

From Test Bench to Classroom: Investigating CET Scores as Predictors of Academic Achievement in English at Jiangxi Universities

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Abstract

This study examined the validity of the College English Test (CET-4 and CET-6) as predictors of academic performance in English-related coursework across ten universities in Jiangxi, China, where high-stakes testing strongly influenced teaching and learning. Guided by Messick's Unified Theory of Test Validity and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition, the research investigated whether CET scores accurately reflected classroom achievement, students' motivational orientations, and teachers' perceptions of learning. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the quantitative phase surveyed 100 third-year non-English majors on attitudes toward English mastery, learning processes, and motivational drivers. Results showed high intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes toward English, but only moderate engagement in communicative tasks. Regression analysis revealed that external motivation—stemming from institutional expectations, parental pressure, teacher demands, and career benefits—was the sole significant predictor of CET orientation ($b = .698$, $p < .001$), explaining 39.5% of the variance. Intrinsic motivation and mastery attitudes were not significant predictors. The qualitative phase, based on interviews with ten English instructors, reinforced these findings. Teachers emphasized the CET's role as a powerful external motivator shaping discipline and study habits, while also critiquing its limitations. They noted that CET performance reflected basic skills (reading, listening, writing, translation) but failed to capture communicative competence, especially speaking. The institutional emphasis on CET preparation narrowed pedagogy, prioritizing drills over interactive, student-centered learning. Triangulated findings revealed a systemic mismatch: students maintained positive attitudes toward English, yet institutional pressures drove exam-oriented behaviors. The study concluded that CET scores captured limited aspects of proficiency and were not valid predictors of academic achievement or communicative competence. It called for instructional reforms that integrated communication skills into CET preparation, balanced curricular goals with holistic outcomes, and provided professional development to help teachers reconcile exam demands with meaningful language learning.

Keywords: College English Test (CET), predictive validity, English proficiency, Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Method, P.R. China