

# Backwash Effect of English Test for International Communication on College English Teaching

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## Abstract

Any evaluation model plays a backwash effect on teaching. English Test for International Communication (ETIC) is a new evaluation method which focuses on examining students' comprehensive English application ability and helps selecting talents. Through interviews and questionnaires, this paper studies the backwash effect of ETIC on college English teaching. The survey results indicate that ETIC has a positive backwash effect on college English teaching. Its effects are shown in the following three aspects: it helps optimize teaching content; it promotes the innovation of teaching methods; and it improves evaluation models. The results of this research can be used as reference for college English teaching reform.

**Keywords:** ETIC, college English teaching, backwash effect, teaching content, teaching method, Evaluation model.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Testing is an important means to detect the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and also provides feedback on teaching methods. In the field of applied linguistics, the influence of language testing on teaching and learning is called backwash. The study on backwash effect of tests started earlier at abroad. Since 1993, language testing scholars began to study the backwash effect of language testing theoretically and empirically. There are three theoretical models of backwash effect: the "Hypothesis of backwash Effect" proposed by Alderson and Wall in 1993, the basic model of backwash effect proposed by Hughes in 1993, and the dominant-implicit backwash effect model established by Prodromou in 1995. With the gradual maturity of the theoretical model of backwash effect in western language testing in 1990s, scholars in this field have also carried out a large number of empirical studies on backwash effect, such as the backwash effect of O-level English test in Sri Lanka by Alderson & Wall, the backwash effect of TOEFL by Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, the backwash effect of Japanese college English entrance examination by Watanabe, and the backwash effect of TOEIC by Robb & Ercanbrack. These studies not only examine the defects of the existing theoretical model from the perspective of empirical research, but also improve and broaden the research fields of backwash effect to some extent. At present, compared with the research on backwash in

foreign language testing circles, this kind of research in China started late. The domestic research mainly focuses on empirical study. For example Qi Luxia (2004) investigated the backwash effect of National Matriculation English Test (NMET); Tang Xiongying (2005) focused on the analysis of the evaluative role played by College English Test (CET). Gu Xiangdong (2007) investigated the backwash effect of CET-4 and CET-6 on students' enthusiasm for English learning. Based on a feedback from a large-scale questionnaire survey, Zou Shen (2012) explored washback effect of National Test for English Major (TEM) 4, and Xu Qian (2012) mainly studied the backwash effect of TEM 8 on English major teaching.

The ultimate goal of teaching reform is to serve the cultivation of talents, and excellent evaluation methods will have a positive backwash effect on teaching. At present, the mainstream evaluation method still focuses on language knowledge detection and teaching content inspection, which leads to classroom teaching still staying at the level of language skills training. However, with China's increasing involvement in international affairs, there is a large need for multi-faceted, high-quality foreign language talents. In order to promote the cultivation of international talents and better evaluate international talents, the China Foreign Language Assessment Center has launched the "English Test for International Communication" (ETIC), a new

way of assessing English proficiency which mainly examines students' comprehensive English application ability in workplace situations, such as language communication ability, critical thinking ability, cross-cultural ability and collaboration ability. The new evaluation method provides a brand-new perspective for talent training in colleges and universities, plays a positive role in guiding and promoting teaching activities, and helps to promote the innovation of foreign language teaching mode which guides the transformation of teaching from knowledge transfer to ability improvement. But the research on ETIC by scholars is just in its infancy, and research on the backwash effect of ETIC on teaching and learning is even less. There are only 2 essays searched in CNKI by far. Those are Li Zhengxuan and Li Shengxuan's "Research on the Backwash Effect of English Test for International Communication (ETIC) on College English Class" (2019) and Hu Wei's "Strategies for Training Internationalized Talents under the Background of 'the belt and Road Initiative' -- Taking the Washback Effect of ETIC on English Majors' Classroom as an Example" (2020).. Therefore, this paper intends to investigate the backwash effect of ETIC on college English teaching.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 2.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the backwash effect of ETIC on college English teaching. The research questions include:

- (1) What are the problems in current college English teaching?
- (2) Does ETIC have a positive impact on college English learners' learning attitudes and methods? How does the impact come about?
- (3) How to take ETIC as an opportunity to adjust teaching approaches and optimize the teaching process, so as to guide students to clear the direction of English learning and improve their comprehensive English application ability.

### 2.2 Research Objects

Ten teachers were involved in this study. Each teacher had one experimental class and one control class at the same time. There are about 50-60 students in each class. The target students were freshmen in North China Electricity Power University. Because the English level of students in different majors is quite different, the students of corresponding experimental classes and control classes came from the same major, which guaranteed the objectivity of the experimental result. The students in the experimental class were encouraged to participate in ETIC.

### 2.3 Research Steps and Methods

Both the experimental class and the control class used *Going Global* as English materials. The

experimental class adopted the "Production-oriented Approach" guided by ETIC, while the control class applied the traditional "text-centered" teaching method. During the term of teaching and learning, the target students' performance, especially the performance of their comprehensive application ability in class was observed. After a whole semester of study, this paper conducted interviews and questionnaires survey on the target teachers and students. The interview questions are as follows, and the questionnaire will be discussed in the section of "Results and Discussion".

### Interview Questions for Teachers

1. What changes have taken place in your teaching content after the implementation of ETIC?
2. What changes have taken place in your teaching methods after the implementation of ETIC?
3. Summarize the teaching situation of experimental class and control class.

### Interview Questions for Students

1. "To meet the requirements of the country's economic and social opening to the outside world, we should cultivate a large number of international talents who have an international vision, are familiar with international rules and can participate in international affairs and international competition (The Outline of the National Medium-and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan 2010-2020)." How do you think of this?
2. Do you think the current English teaching will help you improve the abilities mentioned in question 1?
3. What changes do you want in the current English teaching?

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Backwash Effect of ETIC on English Teaching from Perspective of Teachers

Table 1 show that 80% of the teachers recognize ETIC and thinks ETIC does test students' comprehensive English application ability in workplace situations, such as language communication ability, critical thinking ability, cross-cultural ability and cooperation ability. Therefore, all the teachers tend to recommend students to take this test. Most of the teachers admit that compared the students in the control classes, those in the experimental classes could consciously cultivate oral and written communication ability, and they perform more actively in class, thus their comprehensive English communicating ability improves faster. So 80% teachers approve that ETIC plays a positive role on English teaching.

**Table 1: Questionnaire for teachers**

Questions	Choice (%)
1. The content of ETIC can reflect workplace communication ability.	A. definitely agree (80) B. partly agree (10) C. definitely disagree (10)
2. I am clear about the form and grading standard of ETIC.	A. definitely agree (90) B. partly agree (10) C. definitely disagree (0)
3. I will encourage students to participate ETIC.	A. definitely agree (100) B. partly agree (0) C. definitely disagree (0)
4. In which class could students consciously cultivate oral communication ability, experimental class or control class?	A. experimental class (80) B. control class (10) C. both (10)
5. In which class could students consciously cultivate written communication ability, experimental class or control class?	A. experimental class (70) B. control class (10) C. both (20)
6. Which class has more active classroom performance, experimental class or control class?	A. experimental class (80) B. control class (20)
7. Which class improves students' comprehensive English ability faster, experimental class or control class?	A. experimental class (100) B. control class (0)
8. ETIC has a positive impact on English teaching.	A. definitely agree (80) B. partly agree (20) C. definitely disagree (0)

### 3.2 Backwash Effect of ETIC on English Teaching from Perspective of Students

From the following 2 tables, it can be seen that most of the students in experimental class (90%) and control class (86%) both are aware that English knowledge does not equal to English ability. But because the students in experimental class are encouraged to take participation in ETIC, 94% students could take the initiative to exercise their oral and written English when preparing for the test. Most of the students, up to 90%, welcome the changes in teaching methods caused by ETIC. After a whole term's study, not only more than 75% students agree that their basic English skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, have been improved, but also as many as 89% students think they have enhanced their comprehensive communicating ability. Besides the basic daily

communication, such as ordering food in restaurant and showing direction for foreigners, they could finish business communicating tasks as well, such as writing business emails, making English resumes, and introducing products in English, which enhance their confidence when entering workforce in the future. All in all, ETIC has a positive effect on their learning and teachers' teaching. However, the control class still focuses on traditional teaching methods and teaching content, most of the students still fail to foster a habit of opening mouth in public, and many students lose their passion in English learning. After a whole term's study, although some students improve their reading and writing ability, listening, speaking and comprehensive communication skills are far less satisfying. They could only finish some daily communication.

**Table 2: Questionnaire for students in experimental class**

Questions	Choice (%)
1. English knowledge is equivalent to English ability.	A. definitely agree (4) B. partly agree (6) C. definitely disagree (90)
2. I could consciously improve my oral and written English communication skills during the preparation for the exam.	A. definitely agree (94) B. partly agree (4) C. definitely disagree (2)
3. Whether have English teachers changed teaching methods after the implementation of ETIC?	A. definitely agree (95) B. partly agree (4) C. definitely disagree (1)
4. Do you agree with this change?	A. definitely agree (90) B. partly agree (4) C. definitely disagree (6)
5. After a semester of English classroom study, what do you think your ability has been improved? (multiple choice)	A. listening (82) B. speaking (79)

	C. reading (78) D. writing (88) E. comprehensive communication ability (89)
6. Which of the following practical problems can you solve in English after a term of study? (multiple choice)	A. Guide foreigners on the street. (98) B. Order food in English. (100) C. Write business English emails. (94) D. Make English resumes. (90) E. Introduce products in English.(88)
7. Compared with traditional English test, ETIC strengthens learning motivation and improves teaching model.	A. definitely agree (93) B. partly agree (4) C. definitely disagree (3)

Table 3: Questionnaire for students in control class

Questions	Choice (%)
1. English knowledge is equivalent to English ability.	A. definitely agree (3) B. partly agree (11) C. definitely disagree (86)
2. I have the habit of speaking when learning English.	A. definitely agree (4) B. partly agree (6) C. definitely disagree (90)
3. I could maintain enthusiasm in learning English after entering the university.	A. definitely agree (30) B. partly agree (9) C. definitely disagree (61)
4. After a semester of English classroom study, what do you think your ability has been improved? (multiple choice)	A. listening (30) B. speaking (15) C. reading (84) D. writing (80) E. comprehensive communication ability (43)
5. Which of the following practical problems can you solve in English after a term of study? (multiple choice)	A. Guide foreigners on the street. (90) B. Order food in English. (91) C. Write business English emails. (55) D. Make English resumes. (70) E. Introduce products in English.(20)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above study, this paper proposes that ETIC has a positive backwash on college English teaching.

##### **Guided by ETIC, the course content can be optimized**

The tasks in ETIC are designed according to real workplace situation, highlight the action orientation, and examine the ability to solve practical workplace problems in a specific capacity. Therefore, teachers can combine hot button issues, wonderful speeches on science and technology, sample documents needed by enterprises with the contents of teaching materials to help students broaden their horizons, get familiar with workplace affairs and accumulate indirect experience in the workplace.

##### **Guided by ETIC, the teaching methods can be innovated**

ETIC is different from the common single training of listening, speaking, reading and writing which is isolated from the real life. It pays equal attention to oral communication and written communication applied in real working situation, and

tests students' English communication ability, independent thinking and problem-solving ability. Therefore, flexible and diverse teaching methods should be adopted in classroom teaching, such as task-based teaching, situational teaching, cooperative teaching, project-based teaching and inquiry-based teaching, etc, so as to mobilize students' thinking cognition, promote students' active thinking and cultivate students' problem-solving ability in the workplace.

##### **Guided by ETIC, the evaluation model can be improved**

The traditional assessment is single in form and solid in content. Students are examined only by one paper, which cannot objectively and comprehensively select talents, so it is not conducive to talent training. The traditional final examinations can learn from the question types in ETIC and be conducted in the form of task modules. Grading is based on the completion of students' tasks which centers on students' language ability, critical thinking ability, communication ability, cooperation ability and problem-solving ability. Accordingly, the purpose of evaluation could be achieved, and learning is promoted by testing.

To sum up, ETIC reflects the urgent need of the country for international talents and points out the direction for college English reform. The ETIC-oriented teaching model is helpful to enhance students' motivation to learn English and improve their comprehensive English application ability. College English teachers should change their teaching principle, update their ideas on talent cultivation, adjust their teaching contents and methods appropriately according to the questions of ETIC. In the future teaching research, college teachers should give full play to the positive backwash function of ETIC, strengthen the in-class guidance or extracurricular reading of relevant subject knowledge in a planned way, improve the curriculum system and teaching process, and promote the teaching effect.

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