

TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH



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TEST PREPARATION FOR HIGH-STAKES ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS IN CHINA

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Test preparation in China

China has the largest population of English learners in the world (Cheng, 2008). Foreign language education, especially English language education, has rapidly developed in the past decades after China carried out the Reform and Open-up Policy in 1978. Currently, English has been one of the three core/compulsory subjects from Grade 3 to graduate programs, and English tests have been used as a gatekeeper in every stage of Chinese students' educational experience. For Chinese students, achieving high scores on these English language tests is the key to their success in academic and professional development in China and abroad (Cheng, 2008). Therefore, the goal for most Chinese students is to achieve high scores on English language tests. Test preparation course is a popular venue that Chinese students seek to gain better test performance.

Test preparation, especially preparation courses for high-stakes national and global English language tests (e.g., the College English test (CET), the Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL), and the Pearson Test of English (PTE)), thus come into business under the big umbrella of English training industry, which started between the late 1980s and early 1990s in China (Xu, 2007). In this miraculous

development period, hundreds and thousands of test preparation centres have sprouted across China (Matoush & Fu, 2012). The market value of the English training industry in China was 3.5 billion US dollars in 2008 and continues to grow (Sina Education, 2012). However, the rapid development of this industry has not paralleled with the number of empirical studies that have examined Chinese students' test preparation for these tests.

CET Test Preparation Project

The College English Test examines the English proficiency of undergraduate students in China. The CET scores are used in various high-stakes situations related with graduation and job-hunting (Sun, 2012). Therefore, Chinese students aim for a better test performance by taking CET test preparation courses. However, no empirical studies have so far been conducted on the CET test preparation.

With the partnership with the CET test developer – the National College English Testing Committee, this project investigates the relationship between CET test preparation courses and Chinese students' CET test performance. From December 2012 to March 2013, data were collected from 532 Chinese undergraduate students from eight universities in China, who had taken CET preparation courses and also the

UPDATES

1. Data collection of Year 3 of the project is in full swing. This phase of the study focuses on exploring the relationships between the obtained test scores and students' actual English language proficiency within the context of students' academic studies at one Canadian university and one Australian university.
2. The research team is now turning its focus on communicating the results of this project to various stakeholders including presentations at incoming conferences, e.g., AAAL 2014 and LTRC 2014.

most recent live CET. Two measures were used: a questionnaire on CET test preparation practices and a CET live test. Statistical analyses were performed on both the questionnaire data and these students' test scores (total scores and sub-scores). The preliminary results showed students with both high- and low-English proficiency participated in CET preparation courses and that they learned general English language learning strategies and CET-specific test-taking strategies from test preparation courses. Further statistical analyses (factor analysis, multiple regression) will be conducted to demonstrate the relationship between test preparation courses and various indicators of students' English learning as well as their test performance.

Pearson Test Preparation Project

In 2009, Pearson Language Tests launched the Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic) which is endorsed by Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC). PTE Academic is an English language test designed to measure the English ability of non-native English speakers to participate in a university-level English language instruction program. The test score has been aligned to the levels defined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Since entering English language testing market in China in 2009, the PTE Academic has become another option of English language tests that Chinese students can choose in order to apply for overseas educational institutions. Unlike the TOEFL which is more familiar to Chinese students because of existing in testing market for many years, the PTE Academic appears pretty new, and Chinese students may find "nowhere to start" to prepare for this test without certain kind of formal instructions (Yan, personal communication, April 4, 2012). Therefore, preparation courses targeting the PTE Academic have been listed on Chinese PTE Academic test takers' agenda.

With the partnership with Pearson Language Tests, this project aims to examine how PTE Academic preparation courses influence Chinese students' performance on the PTE Academic. With the help of a solution officer at Pearson Beijing Office, 18 out of the 25 students enrolled the courses participated this project. From March to June

2013, I collected the following sets of quantitative data: 1) students' self-assessed English language proficiency, 2) PTE test preparation questionnaire data, and 3) students' PTE Academic test scores. I also conducted interviews with five students on their perceptions and experience of taking PTE Academic preparation courses. Because of the concern of statistical analysis on the current small sample size (18 participants), the project has been extended till January 2014. I am making efforts to recruit more students at this centre to enlarge the sample size.

Dissemination of Project Findings

Our team members are working on disseminating our project findings through submitting proposals for conferences on language assessment and testing or educational assessment (e.g, AAAL 2014, LTRC 2014). Please keep tuned on our newsletter for updates on upcoming conference presentations.

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