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The Multi-Dimensional Approaches and Paradigm Reconstruction of CET-4 Teaching Reform

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Abstract: The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is currently the largest language proficiency assessment in China, serving dual functions of educational evaluation and social screening. For a long time, it has been the central benchmark guiding English teaching in higher education institutions. If we shift our understanding of the test's construct from a "trait-based" perspective to an "interactive" one, and consider the rapid advancement of technologies, such as artificial intelligence and smart education, CET-4 instruction must address multiple challenges, including excessive test-oriented practices, regional and disciplinary disparities, and increasing individual differences. This article conducts an inductive analysis of CET-4 reform and its wash-back effects. Drawing on cases of graded teaching, assessment-driven learning, and smart education, it defines the "Five-in-One" framework covering graded-categorized teaching, examination-teaching integration, AI-enabled smart education, process-oriented evaluation, and competence-oriented teaching. This study aims to transform the score-chasing mindset into a new paradigm of competency development, so as to provide insights for the high-quality development of college English education in the new era.

Keywords: College English Test Band 4; Teaching reform; Exam-driven learning; Smart education; Tiered instruction

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1. Introduction

Implemented in 1987, the College English Test Band-4 and Band-6 (CET-4/6) has a history of nearly forty years. In 2024, the test was taken by 24.8 million people nationwide, making it currently the largest-scale language assessment in the world. Originally designed to support tiered English instruction in universities and to evaluate teaching effectiveness for students, teachers, and administrators alike, CET-4 has gradually evolved into a key criterion for degree requirements, job screening, and talent evaluation due to its widespread use in society. As such, it has become an indispensable "baton" guiding university English education. This dual role creates a long-standing dilemma: while the test provides direction and feedback for students' English learning, excessive focus on exam preparation and misuse of scores may lead

to negative side effects [1]. Given the realities of the artificial intelligence era and the growing demand for multidimensional assessment, transforming CET-4 from a "baton" into a "catalyst" that drives educational reform is a pressing challenge today.

2. Pain points and challenges of four-level teaching reform

The current CET-4 teaching reform needs to address three-fold tensions. First, the exam-oriented tendency suppresses the cultivation of comprehensive language competence. In some universities, teaching is oriented toward test preparation. Teachers devote much energy to exam-taking strategies while offering insufficient training in integrated language use. Consequently, students who pass CET-4 may still fail to cope with real-world practical demands. Second, there exist prominent disparities among regions and student groups. Restricted by student source quality, limited class hours, and the mindset of "valuing majors over English," science-and-engineering universities in western China have long suffered a relatively low CET-4 pass rate. Surveys show that 60.2% of science and engineering students believe specialized courses are more important than English, and 58.7% hold the view that English proficiency will have little impact on their future careers [2]. Similarly, students in light-industry-related majors also see unsatisfactory pass rates due to inflexible learning, insufficient attention to the test, and inconsistent teaching objectives [3]. Third, there is a disconnect between teaching content and occupational as well as social real-life needs. Higher vocational colleges mostly teach translation based on past exam questions, ignoring practical workplace skills. In addition, the imperfections of the CET-4 spoken-test component make it difficult to eliminate the phenomenon of "dumb English."

The various factors mentioned are interrelated, indicating that the teaching reform for the CET should not only focus on exam-oriented methods but should be approached from three aspects: students, teaching, and environment. Various elements related to the students themselves, the teaching process, and the external conditions are all key points for the CET pass rate [4]. Achieving substantive progress solely relying on any one aspect is difficult. See **Table 1**.

Table 1. Three-dimensional model of factors affecting the CET-4 pass rate of Western science and technology universities

Dimension	Core elements	Typical manifestations
Individual student factors	English proficiency basis, learning motivation, autonomous-learning awareness	Students from western China show weak listening competence; 60.2% of science-and-engineering students hold the view that specialized courses outweigh English
Teaching implementation factors	Class-hour allocation, teaching approaches, objective orientation	General-English class hours are cut by 30–50%; prominent separation of teaching and assessment
Environmental support factors	Campus language environment, policy incentives, technical resources	Polarized participation in English corners; insufficient incentives from scholarship and postgraduate-recommendation policies

3. The logical shift from "conductor" to "catalyst"

The CET-4 reform focuses on the adjustment of the counter-effect. Jin Yan believes that the exam cannot directly cultivate students' achievements; its positive value should be realized through teachers' teaching. "The same exam, in the hands of different teachers, will produce different consequences" [4]. These viewpoints

can precisely serve as the theoretical support for the "exam-driven learning" approach: The exam should not be the end of teaching but a feedback tool related to course goals and progress. Meanwhile, the concept of CET-4 has also undergone continuous development—the past "trait view" centered on language knowledge has now begun to incorporate context and task authenticity into the "interaction view." This evolution is manifested as follows: The number of questions related to language knowledge has gradually decreased, while tasks such as dictation, short answers, speed reading, and translation for practical use are being widely adopted; the proportion of listening has increased from 20% to 35%, and the proportion of reading has decreased from 40% to 35%; in 1999, speaking was included in the assessment, and in 2013, it was fully changed to a computer-assisted two-person interactive method, thus forming a special oral test tradition in global language examinations. All the listed changes are relatively complete responses to the comprehensive language application ability. Graded teaching is the theoretical form on which differentiated cultivation relies. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, "comprehensible input" (i+1) is the best material that language acquisition should come into contact with; materials that are too difficult or too easy are not conducive to the actual learning process. In the actual case of A University, Li Linsen and others pointed out that graded teaching has a promoting effect on learning, and higher-level courses often bring better experiences. Thus, it can be judged that reasonable stratification does not equal empty "labeling," but should be guided by appropriate difficulty, so that the learners themselves feel satisfied and have the motivation to learn.

4. "Five-in-One" reform framework

Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes a "five-in-one" framework for the four-level teaching reform, and, starting from practical cases, demonstrates its feasibility and effectiveness. **Figure 1** shows the "five-in-one" framework for the reform of university English at the fourth level.

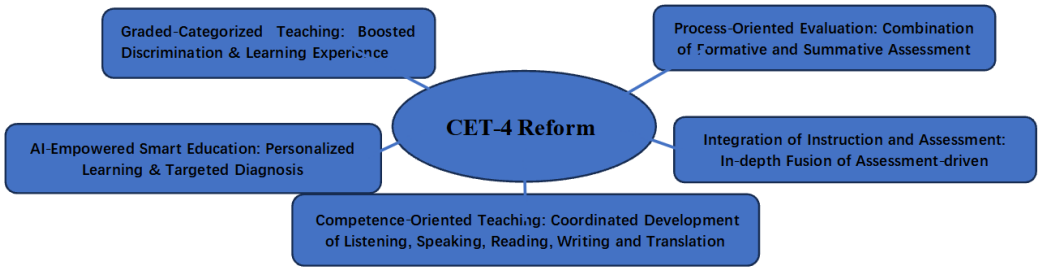


Figure 1. The "Five-in-One" framework for the reform of CET-4 teaching

4.1. Tiered and categorized teaching: Enhancing learning experience through precise matching

Tiered teaching should categorize students based on their test results and assign them to appropriate course levels, setting different goals for each level. At A University, they divide university English into levels 1–4. Lower levels focus on basic skills in listening and speaking, while higher levels focus on writing, translation, and critical thinking skills. From the feedback obtained through questionnaires, the learning satisfaction rates for the four levels (1 to 4) are 3.536, 3.602, 3.740, and 3.831, respectively, all significantly higher than the overall average of 3.702. At the same time, the survey indicates that students in lower levels have significant deficiencies in "learning strategies and cooperative learning" and "higher-order learning and reflective learning." Therefore, it is necessary to provide more guidance in terms of humanities education and learning

methods to encourage them to study more actively. Western technical colleges have also attempted to handle the problems of four-level listening, writing, and translation using the "course embedding" approach. They categorize relevant training by stages under "University English (1)-(3)," and also set up elective courses such as "Specialized English" and "Understanding Contemporary China." The pass rate for the 2024 grade has increased by 9.32% compared to 2023, indicating that tiered teaching is feasible. See **Figure 2**.

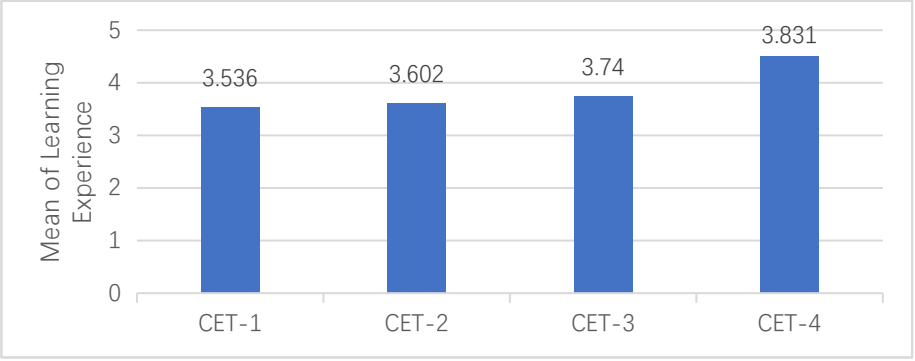


Figure 2. Mean scores of learning experience for students at different course levels (case of grade-based teaching reform in University A)

4.2. Integrated curriculum assessment: promoting learning through assessment rather than replacing teaching with assessment

The idea of "promoting learning through assessment" involves integrating the CET-4 proficiency standards naturally into the teaching process. Yin Rui conducted an experiment at a private undergraduate institution, dividing the courses into four categories: listening, reading, writing, and translation. They adopted a cycle of training using "weekly writing" and peer translation, as well as the "teaching–testing–feedback" method [5]. After the reform, there was a significant improvement in the CET-4 scores, and the initiative in classroom interaction and the use of English were greatly enhanced. This approach precisely aligns with the reform proposed by Cao Shundie, such as "changing traditional teaching concepts and improving comprehensive application abilities" [6]. However, it is necessary to carefully handle the boundaries of the integration of curriculum and assessment. "Integration" does not mean "replacement." The actual teaching time should not be reduced due to mock exams, and the slippery slope from "promoting learning through assessment" to "replacing teaching with assessment" should be avoided.

4.3. Smart education and AI empowerment: From experience-driven to data-driven

Smart education utilizes big data and artificial intelligence in conjunction with online tools to achieve personalized and precise learning. Cheng Dongjie believed that the platform used by Superstar has comprehensively organized pre-class materials, allowing for the assignment of pre-reading content. During the class, it facilitates online or offline interaction, and after class, it can provide analytical guidance based on data [7]. Peng Jun's personalized plan conceived using GPT technology was applied to the entrance counseling of 120 college students, providing vocabulary lists, intelligent writing suggestions, or reading training as per needs; the original pass rates of the control group and the experimental group were both 6%. After the reform, the former increased to 10% while the latter reached 36%, indicating that personalization and intelligence do have significant advantages [7]. In terms of listening, the "TRE" three-step training (Test–Reflect–Enhance)

for understanding news and long dialogues also has a considerable promoting effect [8]. However, Gu *et al.* pointed out that when AI helps translation teaching, it is necessary to prevent students from relying solely on machines and losing their thinking ability. It is advisable to treat "human-machine collaboration" and "machine substitution" differently [9].

4.4. Process-oriented evaluation system: A combination of formative and summative approaches

Scientific and reasonable evaluation is of great significance for the reform. Cao Shundi proposed that the proportion of regular performance should reach over 50%. Formative evaluation should be conducted through classroom questioning, group discussions, in-class tests, various assignments, online learning, etc., and these methods should be combined with end-of-term and four-level examination indicators. Yin Rui also pointed out that both

process-oriented and comprehensive evaluations should coexist. It is advisable to utilize self-evaluation and mutual evaluation methods to ensure that the evaluation does not become a mere formality but actually benefits learning and growth. The proposed ideas precisely align with Gu Yan's view that "summative evaluation provides objective and comparable ability descriptions, while formative evaluation provides process feedback." Regarding the current reform in Western technical colleges, competition achievements or language scores can be added to the regular performance score. The initiative and sense of competence explained by self-determination theory can also enhance the incentive effect of the evaluation. See **Figure 3**.

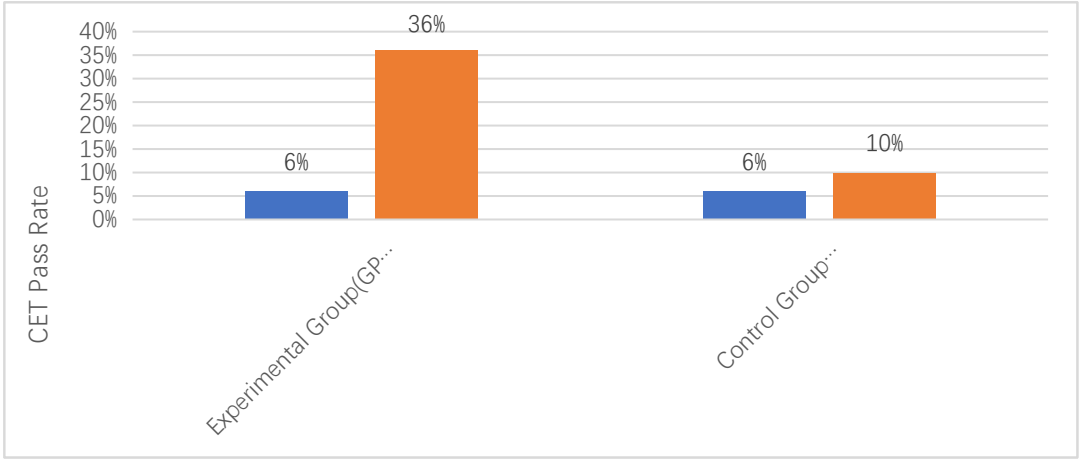


Figure 3. The impact of teaching reform on the pass rate of CET-4

4.5. Competency-based teaching: Integrated development of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation

The ultimate goal pursued by the four-level teaching is the comprehensive language application ability. The discussions on the deficiencies in translation teaching, such as vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion in the text, have been used by scholars like Yan Shilong to illustrate the need to shift from a "teacher-centered" approach to a "student-centered" one. Translation appreciation, peer evaluation, and extensive practice should be employed to enhance the quality of the translation [10]. Gao Qiujie analyzed the oral test and provided several training suggestions including reading aloud, making statements, intensive listening, extensive listening,

and mock computer-based tests [11]. Thus, the simultaneous improvement of all these skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation—is a necessary condition for breaking free from the constraints of examinations and implementing the ability in practice. Regarding "telling Chinese stories well in a foreign language," translation teaching should incorporate Chinese culture and external communication into consideration, helping students learn cross-cultural expression.

5. Conclusion

Serving both as a tool for teaching evaluation and social screening, the CET-4 possesses this dual attribute, which requires relevant teaching reforms to pursue a dynamic balance between "examination" and "instruction." Taking the paradigm shift from a "baton" to a "catalyst" as its main thread, this paper puts forward a "Five-in-One" reform framework integrating graded teaching, examination-instruction integration, AI-empowered smart education, process-oriented evaluation, and competence-oriented teaching. Looking ahead, the integration of artificial intelligence and language proficiency scales has begun to take shape. CET-4 teaching should keep scientific validity, fairness and pedagogical significance in line with such developments, exercise measured application of technologies, and achieve a sound integration of score interpretation, ethical judgment and educational values. When examination, teaching, technology and evaluation work in concert toward talent cultivation, CET-4 can naturally function as a catalyst for the advancement of college English education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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