

# **An integrated approach to English as a Foreign Language assessment in a Chinese University: Teacher's perspectives**

## **Introduction**

In 2007, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE) issued a guideline document - the College English Curriculum Requirement (CECR, the revised version) (HEC, 2007). This document was directed specifically at the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning attainment of non-English major students, that is students enrolled in degrees with a major other than English in Chinese higher educational context. The CECR advocates, among many others, an integrated approach to assessment to reconcile the emergent assessment for learning initiative with the accountability objective of assessment to achieve the purpose of “rais[ing] graduate students’ practical ability in using English, and to meet the national and social demands in the new era” (HEC, 2007, p. 1). This move fits with the changing climate of assessment which is characterized by attempts to transform the current undesired situations in education if the negative impact of some forms of assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2001).

The CECR was trialed and developed via two rounds of piloting before its full implementation in 2007. The first has involved eight universities and the second expanded to 180. Acknowledging the disparity between higher educational institutions, the CECR allows individual institutions to develop syllabus of their own to meet their needs. This arouses interest in the enactment of this policy initiative within individual institutions, and its uptake at the College English classrooms.

This paper reports on an investigation that the researcher has conducted in a Chinese provincial university. Specifically, this paper focuses on teachers’ understandings about this innovative assessment policy initiative and how they embed it within their teaching practices. The findings of this study aim to illuminate the complexity that a reform might involve, that requires the use of assessment for both formative and summative purposes in the area of EFL at the tertiary level. The fact that the reform is introduced in a context which has been traditionally dominated by an examination culture adds to the complexity.

## **Background**

College English was introduced for non-English major undergraduate students in China in the mid 1980s. Currently, it is taught to more than 99% of the target group (J. Wang, 2007). The practice has been regulated through the nationally unified curriculum syllabus – initially, the College English Teaching Syllabus (CMoE, 1986, 1999) and more latterly, the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR). For more than two decades, an external examination system – College English Test Band four and six (CET 4/6) has been adopted as a standard measurement for undergraduate’s English proficiency level ([http://www.cet.edu.cn/cet\\_concept4.htm](http://www.cet.edu.cn/cet_concept4.htm)). The test results are widely used in educational and social contexts for qualification appraisal or employment purposes (J. Wang, 2007), which attaches high stakes to the test itself (Chen, 2008). The extended use of a high-stakes external examination has resulted in sever negative washback effects (Han, Dai, & Yang, 2004; Jia & Yang, 2005) which is criticized as being responsible, in part at least, for the unsatisfactory teaching and learning outcomes (Niu, 2001; Wu, 2001) – the well acknowledged “low efficiency and effectiveness” (literally translated from Chinese mandarin 费时低效 fèishí dīxiào, means spending a lot of time, yet achieving little effect) (Dai, 2001; Jing, 1999, 2000).

Acknowledging the seriousness of the issue, the policy-makers firstly discouraged the pegging practice at an official press conference (CMoE, 2005), and then issued a new

curriculum document – the CECR in 2007. The changes that the CECR proposed to the College English assessment policy are:

- formative assessment be incorporated into the original summative assessment framework;
- students are encouraged to be involved in the assessment practice; and
- assess for measurement as well as learning support purposes

Teachers are the actual implementers of policy, who stand at the interface of policy and practice and the interface of teaching, curriculum and learning, and therefore are crucial to the delivery of the assessment innovation (Fullan, 2004 ). As well, research has once demonstrated that the tensions that emerge in the change process impact first of all on teachers (Arkoudis & O'Loughlin, 2004). Teachers, as “agents of assessment” often “find themselves at the confluence of different assessment cultures and faced with significant dilemmas in their assessment practices” (Rea-Dickins, 2004, p. 253). The crucial role that teachers play in educational reform makes research on teachers a compelling agenda.

Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) identify the factors that affect the potential of an assessment system to encourage formative assessment as exists at three different levels: the macro level of ideology and social context, epistemology of assessment, and policy-making, the meso level of institutional conditions and the micro level of classroom. By exploring teachers' perception and practice, this study aims to reveal the uptake of this formative assessment initiative at the meso and micro levels and further to illuminate the potential that it embodies in a context where an examination tradition deeply rooted (Qi, 2005).

### **This study**

Teachers' practices in the classroom are influenced by curriculum and policy at the social order level and beliefs and experience at the individual level (Murphy, Hall, McCormick, & Drury, 2008). Then

- how they understand the assessment policy initiative,
- how they perceive the changes,
- what training and support they have got, and more importantly,
- how they actually carry it out in their teaching practices

These are the questions that this research aims to address.

### *The research context*

This study was conducted in a university in Shanxi Province. This university enrolls around 3000 undergraduate students each year. Nearly all of these students will take College English as a compulsory course in their first two years. About 60 teachers are engaged for this teaching task. The College English course is based on textbooks and focuses on the integrated development of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and translating. All the College English teachers are local Chinese. The assessment consisted of standardized tests that were summative in purpose and the CET 4 was a qualification for the bachelor degree before 2006. Changes have occurred since then: currently, 10% of the overall learning evaluated for reporting purposes is from formative assessment, while the remaining 90% relies on the summative assessment administrated at the end of semester. Now the CET 4 is recommended but no longer required for graduation and degree qualifications.

This provincial university has been purposively selected as it was a pilot site in the trial phase of the implementation of the policy change, i.e. in 2004. The researcher anticipated that after a certain period of experimental implementation, the teachers' demonstrated perceptions of the integrated assessment approach as well as their assessment practice will have stabilized. What is of particular interest to the researcher is the allocation of only 10% of the overall assessment for reporting purposes to formative assessment as compared to 30%, 40% and even more in other universities (Tang, 2006).

### *Participants involved*

From the 60 teachers, the researcher approached two individual teachers for an individual interview and classroom observation. One teacher, T1, has been chosen in 2004 as one of the first two teachers to pilot the CECR in this university. The other, T2, got involved in 2006, when the university expanded the pilot program. Both of them have experienced both the old and the new assessment models. It is anticipated that they will be able to offer valuable insights into the CECR initiatives.

To get a better understanding about the teaching staff's understanding and practice, the researcher approached the teaching staff for voluntary participation and got five volunteers, who compose the focus group. The focus group involved teachers of wider age range, teaching experience, and professional title (see the table 1 below), which makes it potentially possible to elicit richer information.

Table 1. Demographic information of the focus group

	Gender	Age group	Prof title	Years of CET	No. of class & students
Teacher 1	male	30-35	lecturer	6	4 classes, (around 180-190)
Teacher 2	male	30-35	lecturer	9	2 classes of 65 and 63 (128)
Teacher 3	Female	30-35	lecturer	11	3 classes of 55 (110)
Teacher 4	Female	30-35	lecturer	5	3 classes of 52 (106)
Teacher 5	Female	40-45	professor	23	2 classes of 45 (90)

### *Methodology*

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed to cover the major questions concerned. This enabled the researcher to capture the informants' own accounts of their experiences and understandings of assessment while at the same time keeping the communication focused on the interest topic (Creswell, 2007). Both the individual interviews and focus group interview were conducted in Chinese, the first language of the interviewees, then transcribed and translated into English in full text. On careful reading and re-reading of the textual materials, the researcher coded the materials according to the themes that emerge.

The research is underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical perspective, which emphasizes the roles of social interaction and context in knowledge construction (Gipps, 1994), and the role of "the subjective knower in interpreting the known" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). This theoretical lens was adopted to interpret the collected data within its particular social, cultural, historical context.

The researcher also acknowledges her personal experience in relation to the interpretation of the data. She has been a College English teacher in a Chinese university for more than a

decade before she commenced PhD studies in an Australian university. The identity shift and learning experience in a Western context give her a refreshed perspective to look at the problem as an insider from the outside.

### **Discussion and findings**

What follows is an analysis and discussion of data which illustrates how the participant teachers' understand the assessment policy change and how they uptake it in their classrooms. During the process of coding and identifying themes, the researcher noticed while T2 and the focus group teachers' views were in agreement, T1 demonstrates somewhat different and sometimes even conflicting opinions to the others. This highlights T1's other identity – the vice dean of the College English Department. This identity gives her a voice from the administrative perspective as well as that of a teacher, and hence presents a somewhat different view to the others. The analysis and discussion according to the priority order of emergent themes follow.

#### *Understanding about the College English assessment policy & its changes*

When asked about the CECR, all the teachers agreed on having heard of it and having got a booklet. T1, who is one of the two first piloting teachers in this university, said to have read the documents - both the trial and revised versions carefully and demonstrated so in the interview. T2's reply is however, different.

T2: (I know) A little (about the CECR). But the policy is one story, and to carry out the policy is another. So to most teachers, it doesn't matter much whether you understand the national policy or not. What you need to do is to know about the institutional policy and do as you are required to.

T2's view was shared by the five teachers in the focus group, who can not agree whether the color of the booklet's cover is blue or red. Three teachers claim they have given it a cursory review, while one teacher frankly admitted she just had it shelved.

The assessment policy at the institutional level, however, presents a somewhat ambiguous picture in these teachers' words.

T2: There is no specific assessment policy. They only give us a rough outline and a table list to make record: 10 points are to be formative, that is, the progress grade – among which, 3 points are for the performance in classroom, 3 points for attendance, and 4 about homework. That is all.

This response is shared by the focus group:

GT 3: The assessment in our school did not play a role as it is supposed to. I think it is mostly because it is not specified and established. The specific details are needed for practicability and feasibility etc.

and further triangulated by statements like “There are no standards and I don't know how to do it” (T2). It appears the specific standards and procedures on how to carry out the formative assessment are missing at the policy level in this university. The reported referents are various. GT 2, for example, reports he refers to the CET 4 specifications which he found himself somewhere else. GT 3, GT 1, and T2 however, report they rely on their feeling and tend to make more impressionistic judgment.

As to the changes of the institutional assessment policy, the teachers have reached a unanimous agreement on two points: first, CET4 has been unpegged with the qualifications around 2004 or 2005; and second, 10% of the overall assessment in this course has been allocated for formative assessment.

All the teachers admit the unpegging practice is a big move in the institutional assessment policy. And all but one claim they do not prepare students for the CET 4 now as they used to. But when asked about the influences, the following were representative of teachers' views:

GT 2: There are some influences, but not much as I see it. A student in my class is overjoyed to know she got registered for the CET successfully. Most of the students in my class will take the test. Only one did not.

GT 1: In my opinion the CET is just like a yardstick, which directs both the CE teaching and learning practice. Despite that CET is disconnected from other qualifications, the main stream practice remains the same.

GT 3, GT 4, GT 5: right, they will try every effort to pass, required or not.

GT 4: They need the CET certificate for employment.

To some degree, the social consequences that result from the extended use of the external exam system tend to level out the possible dynamic that the policy initiative intends.

The second change is perceived as minor. This is apparent in three responses:

T1: **Not much changes.** 10% for process grade and 10% for oral test, and the rest goes to final exam test.

T2: There were not the 10 points. **That is the change.**

GT 3: You know it is **not much, only 10%.**

However, one teacher's comment in the focus group was revealing:

GT 5: I did not see any changes in the institutional one over these years. **Are there any changes?**

This might be an extreme case by one teacher who has many years of teaching and too much experience of change; however, it provides valuable insights into the College English education policy and practice. Minor or none, the changes in the institutional assessment policy do not appear to have come to the teachers' attention.

#### *Training provided to the teachers*

Teacher training is regarded as vital and prior for effective educational practice, especially when changes are intended (Fullan, 2004 ). Snow (1989) suggests satisfying the early need of teacher understanding and use before a new assessment framework is implemented. Without it, he asserts, no progress can be made in educational practice. As to my inquiry about training, I got a response that conflicts in T2 and focus group teachers as one party and T1 as the other.

T2: No, definitely no training.

In chores: no, not at all.

GT 5: actually, the teachers are pushed onto the stages once they graduate. No training at all.

GT 4: shortage in human resources.

GT 3: **you teach and learn yourself. It is especially tough for those who learn slowly.**

T1, however, gave a somewhat different comment:

T2: Most of them did. This kind of training is provided every summer vacation - usually several seminars within two or three days. These seminars cover every

aspect, not only about assessment though.

Further communication with the teachers reveals that the training that T1 mentioned is provided by the publishing houses, which provide some seminars during holidays out of the profits they make by textbook selling. This kind of training gets comments from the focus group as presented below:

GT 4: I have not been to this kind of training yet.

GT 5: there are some seminars. Mainly about the developing direction or research tendency, though we did not get clear at all. Those conferences, sponsored by the publishing houses, are **mostly fake, big and empty**.

GT 3: A few seminars only, not much about assessment. Mostly teachers take it as an opportunity for sightseeing.

One teacher in the focus group mentioned an on-line training that she and some other teachers have attended the month before. The training, which illustrates the College English assessment policy reform in other institutions, arouses a hot discussion over the present assessment situation in this provincial university. Pitifully, because of fund shortage, only a dozen of the teachers in the department attended. It can be said the training, even if provided in a way, is far from sufficient and effective.

Rea-Dickins (2004) too has emphasized the importance of providing support and guidance to teachers when introducing an assessment change initiative. Without it, she alerts, the teachers will fall back on their experience. That is exactly what the interviewed teachers replied when asked about the sources of the skills and knowledge they use to assess their students.

T2: books about assessment... experience from other teachers, old teachers.

GT 1: Experience, I should say, experience of mine and of fellow teachers', mostly from other experienced teachers since these experiences have been proved effective. I don't have much theoretical basis.

GT 2: my skills are mainly from experience. (Later, he remembers some pre-service guidance by an experienced teacher, which the rest denied.)

GT 5: mostly experience.

GT 3, GT 4: yeah, experience, no theory.

Only T1 includes training and her experience studying abroad as sources of their assessment practice guidance.

These teachers, ranging from 30 to 46 years old, have experienced the testing culture dominated tradition themselves and have been trained to teach under the same norm. Nonetheless, it is not necessarily pessimistic. For despite the lack of training and technical support, the teachers report that they learn to use new forms of learning/assessment tasks such as presentation (GT 1, GT 3, GT 4 and T2), and introduce new assessment forms such as peer and self assessment (GT 5, GT 2, T1) in their classroom assessment practice. This in a way shows that the teachers are not necessarily passive as might be assumed. But the sense of being lost as to what to do that these teachers shows and the frustration demonstrated in their words is worrying.

GT 2: to be frank, I don't think we teachers have much chance to assess at all. The lion's share (90%) is not in our hands. Only the 10%, only orally in classroom, I ... really don't think we teachers can do much. Assessment or not, it is not up to us teachers.

The sense of being caught in dilemma comes to the national policy level, which the teachers find hard to make sense of.

GT 5: The policy-maker like the MOE is like this. On one hand it states it is definitely not appropriate to measure all the students with one test paper; on the other hand, the CET4/6 tests and training is maintained in a very high position. That makes individual institutions and teachers at lost as to how to link their teaching with the changing assessment. There seems to be a lack for such a link, which needs further and deeper inquiry of course. The key point is even if there issued the policy (CECR) many institutions don't dare to or don't know how to carry it out, and the teachers don't know how to uptake it in their classroom practice.

### *Assessment practice*

When asked how they deal with the 10% formative share delivered to their hands, all the teachers replied that they follow the outline structured in the institutional assessment policy, giving 30%, i.e. three points to writing or translating assignments, another 30% to classroom performance and 40% to attendance. As to the specific assessment tasks and assessment methods, their replies follow:

T2: Because I am not sure what the system in our institution is like exactly, I use my own way to judge the students.

GT 5: I think it is more of a personal choice. A process grade is required by (the institutional assessment policy) though, isn't it?

GT 1, GT 4 and GT 3: yes, it is.

GT 4: It is up to the teachers to do whatever measures that they think good to motivate the students to learn more.

GT 5: and to give students a reasonable process grade that they deserve.

GT 5: yeah, kind of to the need of classroom practices and to the flexible choice and the likes of the teacher him/herself.

Even T1 admits she is not very "rigid" in arranging assessment tasks and tends to be flexible when doing assessment and gives examples to illustrate it.

T1: Firstly we must do as the institutional policy requires. But as a teacher you can make the best of the room allowed. Take the assignment for example, three assignments are required ... I respect the students' individual learning styles – some like to talk, whereas some like to write. Another student, Xi, likes to talk in class. His speaking is fairly good. But he can hardly meet the assignment requirements. Wei, however, hands in assignments every time, good or bad, which could amount to seven or eight within a term. So you see, I am not quite rigid in this.

The observation of the two teachers' classrooms (four sessions each) reveals roughly the same findings: The classroom is primarily teacher-centred, with both teachers take the lion's share of class time explicating the vocabulary, text or exercises, and students listening. Students' participation is limited in both time and form. The assessment activities used include: ask-and-response, teacher's comments on students' response; presentation in T2's class (not in T1's), teacher comments on the performance and make a record; and teachers sharing with the class a few assignment samples and giving comments. While both teachers' comments focus on language accuracy (the grammatical or usage mistakes), product (whether it is good or not)

rather than process (how you do it and how to improve), T1's comments cover more about the structure coherence and fluency, and also show some caring about students' individual differences. Teacher's voice about the assessment, when available, is the advocate of the rule-maker. For instance, T1 on one occasion spent 15 minutes elaborating the test wise skills to prepare students for the coming CET 4. T2 adds a vocabulary dictation to enforce students' word memorisation, which they need in the final exam. Students' voice is largely invisible in the two teachers' class. All these seem to be consistent with what they said – not much change and do as they think the best.

The question remains: Is what the teachers are doing formative assessment? It can be seen from above statements the teachers, as required by the institutional assessment policy, make records on the students' performance in classroom, assignments and even attendance during the semester and use the records, along with the results that students get in their final exam and oral test, for reporting purpose by the end of the semester. And in the interview they frequently use *Process grade* as a term alternative to formative assessment, which is used in the CECR, the national policy. But process grade = formative assessment?

The recent literature agrees that the distinction between formative assessment and summative assessment does not lie in the timing (at the end or during the process) as was supposed to; rather it lies in the purposes that the assessment is put to (Harlen, 2006; Newton, 2007) – to “aid learning” or to review, certificate for accountability purpose (Black & Wiliam, 1998). What the teachers do in this institution and the interpretation of the formative assessment at the institutional level do not seem to reveal such an implication. What is happening there is more like formative scoring for summative purpose.

### *Trust*

The theme of trust in teachers appears mainly when teachers are enquired about the possibility of giving larger proportion of the assessment to formative.

T1 again gives voices from the administrative section: I think if more proportion is given to process grade, the teachers will have more control in hand. But it seems there are other considerations too. I myself try to be just and fair to all my students, you see, I have reliable evidence for their formative grade. But you know, 10% or 30% makes a big difference in students' pass or failure. If some teachers give 30 points or 29 points to all his/her students, it is just not fair for others. And the **Teaching Administrative Department did find cases like this**. So you see ...

T2 is moderate in this: We don't have much formative assessment partly due to the worry that if the students or teachers have more points in hand, **they would abuse**, and we really don't have the instruction about how to do it anyway.

GT 5 in the focus group, however, shows discomfort in the distrust: ..... The day before, we proposed to the dean that the 10% is too little. It seems **they don't trust us. They are afraid the teachers will abuse the power. On this point, I strongly disagree. One teachers' misbehavior should not be extended to all. I am thinking since you distrust me, I will not bother to weight between 10 and 9.**

Apparently, the distrust has affected the teacher(s)' attitude negatively. So it the top down approach of the policy delivery, as the following two teachers in the group scoff.

GT 5: The institutional one is delivered orally on the department' routine meeting, no written copy.

GT 3: not quite formal either. More like a by-the-way business.

Trust in teachers or not is another important issue in the nowadays assessment reform which stress the teacher and students' voice rather than the rule-maker and organisation's voice (Hamp-Lyons, 2007). It is important in that trust might be accompanied by support, whereas distrust would lead to resistance or inaction from the teachers, which is vital to the successful implementation of policy (H. Wang & Cheng, 2005).

### **The conclusions**

At the macro level, the knowledge about assessment remains unchanged. The misinterpretation of formative assessment (in the national policy) as process grade (at the institutional and the teachers' level) is a proof. So is the ideology in the social context, who demands certificate for employments. And also the students, who have been brought up in the examination culture, need guidance to adjust their understandings about the nature and the purpose of assessment.

Two important provisions at the meso level are missing or not sufficient: firstly, the criteria needed for judgment. The standards, when tied to reporting, are used in an accountability context as a lever to improve the reliability and consistency of teacher judgment (Klenowski, 2008). Without it, the validity becomes an issue. Secondly, training on specific procedures. The importance of training while introducing an innovation attempt can not be overemphasized (Rea-Dickins, 2004). Without proper support and guidance, the teachers unavoidably fall back on their experience and level out the possible potential that the innovative initiative intended. The fact that this university is a provincial and non-key one should have some influence on the enactment situation.

At the micro level, the teachers, puzzled over what to do in their teaching and assessment practice, do as they think the best. The variance of the criteria they actually use and the ways they interpret the policy again put accountability under threat. A few teachers' abusing of the power exacerbates the situations and leads to trust crisis between the policy-maker and the teaching staff.

Innovation theory advocates supporting teachers with training and making sure they are willing to and comfortable with the change, especially when it comes to a top-down policy (Fullan, 2004). The training can be more important to the teachers who have been accustomed to the examination-oriented practice and are still immersed personally in the examination dominated culture. They need training to understand the specific procedures and measures of formative assessment and further develop their capability to assess formatively. Also, Rogers et al. (2007) have warned that it is important to make sure the instructors' attitudes agree with rather than conflict with the policy rhetoric. Otherwise, it can make a difference between success and failure out of an innovation attempt. However, as the case that the institutional Teaching Administrative Department found out shows, some teacher(s) did not take the power entrusted to them seriously. This calls for professionalism on the teachers' part (Klenowski, 2008).

To sum up, the introduction of formative assessment into a summative assessment framework is a complex process, which needs concerted efforts from all parties concerned. A changing initiative at the top, without established procedures and specified standards, nor adequate training and follow-up support, is not liable to bring about substantial changes to the practices at the bottom.

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