The Backwash Effect of CET-4/6 on English Writing Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract. College English Test Band 4 and 6 (CET-4/6) in China is a double-edged sword. It has a backwash effect on all aspects of English writing teaching in higher vocational colleges (HVCs), but positive effects are more than negative effects. Based on the characteristics of the era of English writing teaching in HVCs and the backwash effect of the CET-4/6, higher vocational English writing teaching could be improved by selecting good teaching materials, optimizing the curriculum structure; innovating teaching mode, reforming teaching methods and perfecting the evaluation system, etc.

Introduction

The language test backwash effect, also known as the language test aftereffect, refers to the impact of language testing on language teaching and language learning. [1,2] Language teaching refers to teachers or school, including teaching methods, curriculum, teaching content, teaching evaluation, etc.; language learning refers to students, including learning methods, learning motivation, and so on. In China, the study of language test backwash effect has always been one of the hotspots of language test research. From the related researches, the category of language test is mainly for CET-4/6 (College English Test Band 4 and 6), TEM-4/8 (Test for English Majors, Grade Four and Eight), and college entrance examination English test and other English exams; the research content mainly focuses on the backwash effect and language test design and the theoretical model of the backlash effect. But on the whole, “the research content is not comprehensive enough, and the lack of innovation.”[3] If the “CET-4/6” and “English writing” are used as keywords, only 42 articles are retrieved from the CNKI, and the result is zero when retrieved in the first results by “Higher Vocational English”. Therefore, it is much obvious to view that it is extremely insufficient to study the backwash effect on the English writing teaching in HVCs if combined with the CET-4/6.

The Backwash Effect of CET-4/6 on English Writing Teaching in HVCs

CET-4/6 is a standardized (standard-related-norm reference) test hosted and implemented by the Ministry of Education of the PRC and its Examination Center. The scale of CET-4/6 is second to the college entrance examination English, and is highly regarded by various colleges and society. At the same time, the test aims to provide a comprehensive and objective evaluation of college students’ comprehensive English application ability and provide rich feedback for teaching reform. The CET-4/6 since 2017 has adopted The 2016 edition of National College English Test Syllabus Band 4 and Band 6 (hereinafter referred to as The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus), which is well completed in terms of test forms and test contents, so it is in line with the development trend of international language testing, [4] and is conducive to promoting the status quo of college English teaching and testing in China, and has positive and negative backwash effects on English writing teaching in HVCs.
Positive backwash effect

Affecting English writing teaching plan in HVCs

The content and method of the examination largely influence the school teaching plan and teaching content, which is an important manifestation of the language test backwash effect. The “Examination” clearly stipulates that the proportion of the part of the test writing is 15%. It mainly examines the students’ ability to express in English in familiar topics and situations. The assessment skills mainly include ideological expression, text organization, language operation and writing strategy. These requirements pose considerable challenges to the teaching and teaching reform of vocational English. The number of college English courses in HVCs is inherently limited, and most of the higher vocational teachers tend to train the “reading”, an input skill of higher vocational students. The main focus of the lectures is on the understanding of the texts or the reading materials; the teachers often ignore the development of output skills in English writing (also including speaking and translating skills). At the same time, most of the traditional English teaching in HVCs does not have relatively fixed writing materials or text books. The teaching of English writing in HVCs is mainly done in the after-school homework and classroom immersive evaluation. It is difficult to improve the English writing skill of students. The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus on writing assessment requirements and scoring criteria, as well as feedback information after the test statistics will promote HVCs to improve the teaching plan and content in a timely manner, to put the English writing ability training into the teaching design.

Affecting the structure of English writing teaching in HVCs

Language testing is an important part of the teaching process. Scientific language testing can provide accurate and objective descriptions of current teaching situations and provide rich feedback for teaching. After each exam, the Examination Boards of CET-4/6 will provide each colleges or universities with a transcript of the candidates—the total score and each part of the individual scores and various data of the college, this feedback is of clear correlation with the teaching practice of various institutions. At the same time, the design of the CET-4/6 is based on the requirements of college students’ English proficiency in reform and opening up. Therefore, the CET-4/6 has the same guidance for vocational English teaching. Consequently, the feedback after the test often becomes the motivation of English teaching reform in various colleges and universities, affecting the structure of subsequent English writing teaching. The English writing of vocational college students is generally poor, so the writing item in the feedback usually ranks at the bottom. In order to improve the level of English teaching in the whole university and cultivate students’ comprehensive abilities, we should optimize the teaching structure and increase English writing time based on the insufficient teaching time mentioned above.

Affecting the English writing teaching methods

From the writing requirements of the CET-4/6, the main purpose is to write according to the instructions. The writing test clearly defines the writing content or outline, and the essay scoring criteria also adopts the overall impression rating. This test design can effectively prevent candidates from using mechanical template templates; also avoid an excessive essay difference, which makes it difficult to score later. Through the analysis of the writing items in recent years, the author found that the outline-composition and graphic/painting-composition have become the focus of the examination, with the authenticity of direct testing. Its positive backwash effect is to guide the reform of teaching methods of English writing in HVCs, to use the teaching resources of the new era, to explore new teaching modes, and to cultivate students’ independent learning ability. Some HVCs have added a variety of writing training or small direct quizzes in the existing vocational English teaching, such as classroom dictation, oral report, abbreviations or outline comments, etc. whose purpose is not for testing, but to promote reading and writing skills, to pave the way for output writing skills, to achieve
the “writing to promote learning” teaching reform, and to give full play to the positive backwash effect of the CET-4/6 on teaching reform.

Negative backwash effect

Affecting the goal of English teaching of HVCs
In essence, English education in China serves the national strategy. Higher vocational English teaching is also the product of the current diversified market development. It should be turned to the “foreign language + professional” compound development mode to meet the needs of different industries such as legal talents, business talents and tourism talents. China’s current education is still in the seller’s market. In the case of relatively scarce in educational resources, exam like an invisible baton often controls or guides the teaching of higher vocational teachers and the learning of the students. In the real world, it is precisely because the results of the CET-4/6 (transcript of the candidates) are regarded as one of the criteria for employment, which invisibly gives the instrumental and utilitarian characteristics of the CET-4/6. Some HVCs simply believe that vocational English teaching is just to improve the clearance rate of CET-4/6, and has become the only indicator of the quality evaluation of vocational English teaching. Based on such teaching objectives, some HVCs have worked hard to reduce the college English teaching plan, directly incorporating the CET-4/6 program into the classroom, even turning the teaching classroom into a test-taking classroom, which seriously violates the promise of CET-4/6, which aims to cultivate English comprehensive ability of vocational students.

Affect learning motivation of the students
Whether the writing test is in CET-4 or in the CET-6, the purpose is to test the students’ written ability. However, due to the deviation of the training objectives of English teaching in some HVCs and the influence of the “certificate-centered criterion” in the evaluation of a job-hunter, higher vocational students also believe that the ultimate goal of college English learning is to get a certificate, and even many students attend the tests without any preparations, or mechanically memorize the “writing template” and other horrors, thus turn a blind eye to the positive guidance of the CET-4/6. In order to pass the examination, mechanical imitation, some students produce some writings featured by rigid language, subjective vocabulary, single argumentation method, and even some of them cheat in the tests. Most of the higher vocational students lose the test spurs and incentives once they have passed the exam, and they have lost direction and lack of motivation in the follow-up of relevant English courses. It is worth mentioning that language test itself is not a substitute for daily teaching. The language test is only a step-by-step measurement of English proficiency of higher vocational students, whose purpose is to provide some reference for the writing teaching.

The Utilization of backwash effects of CET-4/6
Language testing is a double-edged sword. The CET-4/6 has both positive and negative effects on English writing teaching in HVCs, but the positive backwash effect is far more than the negative one. Because of the length and consideration of the subject of the argument, the backwash effect of the CET-4/6 on English teaching, that is, the common level is not detailed. This article only reflects on the teaching of English writing in HVCs. When we are teaching English writing in HVCs, we need to consider the backwash effect of the CET-4/6, and strive to improve the positive impact of the backwash effect of CET-4/6, and reduce its negative impact. The specific measures include the following several aspects:

Choosing writing materials and optimizing course structure
Students, teachers and teaching materials are the three basic factors that affect the quality of English writing teaching in HVCs. The existing research emphasizes more on the teaching methods of the
CET-4/6 on the teaching methods of higher vocational teachers and the writing abilities of the higher vocational students, while ignoring the research of teaching materials. Although the “textbook” has broad and narrow meanings, the concept of textbooks in the information age should be the tool for organizing teaching and the medium for professional development. It refers to all materials used by higher vocational teachers and students in the process of writing teaching, including textbooks and network resources, multimedia materials, and self-made materials, etc. Considering the actual teaching of English writing in HVCs and the writing requirements of *The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus*, the author suggests that HVCs should combine their own performances in the CET-4/6, adopting the materials characterized by multimodality, diversity and individuality. The textbooks should make it convenient for the overall design of college English teaching, and can also add or integrate the teaching content of English writing in a timely manner. On the basis of selecting the textbooks, the positive and effects of the CET-4/6 should be utilized according to the writing assessment requirements in *The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus*, the teaching structure should be optimized—consciously increasing the number of writing teaching time while dealing with the texts or reading materials. The teaching forms such as paragraph writing, topic writing and writing skills, may help students to describe their personal experiences, perceptions, emotions and events in English, and guiding the students to discuss the outlines, charts (paintings) from different aspects. All those above will benefit to form a teaching structure of interaction between reading and writing.

**Innovating teaching mode and reforming teaching methods**

*The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus* is based on the reform of the College English Syllabus in China, and the examination reform serves the teaching reform. Teaching reform relies on the changes in teaching models and teaching methods. The English writing teaching in HVCs should pay attention to the characteristics of English teaching system in HVCs, clarify the pertinence of English writing goals, and explore new teaching modes based on satisfying ESP (English for Special purpose), on such as the backgrounds of Internet plus, big data and cloud computing, etc. The three-dimensional integrated teaching mode--online teaching, teaching software and classroom teaching; or the Flip, SPOC and multi-modal writing teaching mode, will be taken into account in order to cultivate the students’ writing ability. At the same time, teachers who teach English writing from HVCs should consciously cultivate students’ writing strategies—helping the students understand the layout of chapters, think in English in essay structure and language expression, and acquiring to develop the essays in extended, gathered paragraphs or definitional paragraphs; and the teachers should concentrate on more practice, taking into account the guidance and training of writing methods in text or reading teaching, and giving students the opportunities of thinking in English as much as possible in the classroom. In addition, in the classroom—before, during, and after writing, the task-based approach may be used, too. There are different tasks, such as pre-writing instructions, including topic introduction, vocabulary and material discussion and preparation; and while-writing revision and polishing of each manuscript; and evaluation and reflection in post-writing period.

**Improving the evaluation system and changing the way of correction**

After all, the language test is a sampling test. The questions in a certain representative test can only feedback some of the students’ abilities. The CET-4/6 is no exception. In this regard, HVCs and teachers ca not use this small part to guide the teaching of English writing in HVCs. Schools, teachers, students and even the society must correctly view the results of the CET-4/6, change the “certificate-centered criterion” into the “capability-centered criterion”, and guide the employers to select the right talents according to their actual needs. At the same time, the teaching model of English writing in HVCs should consider the dynamic and multi-dimensional characteristics of the teaching evaluation and feedback system in Internet plus era, and gradually establish a multi-evaluation system based on formative evaluation.[6] During the reform, the test content and structure should be perfected, and the output test questions were added to increase the direct test—that is, to increase
openness items, such as writing letters, notes, narratives, and explanatory writing. [7] The focus of writing evaluation is based on the evaluation of writing skills described in *The 2016 Edition of Test Syllabus*. It mainly focuses on four aspects: ideological expression, text organization, and language use and writing strategy. In terms of specific evaluation methods, teachers of English writing teaching can formulate a staged writing evaluation form and establish a portfolio of English writing for each higher vocational student. In the students’ whole writing process, “Some interactive ways such as E-mail, MSN, QQ or Wechat are used for answering the students’ questions produced in each writing stage.” [6] In addition, due to the current low level of English writing ability of vocational college students, the teachers in HVCs should give priority to encouragement in the assessment. The diversified methods including teacher evaluation, student mutual evaluation; even the Internet, AAP, etc. are welcomed, too.

**Summary**

Although the language testing has positive and negative backwash effects, the impact of CET-4/6 on English writing teaching is also prominent. However, the reform of English writing teaching in HVCs should be in line with the background of the times, the orientation of running a higher vocational college, establish a correct direction of reform, and accelerate the cultivation of composite talents needed by the times. HVCs and their teachers must balance the relationship between ESP and college English; maximize the positive backwash effect of the CET-4/6 in order to improve the English writing level of vocational students.

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**References**