from degree requirements in certain colleges has prompted each college to establish an English assessment system tailored to its own students' needs. According to individual student situations, corresponding English courses and examination content are formulated, breaking away from the inherent constraints of the traditional English proficiency exams, which primarily emphasized students' reading ability and vocabulary accumulation. This shift has diversified English learning, made classroom content more engaging, ignited students' motivation to learn English, and, importantly, helped students clarify their purpose in learning English, stimulating their interest in the subject.

4.3. Imperfections in Examination Reform Resulting in the Persistence of Exam-Oriented Phenomena

Since the implementation of college English examinations in 1987, the pace of examination reform has never ceased. However, to this day, the phenomenon of excessive exam orientation in college English examinations persists, mainly due to the following two reasons. Firstly, from the perspective of the CETs, the content remains rigid, with a predominant focus on reading comprehension and writing despite an increase in the weight of the listening section. Many of the words required for accumulation in the examination, particularly in the areas of reading comprehension and writing, are of limited practical use in real-life situations. In daily English communication, individual oral proficiency is crucial, but the CETs do not mandate students to take the oral English section; it is voluntary, making it challenging to motivate students to practice spoken English. Secondly, the direction of examinations also influences the direction of college English education. From a teaching perspective, examinations have had a significantly negative impact on college English teaching, evolving into a "baton" directing the teaching process. According to surveys, over 90% of colleges exhibit varying degrees of exam-oriented teaching practices, including intensive preparation for the CETs with a focus on solving simulated or past examination papers, sidelining textbook content, and preparing comprehensively for the June CETs [12].

5. Strategies for Enhancing College Students' Awareness of the Importance of College English Education under the Background of College English Examination Reform

5.1. Optimization of the Shift in College English Examination Reform Orientation

Firstly, each college's English examination reform should persist in the general direction of transitioning from a focus on "reading and writing" to "listening and speaking," further enhancing students' listening abilities. Building a combination of online and offline, paper-based and computer-based listening examination formats would diversify the forms of listening examinations, meet diverse examination needs, and further promote the cultivation of students' comprehensive English skills. Additionally, the CET (Band 4 and 6) examinations should transform the optional nature of the oral examination section to mandatory, and professional English examinations, such as CET-4, CET-6, and postgraduate English examinations, should appropriately increase the content of oral examinations, imposing higher requirements on students' oral proficiency.

Secondly, in the current college English examinations, traditional question types such as reading comprehension, cloze tests, and single-choice questions assessing English grammar still carry significant weight. Therefore, colleges should appropriately reduce the proportion of traditional question types, such as reading comprehension, and allocate more space for oral, listening, and translation examination content. Simultaneously, colleges should increase the emphasis on assessing oral proficiency, constructing a comprehensive framework for assessing spoken English using a combination of online and offline examination formats.

5.2. Leveraging the Positive Effects of Examination Reform on Students' English Learning

Students are the center of examination reform and its main target audience. Each college should leverage the positive effects of examination reform on students' English learning. By reforming examination content, college English examinations should become more diversified, breaking away from the traditional framework of CET examinations, and comprehensively promote the cultivation and enhancement of students' overall English skills. Simultaneously, guiding English courses to become more diverse through examination reform can prompt a transformation in English teaching

methods, allowing students to encounter English culture from various perspectives, sparking students' interest and motivation to learn.

While harnessing the positive effects of examination reform, colleges should also avoid the negative impacts it may bring. Firstly, colleges need to guide students in developing a correct perception of examinations, emphasizing that examinations are a means to enhance their own English proficiency rather than pursuing certificates blindly. Secondly, examination reform should correctly guide students' learning purposes, helping students understand the value and purpose of examination reform rather than perceiving it as a mere change in examination content. This approach will better guide students in establishing correct learning attitudes and goals.

5.3. Shifting the Focus of Examination Reform Towards Practicality

The purpose of foreign language teaching is to cultivate talent for economic construction and social development [13], and college English examination reform should align with this purpose. College English examination reform should lean more towards the practicality of the acquired English knowledge, rather than persisting in an exam-oriented direction. Firstly, in terms of examination vocabulary, examinations should not deliberately choose complex and difficult words to increase difficulty; instead, they should select vocabulary more relevant to daily life or work. This approach allows students to apply new words to their daily lives or work while learning them. Secondly, concerning examination content, questions in various sections (reading comprehension, cloze tests, translation, writing, etc.) should be integrated with the content of other practical disciplines rather than discussing complex theories or literature for the sake of difficulty. This integration helps students gain a deep understanding of other practical subjects from an English perspective. Lastly, listening, translation, and oral proficiency are crucial in daily foreign language communication and in professions related to English. However, these aspects have not received due attention in examinations for an extended period. Therefore, examination reform should shift from the original focus on "reading and writing" to a comprehensive development that includes "listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation.

6. Conclusion

After interviews with numbers of college students, it was found that the reform of college English examinations has a positive impact on college students' awareness of the importance of English, such as stimulating students' interest in learning, but it may also have a negative impact on students such as a test-taking mentality. In order to exert the positive impact of the examination reform and avoid the negativity of it, the future examination reform should optimize the English examination reform orientation, and at the same time shift the focus from exam-oriented to practicality, and give full play to the positive role of the examination in students' English learning process.

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