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An Analysis of Chinese English Learners' Listening and Reading Comprehension Performance in CET and its Implications

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Abstract

Listening and reading constitute the basis for speaking and writing in SLA. However, for Chinese English learners, there exists much difference in their listening and reading performance. This paper makes an analysis of 6613 undergraduates' listening and reading scores in CET from Shanxi normal university by using the visual basic computer language. The result shows that students' listening ability is much poorer than their reading ability. Students' listening and reading ability are developed in an unbalanced way, this might be because that students can have easy access to reading material to facilitate their reading comprehension. However, for English listening, they lack sufficient input due to the poor acquisition environment. Some suggestions are proposed to improve the students' listening ability.

Key words: Reading and listening; Statistic analysis; Normal distribution; Mean score

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INTRODUCTION

English learning involves listening, speaking, reading and writing, among which listening and reading are the major

approaches for input of English material, underlying learners' output of English in speaking and writing. It is generally believed that Chinese English learners tend to do better in the aspect of listening and reading which does not necessarily require the good acquisition environment as speaking and writing do. However this is only true to some degree. Much previous research findings indicate that Chinese English learners at different levels are incompetent in their listening tasks, which could be attributed to different reasons such as listening anxiety (Liu, 2006; Xiao, 2009; Qü, 2008; Liu, 2009, etc.), lack of knowledge concerning requisite listening strategies (Li, 2007; Xü, 2005. etc.), problems with learning styles (Xiao, 2009), learners' individual differences, etc. The previous research mainly takes experimental research method, questionnaire, interview, class observation, etc as the research method, different from which, the present study collected College English Test (abbreviate as CET there after) scores of 6613 participants from Shanxi Normal Universities to reveal the actual distribution of different score areas, the numbers of students within different score areas, and discuss the possible solutions to problems with students' English listening.

The College English Test is a highly recognized English-language proficiency test in China, especial in Chinese university. The CET test is designed to evaluate how well the student can combine their reading, listening, translation, and writing skills to perform academic tasks. CET band 4 are largely standard English tests, and sponsored by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of the People's Republic of China, undertaken by The National Education Examinations Authority of the People's Republic of China. The National Education Examination Authority is an institution directly under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and appointed by the MoE to exclusively undertake educational examinations and to practice some administrative authority. The CET is designed to measures the ability of Chinese college

students to use and understand English in the university classroom. The higher-standard CET test helps student do well by preparing them to express themselves confidently in English in the university environment. The original designed participants of CET test is mainly the college undergraduate students and graduate students in university, but now, the CET is the English-language test most preferred by Chinese universities, government unit, factory and company in China and the CET scores are accepted by these units. Now, CET is the biggest English test in China. Every year, more than 2.4 million people have taken the CET test to demonstrate their English-language proficiency.

CET was prepared in 1986, and first given in 1987. The goal of CET is the implementation of the college English teaching program, and improve the college English teaching quality. Now the CET test is given twice

a year in June and December. CET full score is 710, including four sections: listening comprehension (35%), reading comprehension (35%), translation (15%), and writing (15%).

In the present research, we are mainly concentrated on the analysis of students' performance in the sections of listening and reading, and then attempt to come up with some effective counter-measures to help students get improved.

1. STATISTIC RESULTS

The CET score is presented as an Excel file. Using the visual basic computer language, the analysis takes 6613 students' CET scores as the research data for analysis. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 6613 participants' CET total scores.

Table 1
Total Score Distribution

Score area	225-235	235-245	245-255	255-265	265-275	275-285	285-295	295-305	305-315	315-325	325-335	335-345	345-355	355-365	365-375	375-385	385-395	395-405	405-415	415-425
No of Students	10	15	13	12	18	27	76	130	193	217	298	332	365	398	440	407	418	418	395	339
Score area	425-435	435-445	445-455	455-465	465-475	475-485	485-495	495-505	505-515	515-525	525-535	535-545	545-555	555-565	565-575	575-585	585-595	595-605	605-615	615-625
No of Students	316	283	250	199	207	166	146	112	108	90	66	43	36	20	18	14	7	5	3	3

Table 1 indicates students' number in different score areas from low, medium to high one. Figure 1 gives us a clearer look at the statistic results. The average score μ of the 6613 participant is 399, almost coinciding with the concentrated score of 395. The distribution is almost a normal distribution. This means the CET test is a

highly standard test in terms of validity and reliability, and the participant score is highly reliable. Selected CET test scores for analysis is reliable in this paper. In this distribution, the standard variance σ is 63. This means 68% participants score is distributed between 336 and 462.

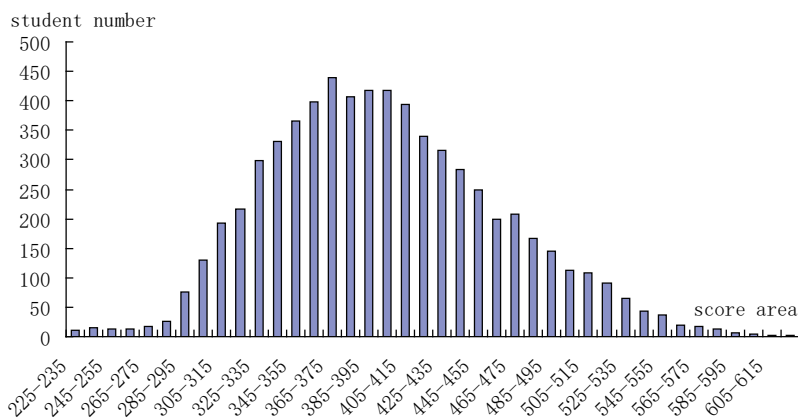


Figure 1
Score distribution

Table 2 is the number of participants in different listening score areas. To make it more obvious, the data of

Table 2 is presented in Figure 2.

Table 2
Listening Score Distribution

Score area	85-95	95-105	105-115	115-125	125-135	135-145	145-155	155-165	165-175	175-185	185-195	195-205	205-215	215-225	225-235
Student number	294	861	1256	1151	869	700	394	386	274	190	133	66	29	5	5

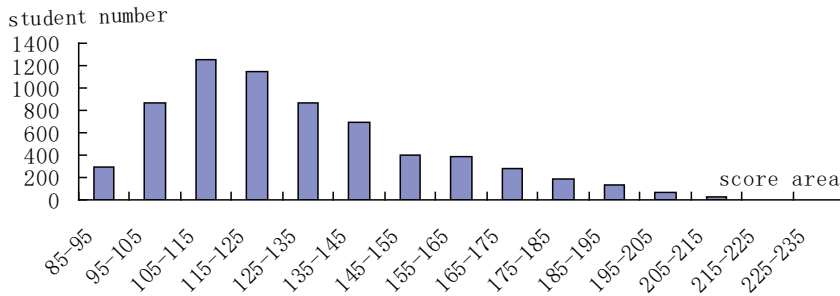


Figure 2
Listening score distribution

The average listening score of the 6613 students is 128. The concentrated score is 110. The concentrated score is lower than the average score. This means that most of the participants' listening score is lower than the average score.

The standard variance of the listening score is 26.

Table 3 is reading score in different score areas of the 6613 participants. To make it clearer, the data of Table 3 is presented in Figure 3.

Table 3
Reading Score Distribution

Score area	85-95	95-105	105-115	115-125	125-135	135-145	145-155	155-165	165-175	175-185	185-195	195-205	205-215	215-225	225-235
Student number	92	214	379	643	694	743	937	801	699	645	342	251	107	61	5

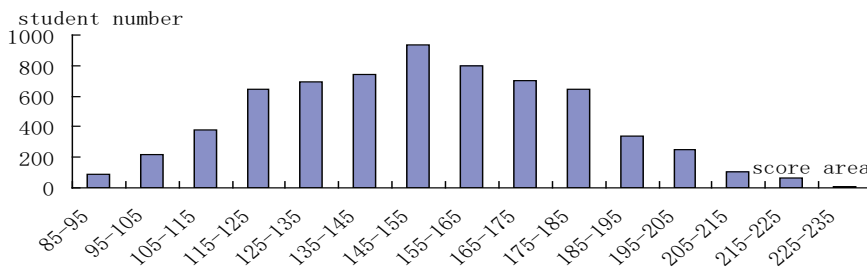


Figure 3
Reading score distribution

2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LISTENING AND READING SCORE DISTRIBUTION AND DISCUSSION

From tables and figures above, we can notice that students' reading scores are in a very standard normal distribution. Reading score distribution shows that the participants'

reading ability is reasonably high in general. This is very different from the listening score distribution. The reading average score of the 6613 participants is 150. The reading concentrated score is also 150. The concentrated score is the same as the average score. This means the participants' reading ability is really developed in balance. The standard variance of the reading score is 28.

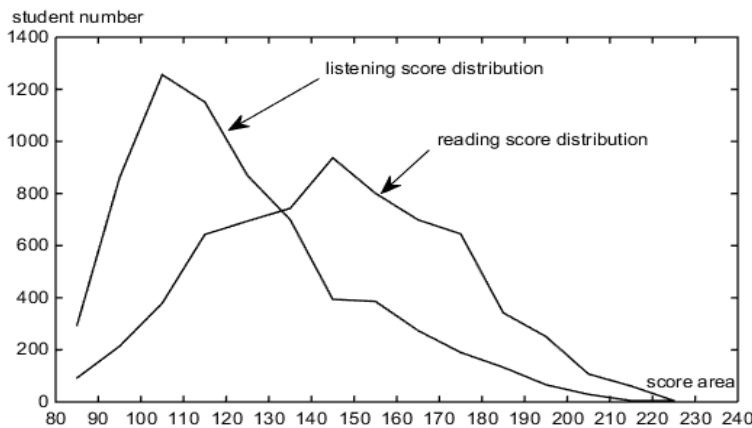


Figure 4
Compare of listening and reading

Figure 4 presents a contrast between the reading score distribution and listening score distribution, which shows the difference in reading score distribution and the listening score distribution more obviously. A close examination of Figure 4 can lead to the following findings.

Firstly, the reading average score is 150, but the listening average score is 128. This result shows that the test participants' reading ability is higher than their listening ability. According to the explanation of the CET official website (Council of College English Test Band 4 and Band 6), the reading comprehension and listening comprehension scores account for the same percentage of the total score, that is 35%. The full reading comprehension and listening comprehension score should be $710 \times 35\% = 249$. If the students' reading ability and the listening ability are well balanced, the distribution of reading and listening scores and their average score should be the same, the average score of reading and listening should also be the same.

Secondly, the reading score distribution is a normal distribution. Compared with reading score distribution, the listening distribution is a skewed distribution. Not only the listening average score is lower than the reading average score, but most participants' listening score is lower than the average listening score. The situation shows that the participants' listening ability is very improper. The tendency of the listening score distribution shows the same problem. University English teachers and the English learners should pay attention to this problem.

To sum up, the result shows that Chinese college student's listening comprehension ability is lower very much than their reading comprehension ability. College English teachers should pay more attention on the listening comprehension in the English teaching classroom.

3. STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM WITH STUDENTS' LISTENING

Why the CET participant English listening ability is much lower than their reading ability? Previous research findings indicate that various reasons could be identified to account for students' poor performance in listening comprehension, for example, Qü (2008) revealed that students' has enormous negative impact on their listening effect listening anxiety, Liu (2006) comments that there exists medium-leveled anxiety among non-English students in their listening, and the effective listening strategies could be used to reduce anxiety, factors like listening material, listening task, English teaching system in China, and students' overall English level and their listening ability, etc are also the possible reasons. It is known that most English teachers are not English native speakers in Chinese university, so the opportunity to listen

and to speak English is very rare and limited in classroom for Chinese college students. The English learners seldom have the chance to communicate with the native English speaker in daily life. The English learners have no motivation to speak English in daily life situation. But, the college students and other English learners have more opportunity to read English material. For most English learners in China, their reading ability is much higher than their listening ability. College students and other English learners should improve their listening ability as possible as they can.

Suggestions From Teachers' Perspective

In language learning, along with speaking, reading and writing, listening is one of the "four skills" of language learning. College English teachers should speak English as much as possible in their classroom. Let the students listen more and get familiar with English pronunciation and intonation. Teachers should offer students graded authentic listening material to do listening practice.

Adapting comprehension, insight-oriented repetitions and recasts are some of the methods used in training. To improve the student's listening comprehension, teachers also need to increase their vocabulary. It has been suggested that to improve listening comprehension, complex vocabularies, such as homonyms or words that have multiple meanings. Just speaking out the written form English content should be avoided in the classroom.

Spelling and pronunciation are probably the biggest difficulty for non-native speakers, since the relation between English spelling and pronunciation do not follow the alphabetic principle consistently. The spelling and pronunciation system causes problems in both directions: a learner may know a word by sound but be unable to write it correctly (or indeed find it in a dictionary) or they may see a word written but not know how to pronounce it or mis-learn the pronunciation. However, despite the variety of spelling patterns in English, there are dozens of rules that are 75% or more reliable.

Listening anxiety is one major factor that cause the learners' poor performance in CET listening section, which has been investigated in previous research (Liu, 2006; Li, 2007; Qü, 2008; Liu, 2009.etc.), therefore, to reduce and overcome students' anxiety in English listening class and listening test, teachers need to take into consideration such factors. As Rivers remarks, the emotional needs of the individuals must be understood by the teacher if teachers are to realize students' full potential. To reduce students' anxiety, teachers need to take the following measures. Firstly, in listening class, to deal with anxiety, teachers should find out the possible sources that cause students' anxiety, so that they can work out corresponding techniques to overcome the problem. In classroom teaching, teachers need to build up a warm,

uninhibited, confident and free, relaxed and sympathetic relationship, and to remind students of the rules of listening class that is "Don't play too safe.", encourage students to be brave and actively involve in the listening class interaction, so that students can be gradually gain confidence in listening class interaction. Secondly, with the prevalence of modern technology, computer-assisted English teaching has been widely practiced. Teachers can assign students some after class listening tasks, students can finish alone which are proved to be able reduce students' anxiety, when they are not required to listen and speak in class and in front of other students. Thirdly, to help students improve their pronunciation and intonation, teachers should encourage students to imitate what they have listened on internet or some digital listening material. Nowadays, education has upgraded its methods of teaching and learning with dictionaries where digital materials are being applied as tools. Electronic dictionaries are increasingly a more common choice for English study as a second language (ESL) student. Most of the electric dictionary contains native-language equivalents and explanations, as well as definitions and example sentences in English. They are easy to carry around and can read out English vocabulary to the learner.

Suggestion for English Learners

Firstly, due to individual learners' differences in learning styles and learning strategies, students are encouraged to find their own strength and weaknesses in English learning, so that they can take advantage of their strength to facilitate their second language learning. For example, some students are visual learners, they can learn more quickly by seeing, and some are auditory learners and they can learn more quickly by listening.

Secondly, computers have made an entry into education in the past decades and have brought significant benefits to English learner. Computers help learners by making them more responsible for their own learning. Computers can provide help to the ESL learners in many different ways such as learning some oral English materials through watching English films, reading electronic newspapers, etc. Nowadays the increasing use of mobile technology, such as smartphones and tablet computers, has led to a growing usage applications created to facilitate language speaking and listening learning, such as The Phrasal Verbs Machine from Cambridge. English learner should use such resources to improve their listening ability as possible as they can.

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