

## **Assessment and curriculum reform in China: EFL education at the tertiary level**

### ***Abstract:***

The current world sees a changing climate in educational policy and practice (Broadfoot, 1996; Murphy, 2007). This is attributed to the combined influence of many aspects. The first relates to the increasing acknowledgement of the theoretical developments in cognition, notably constructivist and sociocultural perspectives (Rogoff, 1999). These perspectives have provided dynamic insights into educational philosophy and understanding about the nature and process of learning and assessment (Broadfoot, 2004). The second is the overall dissatisfaction with educational attainment (Klenowski, 2006) and a desire to raise the quality of education to gain an edge in an increasingly competitive global context (Murphy, 2007).

In these educational reforms, assessment assumes a critical position (Murphy, 2007). The reasons follow. Firstly, the educational system is now 'politically charged and value laden' (Leach, McCormick, Moon, & Murphy, 1999 p. i) in a competitive global context. It demands 'efficiency and quality' out of its expenditure (Mok, 2005). Secondly, the realisation that "real change will not take place in schooling until significant change happens to assessment" (Torrance, 1996 p. i) places increasing interest on assessment for policy-makers. Thirdly, assessment itself, as informed by the above mentioned theoretical developments, has undergone a 'conceptual shift' (Dwyer, 1998) from behaviourist to constructivist paradigm (Gipps, 1994). Notably, more emphasis has been given to formative assessment, which highlights the learning process, learner engagement, and particularly, learning improvement rather than evaluation of products (Harlen, 2006). This role of formative assessment in 'supporting and enhancing learning' (Black & Wiliam, 1998) is appealing to both policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Reforms initiated to achieve better educational outcomes for a sustainable future via more developed learning and assessment theories have included the 2007 College English Reform Program (CERP) in China's context. The CERP is situated in the discipline of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for non-English major students in the Chinese higher education context. Initiatives to achieve better education outcomes for a sustainable future via more developed learning and assessment theories and technology are clearly articulated in its guideline document, the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) (CMoE, 2004; 2007). The stipulated College English assessment framework has taken two major moves. Firstly, the original external examination system, the College English Test (CET) testing system is reformed in a substantial way; and secondly, formative assessment elements are advocated to incorporate into the summative assessment framework. Concern remains as to whether this reform of foreign origin could fit with the local context. The question is what issues need to be considered to avoid any potential pitfalls in practices? To what extent the implementation practices will be aligned with the policy rhetoric? And what the long term effect will be?

To find clues to these questions, this paper sets out to examine the social and cultural context of the CERP. This will be achieved by examining the causes that resulted in the unsuccessful attempts in the previous College English curriculum reforms. Special regards will be given to the roles that assessment performed in the reforms and its impact on College English teaching and learning practices. That will shed some light on the barriers and possibility of the CERP in the local reality. Further, this paper will present the changes to the College English learning context in the past decade. Highlights are given to the quality demand and the new role that testing and assessment has assumed in the assessment culture

of China. Thirdly, this paper will report the progress and challenges as informed by the research literature, and call for attention to the problems that looms. As such, the paper seeks to introduce the College Education and the CET testing system and the current College English reform to a new readership while also providing a source of analysis directed towards the impact of global educational reform outside the Western contexts.

As many documents are involved to indicate the policy shift, the methodology of document analysis is used.

**Key words:** testing and assessment, EFL, higher education

## *Introduction*

The second half of the twentieth century saw the understandings about mind and mental development take on new perspectives, notably constructivist and sociocultural perspectives (Rogoff, 1999). These perspectives provided dynamic insights into educational philosophy and understanding about the nature and process of learning (Broadfoot, 1996). Assessment has undergone a similar 'conceptual shift' (Dwyer, 1998) from behaviourist to constructivist paradigm (Gipps, 1999). This shift relates to a shift of focus in the assessment purposes (Broadfoot, 2004). Notably, in contrast to the prevailing summative assessment, formative purposes are highlighted, which gives more emphasis to process, learner engagement, and particularly, learning improvement rather than evaluation of products (Harlen, 2006). Based on these theoretical developments, it is assumed that better education outcomes for a sustainable future can be achieved via more developed learning and assessment theories (Black & Wiliam, 2001). This assumption, coupled with the desire to raise the quality of education in a global context, has contributed to a changing climate in educational policy and practices (Broadfoot, 1996).

Assessment is a critical issue in these educational reforms (Murphy, 2007). Reasons are as follows. Firstly, the educational system is now 'politically charged and value laden' (Leach, McCormick, Moon, & Murphy, 1999 p. 1) in a competitive global context. It demands 'efficiency and quality' out of its expenditure (Mok, 2005). Secondly, the realisation that "real change will not take place in schooling until significant change happens to assessment" (Torrance, 1996 p. i) places increasing interest on assessment for policy-makers. Thirdly, the role of assessment in 'supporting and enhancing learning' (Black & Wiliam, 1998) is appealing to both policy-makers and other stakeholders. Therefore, reforms initiated to attempt for better learning outcomes via advanced theory of learning and assessment are seen in diverse settings.

The 2007 College English Reform Program (CERP) in China is an example of these reforms. It is situated in the discipline of EFL in the Chinese higher education context. Initiatives to achieve better education outcomes for a sustainable future are clearly articulated (CMoE, 2007). The stipulated assessment framework advocates incorporating formative assessment with summative assessment, and thus assumes assessment a new role - to measure as well as to improve. Positive impact on pedagogy and learning practices are intended (CMoE, 2007). The official report (HEC, 2006) on the two rounds of pilot implementation uttered largely positive findings in terms of active involvement and morale increase on both teacher and student's parts. The report also indicated optimistic tendency in its development. However, concern remains as to whether this reform of foreign origin could fit with the local context. The question is what issues need to be considered to avoid the potential pitfalls during the process of implementation? To what extent will the practices be aligned with the policy rhetoric? And what the long term effect will be?

Innovation theory (Fullan, 2004) perceives it necessary to analyse the context of an innovation, that is, the educational and cultural system, among others, for a judgement of feasibility. Based on this sentiment, this paper sets out to examine the educational and sociocultural context of the CERP. This will be achieved by examining the development of College English development in the past two decades. Special regards will be given to the causes that resulted in the unsuccessful attempt in the previous College English curriculum reform and the roles that assessment performed in. Further, this paper will present the changes that have happened to the College English learning context in the past decade. Highlights are given to the quality demand and the new role that assessment has assumed in this round of curriculum reform. Lastly, this paper will report the progress and challenges as informed by the research literature, and call for attention to the problems that looms. As such,

the paper seeks to introduce the College Education and the CET, the testing system of the largest scale around the world (J. Wang, 2007) and the CERP to a new readership while providing a source of analysis directed towards the impact of global educational reform outside the Western contexts.

### ***Background and context***

#### *The EFL education in China, a political and economic agenda*

In an era of globalisation, the vital role of English is well perceived by the Chinese government in its push for national modernization, development, and the nation's competitiveness in the global economy (CMoE document, 2002). China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in 2001 spurred a more pressing urgency (Pang, Zhou & Fu, 2002). In addition, the use of English test results as gate-keeping devices in educational as well as other social domains further reinforces this situation (J. Wang, 2007). English proficiency is regarded as a passport to better academic, professional, and social advancement, as 'the key to success' (Cheng, 2008) and is 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) for the betterment of personal well-being (Hu, 2005). Thus EFL education in China has become a political and economic agenda, and a national and individual commitment (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Q. Wang, 2007).

This study is primarily concerned with the EFL education for non-English major students in the Chinese higher education context, the 'College English' in China. In the following section I shall briefly introduce this special area.

#### *The College English*

In the mid 1980s, to accelerate the modernisation process under the Open Door policy, initiatives were taken to offer mandated EFL education in higher education institutions (CMoE, 1986). College English was introduced for non-English major undergraduate students. Currently, it is taught to more than 99% of the target group (J. Wang, 2007). The practice has been regulated through the nationally unified curriculum syllabus – the College English Teaching Syllabus (1985/1986, 1999) and more latterly, the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) (2007). According to these policies, College English constitutes a compulsory course unit for four academic terms or two academic years (usually the first two years), and accounts for 16 points or 10% of the total credit points required for a Bachelor degree. Despite the shift in emphasis of specific language skills, the objective of College English is consistent in cultivating talents to meet the demands of national and societal development (CMoE, 1986, 1999, 2007).

Its testing system, the College English Test (CET) is a test battery (Cheng, 2008). But when the CET is mentioned, it usually refers to the CET Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6) in particular, because the two external assessment instruments are nationally administrated and certificated on passing. An oral session, the CET-Speaking English Test (SET) has been added since 1999. Band one to three and five (CET 1-3 and 5) are achievement tests administrated at collegiate level at the end of each semester. All are standardised test formatted with minor variations between them. This design makes assessment for College English virtually synonymous to testing (Tang, 2005; J. Wang, 2007).

As is known, all assessment has consequences, intended or unintended (Stobart, 2003). When large scale test is attached high stakes, it might impact on teaching and learning practices in the classroom or even wider society (Messick, 1996; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Alderson, 2004). This phenomenon, termed as 'washback' in Applied Linguistics and 'backwash' in general education resides with the CET in China.

### *College English education in a changed context*

College English education in China has been given a great deal of policy attention (Hu, 2004) for reasons from several perspectives. Politically, the Chinese government considers higher education an important contributing force to the nation's strength, and its quality a key index of the nation's competitiveness in the global context of the knowledge economy (CMoE, 2002; Mok, 2005). English proficiency is an essential component of quality education (CMoE, 2007). Socially and economically, higher education is faced with challenges from societal demands and changed contexts (Boud, 2007). Graduates, who leave school at a time when China's labour market begins to tighten (Powell, 2008), have to face a rather competitive employment market. As mentioned before, English proficiency is an asset for graduates to gain an edge. So they demand English education provision of higher standards. As well, a changed educational context poses challenges for College English education. Specifically, between 1998 and 2006, the yearly enrolment rose from 1,080,000 to 5,400,000 students in the Chinese higher education sector. Official statistics showed a total tertiary registration of 25,000,000 in 2006 (CMoE, 2006a). With such an exponential increase in quantity, the quality of higher education became a troubling issue and a major concern (CMoE, 2002). Therefore, in 2002, the Chinese government launched the *Higher Education Quality and Reform Project (HEQRP)* to improve the overall quality (CMoE, 2002). The CERP is a major part of it.

In contrast to the policy orientation to and a general desire for quality, 'low efficiency and effectiveness' (literally translated from Chinese *费时低效 fèishí dīxiào*, means spending a lot of time, yet achieving little effect) (Dai, 2001; Jing, 1999, 2000) has been a "thorny issue that has long been identified, yet to be solved" (Hu, 2005 p. 3) for College English education. The reasons contributing to this phenomenon are multiple. A major reason by consensus, however, is the CET (Han et al., 2004; Niu, 2001). The CET has remained a major part of College English curriculum reforms. By means of certification and control, this national system has exerted significant impact on College English education as well as the society in China (D. Wang, 2007).

### ***The CET and College English curriculum reforms***

As mentioned before, the College English started in the mid 1980s. Up to now, the College English has had three guideline documents, the College English Teaching Syllabus (1985/1986), the College English Teaching Syllabus (1999) and the CECR (2007), each accompanied by a testing syllabus. Over the two decades, the College English witnessed noticeable development (Yang & Jin 2006). The assessment system and the role it plays have changed correspondingly.

#### *The CET and 1985/1986 College English Curriculum Syllabus*

In 1985, the former State Education Commission (the current China Ministry of Education) issued the first National College English Teaching Syllabus for the Science and Technology students (CMoE, 1985), and then in 1986 for the Liberal Arts students (CMoE, 1986). With higher English proficiency standards, it was hoped that China could have more technological and scientific exchange with the outside world and could catch up with the developed nations as soon as possible (CMoE, 1986; Hu, 2004). To reinforce the effective implementation of the syllabus, the CET testing system was adopted (Yang, 2004). The CET is grounded in psychometrics to secure an 'objective, scientific and fair' measure of whether the undergraduates meet the requirements prescribed in the syllabus (Yang & Weir, 2001) and also to motivate English teaching and learning in higher education sectors.

The then CET format was comprised of paper-and-pencil tests only. Items of grammar, structure, and reading were mostly in the form of multiple choice questions. Test scores were based on a 100-point scale, and 60% constituted a passing grade. During this period, the CET was used as the exclusive assessment instrument of College English education. Much attention and investment were given to it, especially when the CET-4 pass rate became a criterion to evaluate and rank higher education institutions. In turn, these institutions awarded teachers' merit rewards and promotion based on the CET-4 pass rate, and pegged the CET-4 score to the students' academic degree and graduation (Gu, 2005; J. Wang, 2007). These high stakes did on one hand help to reinforce the motivation as well as the pressure to learn English, and hence promote a rapid development of tertiary EFL education. On the other hand, it directed the students, teachers and the institutions' attention to the test instead of College English learning itself (Yang, 2003). Under such circumstances, the limitations of CET as a standardised testing format became evident. It began to backwash negatively on College English teaching and learning practices (Tang, 2005).

The following years saw constant modifications made in both form and content of the CET, attempting to steer away from the negative backwash effects, for example, separate the writing section from the main test paper in 1990, add new items such as spot dictation, short-answer questions and translation in 1996, adopt a mean graded point in 1997, and set a minimum score requirement for writing in 1998 (J. Wang, 2007). However, the intended backwash effects were not quite obvious. Li Lanqing (1996), the then Vice Premier Minister, uttered at a conference that the College English education was 'low in both efficiency and effectiveness' (p.9), and urged more to be done to promote effective English learning. This fuelled a round of CET innovation.

#### *The CET and the 1999 College English Curriculum Syllabus*

The issuing of the 1999 National College English Syllabus was a response to the problematic phenomenon of 'low efficiency and effectiveness'. It was also intended to strengthen the use of communicative language teaching approach (L. Yu, 2001). It gave equal weight to speaking and reading (CMoE, 1999) to better meet the needs of China's economic reform.

A dynamic move was the inclusion of an oral session, so called CET-SET in the CET system. The CET-SET designers asserted that since it is a direct assessment of test-takers' interactional competence, CET-SET should be valid as long as it is properly designed (Yang, 1999). Two timely studies conducted by Jin (2000a, 2000b) showed CET-SET was welcomed by students and teachers alike (96.9%). Based on the survey, the research claimed a tendency of positive changes in College English teaching – stating the institutions began to pay more attention to improving students' communicative competence and students were becoming more active in oral activities in class (Jin, 2000). There is a lack of substantive evidence of these claims though. However, the oral session is only accessible for students who have gained a score of 80 in the CET-4 or 75 in the CET-6. Hence, little or no substantial changes might be expected in students and universities of lower level. A large scale survey in 2005 (involving 9000 students from over 50 universities scattered in 20 provinces around the country) revealed little positive influence even on CET-SET test-takers, since as the interviewees claimed, almost all of them can pass (Yu, 2005). This is confirmed by a corpus-based investigation (He & Dai, 2006), which revealed that the designed topics failed to challenge 60.2% of the test-takers. And because test-takers interpreted the CET-SET as an examination, they regarded the examiner rather than the group members as target interlocutors. That resulted in low degree of communicative interaction elicitation, hence a low validity in the test.

Limited as CET-SET's backwash effects are, with the inclusion of CET-SET, the CET testing system was established. So was its impact on society, where the CET-4/6 certificate was increasingly used as a gate-keeping device for access to higher degree education, general employment, and even residential certification in big cities (Gu, 2005; J. Wang, 2007). This gave rise to the already severe CET certificate addiction and test-orientation. The College English curriculum was narrowed to give way to coaching materials; students spent most of their time memorizing vocabulary and doing mock tests rather than developing their communicative competence; developing examination-wise skills are common practices (Gu, 2005; Jia & Yang, 2005; J. Wang, 2007). Impact is seen in other perspectives too. The statistics from a study by Zhang (2005) are daunting: 75% of the subjects spent an average of three hours per day on English; 80% of the subjects chose English as the course that took the most of their time, yet yielded least effective results; 95% of the subjects identified English as the most examination-oriented of all the courses. The study concluded that CET had impacted negatively not only on College English education, but also the subject courses that were more important to students as qualified university graduates. Shu (2004) identified the CET as a 'nightmare' to some of the low-achievers and has affected their psychological well-being. Being problematic in many a way, the College English assessment is in need of substantial change (Han et al. 2004; Niu, 2001; Tang, 2005a, 2005b). Professor Sun Shaozheng condemned the nationally administrated CET as a 'sword that destroys our College English education' (cited in Zhang 2005 p. 100). Voices to abandon the College English and the CET were heard (Cai, 2004, 2005). The heated debates on the well-perceived negative effects of the CET, on the necessity of the nationally administrated English test, as well as on the necessity of College English, ushered in the College English Reform Program (CERP).

This in a sense failed attempt to raise the College English education quality by using high-stakes test as a tool is no accident. The consequences in social context can make the high-stakes test very powerful (Shohamy, 2001). It is now known apart from the test itself, contextual factors and participants' response (Rea-Dickins & Scott, 2007) can sometimes be decisive. This has been confirmed by washback studies in diverse settings such as Hong Kong (Cheng, 2005), Sri Lanka (Wall, 1993, 1996), and China (Qi, 2007).

In Chinese context, the power of the CET is related to its particular assessment culture. Examination is originated from ancient China in about Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220AD) (Spolsky, 1995), when the government adopted a national examination system, 'keju' to select civil officials for its administrative purpose. The over 2000 years' practicing of examination has greatly influenced the Chinese people's ideology about education and schooling. Han (2001, p.5) summarized the influences as: strengthen the utilitarian values of education; stress the key role that examination plays in education; emphasize the one-off result while neglecting formative assessment. These values are evident in the College English education culture (Tang, 2006), and constitute a major cause of failure in the 1999 College English Curriculum Reform (Hu, 2004). Further, they pose barriers against attempts to change such as the CERP.

#### *The College English assessment and the College English Curriculum Requirements (2004, 2007)*

As mentioned previously, the introduction of the CERP is a response to the new understandings about learning and assessment, to the overall demand for higher College English education quality as well as to a changed social and educational context. It was put into full implementation in 2007 with the revised CECR (CMoE, 2007). The CERP aims to raise the standards of English proficiency so that graduates can command sufficient English communicative competency to communicate in their academic and professional career

(CMoE, 2007). It is composed of three major parts: the CECR, encourage to use multimedia, courseware and internet, and a new CET testing system. Hu (2004) identified individualisation, collaboration, modularization and hypertextualization as the innovative foci of the 2007 CECR. The detailed changes will not be elaborated here for limited space.

The College English assessment policy in the CERP involves two parts: a new CET-4/6 testing system and an assessment model in the CECR.

The highlights in the new CET-4/6 are: the CET-4/6 retains the CET's summative function as the external assessment instrument of College English; alleviate the high stakes attached to the CET by encouraging unpegging practices; abandon the CET-4/6 certification practices, issue instead transcripts of results only; adopt a 710-point scoring system; include more non-multiple choice questions (35% -40% instead of 15-20%), more listening (35% instead of 20%) and authentic listening materials (CET Syllabus Committee, 2005; Jin, 2005a).

The assessment model in the CECR (2007) reveals several points about the reform directions. To start with, the use of 'assessment' rather than 'testing' indicates a deliberate deviation from previous practices; secondly, learning in terms of communicative ability is put at the centre of assessment; thirdly, new assessment approaches for formative purpose (such as portfolios, self and peer assessment, conference) is advocated to go hand-in-hand with the summative assessment; fourthly, learners' involvement in assessment (by way of self assessment and peer assessment) is encouraged; and both process and product are emphasised, namely, assessment is to serve both purposes of learning enhancement and accountability.

As such, the College English assessment framework is changed partially in nature. The initiative goes beyond seeking alternative and better ways of assessment. Additionally, the assessment framework in this program, framed by external examination backwash and formative assessment promotion, assumed a new role – as a stimulus and a support of College English learning.

### *Progress and challenges*

Changes were indeed seen. A study (Yu) in 2005 shows that 57.1% of the higher education institutions have already, partly or completely, given up pegging practices. Employers, according to an investigation (Wang, 2007) in Beijing, began to lay their eyes more on the communicative competence rather than the certificate per se. Yet, the number of CET 4/6 test-takers did not show any sign of decrease. A figure of 10,500,000 in 2005 and 12,000,000 in 2006 was reported (Jin, 2006). That, in a way, indicates the grip of certificate addiction is still strong. Further, the new CET 4/6 has entailed a 'certain effect' on classroom practices, hence on learners' learning activities; however, there is still 'a long way to go', Bao (2006) concluded in a study involving 200 students and 80 teachers.

Theoretical exploration and experimental studies on the feasibility and necessity of formative assessment in the Chinese context are seen in the literature (Jia & Yang, 2005; Tang, 2006; Tang & Zhang, 2007). Most of these studies found a boosted morale in learners. However, no solid evidence for learning outcomes improvement was revealed. In addition, these studies found some problems. For example, some teachers felt they were excessively overburdened with workload (Tang, 2006). Some teachers were found in want of formative assessment related training (Xue, 2006). Some intrinsic learners, 11% as in Zhou and Qin's (2005) study, are reluctant to be involved. Still some students, though interested and eager to learn and be assessed formatively, need guidance in how to achieve this end (Xue, 2006). In practice, a varied proportion (ranging from 10% to 60%) of the College English assessment is reported to have been given way to formative assessment (Tang, 2005).

All these seem to tell that the changes in College English assessment practices are on the way. However, challenges remain. Firstly, backwash is a complex issue (Wall & Alderson, 1993). Contextual and participant factor needs to be taken into account. Teachers' role is crucial to the delivery of the assessment innovation. Snow (1989) suggested satisfying the early need of teacher understanding and use before a new assessment framework is implemented. Without it, he asserted, no progress can be made in educational practice. Students, as the end user of the assessment policy (Higgins et al, 2002), also need informed understanding about the assessment procedures and need guidance as to how (Fullan, 2004). As well, the teacher and students need to aware of and take positive attitudes and actions in the role change that is involved in the College English learning and assessment practices. Secondly, the potential of the mixed assessment approach is barely explored (Carless, 2008). How will the rhetoric be translated into practical procedures in classrooms? To what extent will this new assessment model positively affect College English learning? And above all, how can the latest assessment theories be socially and culturally situated to bring optimal results to EFL education at tertiary level for a sustainable future? All these are compelling agendas to be addressed. There is no denying that College English education in China is making unreserved efforts to adapt to the challenges that have arisen from the context of rapid economic growth, shorter delivery time lines, and greater global movement. However, a new learning culture that involves new ways of learning and engaging with knowledge is needed for desirable learning outcomes (Shepard, 2000). To establish such a learning culture in an examination tradition dominated society, an assessment culture supportive of learning is needed first of all.

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