



The Validity of CET-6 among Chinese Students Studying Overseas

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the validity of College English Test Band 6 (CET-6) in overseas life among Chinese students to find out whether the scores of CET-6 can truly reflect students' English language ability and whether it is possible to use the scores of CET-6 as an indicator of sufficient English language proficiency required to succeed in academic and social life in a Malaysian academic setting. To do the survey, we conducted the survey by quantitative research methods with 50 samples in a Malaysian public university. After the collection and analysis of data, some current issues about the assessment standards of CET-6 are found, and suggestions are also given to improve the validity of CET-6, especially in relation to academic needs in Malaysia.

Keywords: College English Test Band 6 (CET-6); English language proficiency; Assessment standards; Validity of CET-6.

1. Introduction

CET (College English Test) is a large-scale standardized exam administered by the Ministry of Education in mainland China which has been implemented for over 30 years from 1987. CET can be further divided into two levels, CET-4 and CET-6, and CET-6 is more difficult and advanced for participants. Thus, CET-6 is always considered as the focal point and also the focal point of this paper to be discussed. Nowadays, there are nearly 10 million people taking CET annually. This huge number of test takers suggests that more people take the CET than any other English tests in China. CET includes four sections with the full mark of 710, namely listening, reading, translation and writing. The fundamental purpose of the CET is to comprehensively evaluate English education in Chinese colleges and universities. The test assesses students' English proficiency against the teaching goals prescribed by the Ministry of Education in the College English Syllabus and Teaching Requirements. Compared with some international English tests like IELTS implemented in 1989 and widely accepted by many organizations in the world, CET in China has a longer history but its validity has been questioned, and the Chinese Ministry of Education has never stopped making adjustment in its testing construct and content to meet international standards. Until now, achievements have been made. Some overseas organizations like University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany accept the score of CET-6 as proof of English language proficiency. However, CET-6 is still not considered as authoritative as many other international English tests in the world.

In response to the potential issues about the validity of CET-6, this paper tries to find out whether the scores of CET-6 reflect the levels of practical English ability in overseas students' life. In order to do so, a survey was conducted among Chinese students who are doing their Master and PhD programmes in UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia). Based on the research result, this paper analyses students' practical ability in English usage and provide our improvement suggestions according to students' responses. Our purpose is to make contribution to the internationalization of assessment standards of CET-6 and help Chinese students who learn English guided by the assessment standards of CET-6 adapt to overseas life better.

2. Literature Review

Test validity refers to the degree to which a test procedure accurately measures what it is designed to measure. According to Heaton (as cited in Cheng, 2016), validity of a language test reflects dependency, namely the correlation between test and test objectives. According to structuralism testers, validity of language test aims to check whether it can test what it is intended to test. And only when the answer is yes, only then it is valid.

When talking about CET-6, the form and content of CET-6 have also received extensive attention from scholars in the field of foreign language education. Many experts and scholars try to study CET-6 and its validity from different perspectives.

Previous studies on CET-6 mainly focused on analyzing the types of exam questions, such as the content validity of listening comprehension in CET-6 with the theory of communicating language testing by using authentic materials (Sun, 2011). Liu Na (2014) conducted research on the authenticity in English reading material in CET-6 according to the relevance between the syllabus and question design of reading comprehension in CET-6. All the above studies give some suggestions on improving the validity of CET-6. Sun Fei (2011) points out that the listening test of CET-6 basically meets all the elements of CLT theory and has content validity. However, there are still some problems in the test, such as the unbalanced test of language ability.

At present, many studies compare CET-6 with IELTS, TOEFL and other English tests. Tang Jing (2016) compared CET-6, IELTS and TOEFL from three aspects: test object, test content and test method. It found that each method of the three tests has its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, the authenticity of CET-6 listening materials is slightly lower than that of IELTS TOEFL, but the overall difficulty is comparable to IELTS. But in terms of overall difficulty, CET-6 is almost the same with IELTS. The reading speed required by IELTS and TOEFL is obviously faster than that of CET-6. However, there are some problems in the listening part of CET-6. Although the reading content is relatively simple, the exam-takers' correct rate may be very low. Ma Jie (2006) used a variety of analytical methods such as literature analysis, historical research and comparative research to make a detailed comparative study of question types, examination methods and examination management of CET-6, IELTS and TOEFL. The study found that candidates who got high listening scores in IELTS or TOEFL did not necessarily get high listening scores in CET-6. CET-6 reading increased the difficulty of the test because of the obscurity of questions. The writing topics in CET-6 covered relatively few areas, which limited the thinking of candidates. Fortunately, in recent years, the writing content of CET-6 was becoming more and more practical.

However, all the studies mentioned above try to check the paper-based validity of CET-6 and make comparisons with other English tests, but not to find out its validity of application in real life. Thus, this paper pays more attention on the validity of CET-6 when it comes to real life, especially among Chinese students studying overseas to explore whether the scores of CET-6 are valid enough to reflect students' English language ability.

3. Main Research

3.1 Research Purpose and Theoretical Background

With the purpose of exploring whether the scores of CET-6 can truly reflect students' English language ability and be used as an indicator of sufficient English language proficiency, we designed the questionnaire with two parts with the theory of Needs Analysis. We would like to explain what Need Analysis is and how it relates to our questionnaire design first. According to Iwai et al. (1999), the term needs analysis generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students. Scholars have put forward various models of needs analyses, including Target Situation Analysis (TSA), Present Situation Analysis (PSA), Hutchinson and Waters' Model and Dudley-Evans and St John's Model, and each model can identify language needs from different perspectives (Li, 2014).

3.2 PSA, TSA and Questionnaire Design

We designed the different parts of our questionnaire with the theories from Present Situation Analysis (PSA) and Target Situation Analysis (TSA). Present Situation Analysis (PSA) analyses learner's present situation and shows the gap between the present and the target. When emphasizing the learner's motivations in the process of studying, the needs that the students' self-perception about learning cannot be neglected. PSA attempts to find out the language proficiency of the students when the language course begins (Robinson, 1991). As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 125) state "a PSA estimates strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, learning experiences." If the destination point to which the students need to get is to be established, first the starting point has to be defined, and this is provided by means of PSA. Based on PSA, the close-ended questions in part 1 were designed to identify students' language skills and present adaptability of overseas life. Target situation is the situation in which the language learners will be using the language they are learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Target Situation Analysis refers to the requirements analysis process for learners' future career or further studies. One of the most

famous modes is Communicative Need Processor, which was proposed by Munby (1978). He pointed that study contents should be in accordance with learners' communicative needs. As for our study, for future Chinese students' benefits, we designed the open-ended questions in part 2 of the questionnaire to find out the potential suggestions for the improvement of CET-6 assessment.

3.3 Data Collection and Group Formation

In the survey conducted in October 2019 at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), we employed the quantitative research methods to randomly choose 50 Chinese Master and PhD students who have taken CET-6 and now study in different faculties of UPM for sampling. All the questionnaires were distributed to be done by the respondents from China face to face. Participants filled in the questionnaires mainly in Sultan Abdul Samad Library, Academic Complex A (KAA) and OnePutra Cafeteria at UPM. To find out the relationship between the scores of CET-6 and students' adaptability of overseas life, these 50 respondents with different CET-6 scores are allocated to form three groups (lower group, middle group and upper group) to make comparisons as we can see in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' CET 6 score distribution

	Lower Group	Middle Group	Upper Group
Score Range	425-499	500-550	550-710
Number of Respondents	15	24	11

4. Data Analysis and Suggestions

4.1 Analysis of Data Collected on Close-ended Questions

After the formation of groups, as what is showed in the Table 1 above, the number of respondents in Lower Group, Middle Group and Upper Group are 15, 24 and 11 respectively. The data of how many respondents choose Very Good (Above 85%), Good (70%-84%), Competent (55%-69%), Modest (40%-55%) and Limited (Below 40%) in each item (Lecture Content, Group Discussion and Presentation, Academic Reading and Essay Writing) can also be collected. To better compare the data among three groups, we calculate the percentages from respondents in each group and present them in the tables below from which we analyze Chinese students' adaptability of overseas life. And we have some interesting findings after comparison in each item.

(1) Lecture Content

Table 2: Questionnaire results for close-ended questions (Lecture Content)

Adaptability	Lower Group (425-499)	Middle Group (500-549)	Upper Group (550-710)
Very Good (Above 85%)			18.18%
Good (70%-84%)	20.00%	16.67%	27.27%
Competent (55%-69%)	46.67%	58.33%	36.36%
Modest (40%-55%)	33.33%	16.67%	18.18%
Limited (Below 40%)		8.33%	

Overall, the upper group has the best performance in Lecture Content. However, when it comes to the lower group and middle group, it can be seen that there are 20% of respondents in lower group consider that they are good at comprehending lecture content while only 16.67% of respondents in middle group choose Good (70%-84%). And only the respondents (accounting for 8.33%) in Middle Group choose Limited (Below 40%) for Lecture Content.

(2) Group Discussion and Presentation

Table 3: Questionnaire results for close-ended questions (Group Discussion and Presentation)

Adaptability	Lower Group (425-499)	Middle Group (500-549)	Upper Group (550-710)
Very Good (Above 85%)			18.18%
Good (70%-84%)	20.00%	25.00%	18.18%
Competent (55%-69%)	26.67%	33.33%	36.36%
Modest (40%-55%)	40.00%	25.00%	27.27%
Limited (Below 40%)	13.33%	16.67%	

In Group Discussion and Presentation, 18.18% of respondents in upper group choose Good (70%-84%). What is out of expectation is that the proportions of respondents choose Good (70%-84%) in lower group and middle group good are higher than that of upper group (20% and 25% respectively). The proportion of students who choose Limited (Below 40%) in middle group is 16.67%, which is 3.34% more than that in lower group.

(3) Academic Reading

Table 4: Questionnaire results for close-ended questions (Academic Reading)

Adaptability	Lower Group (425-499)	Middle Group (500-549)	Upper Group (550-710)
Very Good (Above 85%)		8.33%	9.09%
Good (70%-84%)	33.33%	33.33%	36.36%
Competent (55%-69%)	40.00%	58.34%	45.46%
Modest (40%-55%)	26.27%		9.09%
Limited (Below 40%)			

No respondents in middle group consider that they are modest in Academic Reading, while there are 26.27% of respondents in lower group and 9.09% respondents in upper group choose Modest (40%-55%). Another point is that lower group and upper group have the same proportions (33.33%) of respondents who have chosen Good (70%-84%).

(4) Essay Writing

Table 5: Questionnaire results for close-ended questions (Essay Writing)

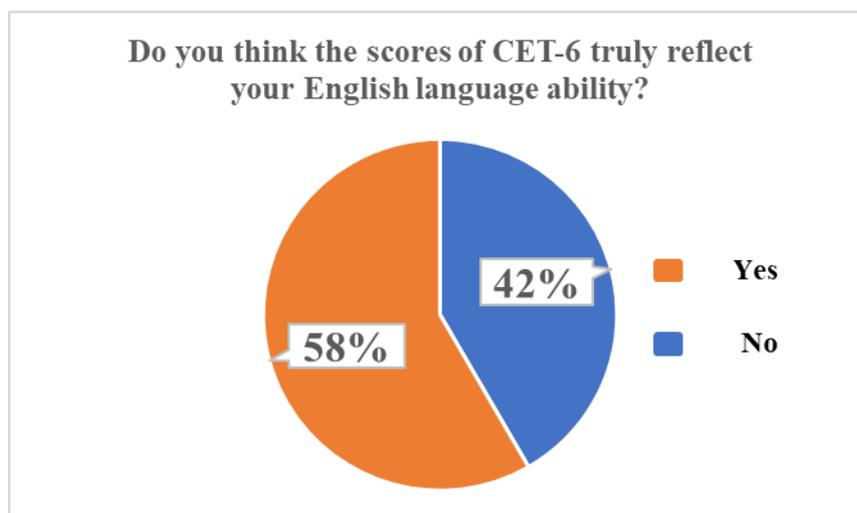
Adaptability	Lower Group (425-499)	Middle Group (500-549)	Upper Group (550-710)
Very Good (Above 85%)			18.18%
Good (70%-84%)	20.00%	16.67%	27.27%
Competent (55%-69%)	46.67%	41.67%	45.45%
Modest (40%-55%)	33.33%	33.33%	9.09%
Limited (Below 40%)		8.33%	

For Essay Writing, we can see that 20% and 46.67% of respondents in lower group believe that they are good or competent in it respectively. On the other hand, only 16.67% of respondents in middle group choose Good (70%-84%) and 41.67% of them choose Competent (55%-69%). 45.45% of respondents in upper group choose Competent (55%-69%), which is higher than that of middle group and lower than that of upper group. 8.33% of the

respondents in middle group think they are Limited (Below 40%) in Essay Writing while no respondents in low group and upper group choose this item.

(5) Short Conclusion

As what is showed in the Table 2, 3, 4 &5 above, students with higher scores in CET-6 do not necessarily do better in all aspects than those students who have got relatively lower scores. What’s more, according to the responses of Question 4 of Part 1 (Do you think the scores of CET-6 truly reflect your English language ability?) in the questionnaire which is showed in the Pie Chart below, 58% of respondents do not believe that CET-6 can truly reflect their English language ability. Thus, we can draw a conclusion that CET-6 is not valid enough to reflect students’ English ability, and there is still room for improvement for the validity of CET-6.



Pie Chart: Students’ perception on whether the scores of CET-6 truly reflect their English language ability

4.2 Analysis of Data Collected on Open-ended Questions and Suggestions

In part 2 of the questionnaire, respondents are required to write down their suggestions on how they think the CET-6 should be improved based on the perspectives of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. We find that some points are common in their reply of individual questions. This paper lists three most frequently occurring suggestions in each item from students, then we analyze their responses and provide the corresponding suggestions to the betterment of the CET-6 validity.

(1) Listening

Table 6: Questionnaire results for open-ended questions (Listening)

Suggestions	Numbers of Respondents
Use of authentic listening materials	14
Use of listening audio with different accents	12
Use of authentic listening situations	9

In CET-6, the listening material is well designed and modified but lack of authenticity. The audio is usually played with the dialogue between two persons without noise. But in reality, the participants in conversation are more than two persons, especially in group discussion. What’s more, some conversations do not happen in real-life situation. From students’ responses where 14 of them think authentic listening materials should be used and 9 of them consider it is important to use authentic listening situations, we know that authentic listening materials should be selected based on students’ daily life and study. Conversations in the listening part of CET-6 can take place in different scenes such as supermarket, meeting room and lecturer’s office, etc. Besides, 12 respondents believe that the listening audio should be with different accents because when students study overseas, they will make contact with people from diverse countries with different accents. However, in CET-6, audio in American or Britain accent is considered to be standard and used. In response to this issue, English audio in different accents like Indian accent, New Zealand accent and Japanese accent should also be utilized.

(2) Speaking

Table 7: Questionnaire results for open-ended questions (Speaking)

Suggestions	Numbers of Respondents
Make speaking a compulsory part of CET-6 and focus on speaking fluency	18
Combine computerized speaking test and face-to-face speaking test	13
Broaden the topics of speaking with real life and overseas studying experience	7

In the speaking part, we can see that 18 respondents suggest that speaking should be a compulsory part of CET-6 and speaking fluency should be the focal point. Because, strictly speaking, speaking test is not included in CET-6. Students who want to attend speaking test need to register for another test called CET-SET (CET Spoken English Test). Unfortunately, the scores of CET-6 are more widely recognized in China, thus many students who get a certificate of CET-6 choose not to attend CET-SET. As a result, many students are demotivated to practise their speaking skills. Furthermore, in CET-SET, more attention is paid on the correct usage of grammar and vocabulary by the candidates which results in candidates' unwillingness to speak worrying that they will speak the wrong sentences. To evaluate students' speaking ability, it is necessary to make CET-SET become a compulsory part in CET-6. The assessment standards are expected to focus more on fluency of speaking rather than the correct usage of grammar to make speaking as a tool as communication. At the same time, CET-SET is computer-based, but in real life, we will speak with others face to face and we can see response of facial expression and the topics are limited while they are also not have a close relationship with real life. Thus, it is no wonder that 13 of them and 7 of them give such suggestions as listed above. Instead of only applying computer-based testing, more human examiners are supposed to participate in the testing procedure to modify the real communication situation. Furthermore, the speaking topics should also be more rich to include real life and oversea studying sceneries.

(3) Reading

Table 8: Questionnaire results for open-ended questions (Reading)

Suggestions	Numbers of Respondents
Use of subjective questions	20
Removal of ambiguous items	16
Use of different reading passages for students with different programmes	8

20 respondents suggest that subjective questions should be included into CET-6, and we think it is necessary to do so because in the reading part in CET-6, all the questions are objective like multiple choice questions. Students who do not really comprehend the reading material can choose the right answers by chance. To make improvement of the reading part, we should add subjective questions like short-answer questions which can test whether students have their real understanding of the passage. 16 of them hold that ambiguous items should be removed. It reminds us that the reading passages in CET-6 are not difficult to understand while the possible choices of question statement are ambiguous. Many candidates may understand the content of the reading material but still can not select the right answers. Thus, questions in CET-6 reading should be stated clearly and without ambiguity. Furthermore, it is also essential to divide reading passages into different scopes for students with different programmes as the 8 respondents suggest because for students who study social science, it is not appropriate to give them reading passages which relate to engineering and agriculture, since they don't need to know much about knowledge in those fields.

(4) Writing

Table 9: Questionnaire results for open-ended questions (Writing)

Suggestions	Numbers of Respondents
Include more types of writing tasks	17
Make the writing topics focus more on real life and academic studies	15
Make the grading standard more concrete	7

When it comes to the final part, writing, 17 respondents think that more types of writing tasks should be included. In the writing part of CET-6, candidates are required to write a short essay according to the picture provided or the topic provided. Usually, they need to write an argument essay following the fixed format which lacks diversity and can not synthetically test candidates' writing ability. To solve such a problem, different types of writing tasks like writing a letter or describing the diagram are needed to be introduced in CET-6. For the writing topics, 15 respondents believe that these topics should focus more on real life and academic studies. It inspires us to make the topics relate closely to students' authentic life and experience. By doing this, students can actively express their own opinions through writing. Also, 7 respondents imply that the grading standards of writing should be more concrete for them to know. This suggestion is important because many candidates do not know which kinds of writing belong to good writing and how they can meet the requirement to get high marks in writing. In that case, concrete grading standards need to be stated. It can learn from IELTS to specify very clearly its grading criteria.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

According to the statistics provided by the China's Ministry of Education, the number of Chinese students studying overseas in 2018 is about 66.21 million, ranking the first in the world. To catch the opportunities to enter universities in other countries in the world, international students are usually required to meet the requirement of English proficiency. In China, CET-6 is widely accepted as a proof English language proficiency. However, when it comes to overseas setting, the validity of CET-6 is questioned by others. The research conducted in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) shows that CET-6 can not truly reflect students' English language ability, and we can not use the scores of CET-6 as an indicator of sufficient English language proficiency. There is much room left for the improvement of CET-6 from the perspectives of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

However, this study also has its limitations. The main limitation to this study is the fact that the samples of students involved are very small, and the samples are only from one university, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Thus it cannot be generalized as if it reflects the English proficiency of all the students who study overseas with certain CET-6 marks. Moreover, the fact that the research hypothesis is investigated through the use of a questionnaire constitutes a limitation to the objectiveness of replies. Indeed, since the students' response is based on the feeling they have on their own adaptability in overseas life rather than observing students' behavior first hand during classroom practices, data collected are completely subjective.

Nevertheless, it can be a starting point to investigate the validity of CET-6 among Chinese students studying overseas. Further supplements are needed to be made by other researchers in the future.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Student Details

1. What degree are you currently pursuing in UPM?
A. Master B. PhD
2. What is your CET-6 score?
A. 425-499 B. 500-549 C. 550-599 D. 600-649 E. 650-710

Part 1 Present Situation Analysis (PSA)

1. To find out the adaptability of Chinese students with corresponding scores of CET-6, the questions in the following table are designed according to Likert Scale, which divides students' language skills into 5 levels. Please choose the most appropriate options for you.

Adaptability Items	Very Good (Above 85%)	Good (70%-84%)	Competent (55%-69%)	Modest (40%-54%)	Limited (Below 40%)
Lecture Content					
Group Discussion and Presentation					
Academic Reading					
Essay Writing					

2. Do you think the scores of CET-6 truly reflect your English language ability?
A. Yes B. No

Part 2 Target Situation Analysis (TSA)

Based on your overseas studying experiences, what suggestions would you give to the improvement of the CET assessment? Please give your advice based on every aspect of the language skills.

1. Listening
2. Speaking
3. Reading
4. Writing