

# English language assessment practices in Chinese universities: A critical examination of testing methods and their implications for student learning

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**Abstract.** English, as an essential skill for cross-cultural communication, underpins China's globalization efforts. Currently, English assessment methods in Chinese universities primarily rely on traditional paper-and-pencil tests and standardized examinations. While these methods are effective in evaluating vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills, they fall short in assessing practical skills such as listening and speaking. This paper examines the current state and challenges of English language assessment in Chinese universities, highlighting its limitations and proposing improvements. The study finds that the current assessment system places excessive emphasis on test scores and neglects practical language application abilities. Through a literature review, this paper identifies existing problems in university English teaching, discusses the feasibility of diversifying assessment forms, increases the weight of listening and speaking tests, and suggests innovative evaluation methods. The paper also recommends learning from advanced foreign language assessment practices, enhancing practical tests, and utilizing modern technology for assessments to improve fairness and effectiveness, thereby promoting the comprehensive development of students' language abilities.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research background

The process of globalization has elevated the importance of English as an international language. Currently, the English assessment system in Chinese universities mainly relies on traditional paper-and-pencil tests and standardized examinations. Although these methods are effective in evaluating vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills, they are significantly lacking in assessing listening, speaking, and practical application abilities [1]. These assessment methods overemphasize memorization and test-taking skills, neglecting the practical use of the language [2]. A single assessment standard is insufficient to fully reflect students' comprehensive language abilities, leading to a skewed focus by both teachers and

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students on language learning. An exam-oriented assessment system tends to make students favor exam preparation over the improvement of practical language skills.

As a global language, English has become increasingly important in various fields. Traditional university English assessment methods mainly rely on mid-term and final exams and standardized tests, which cannot comprehensively reflect students' real language proficiency or meet diverse learning needs and objectives [3]. Therefore, there is an urgent need to systematically study and improve existing testing methods by adopting diversified and comprehensive assessment tools. These tools can more accurately evaluate students' language proficiency, stimulate their interest in learning, enhance their learning outcomes, and provide teachers with more effective feedback, thus promoting the overall quality of teaching [4].

This study examines the current state of English language assessment in Chinese universities and its challenges, revealing problems and limitations through a critical analysis of existing assessment methods. By comparing the effects of various assessment methods on students' motivation, learning strategies, and outcomes, this research provides theoretical support and empirical evidence to enhance assessment practices [5]. Ultimately, the study aims to optimize and innovate assessment tools to improve the fairness, accuracy, and pedagogical effectiveness of assessments, thereby promoting students' overall development and progress in English language learning.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Concept and development of English language assessment**

The concept of English assessment dates back to the early 20th century. With the development of language teaching theories, assessment methods have gradually expanded from single written tests to diverse testing approaches [6]. Early English assessments mainly focused on written exams, emphasizing students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge. By the mid-20th century, linguist Robert Lado introduced the idea of "integrative assessment", advocating for assessments that include listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to comprehensively reflect learners' language abilities [7]. Entering the 21st century, assessment theories further evolved, emphasizing the authenticity and practical application of assessments. For instance, Bachman and Palmer proposed the communicative language ability assessment model, advocating that assessments should measure not only language knowledge but also its application in real-life contexts [8].

### **2.2 Current status of English language assessment**

Presently, English assessments globally demonstrate considerable diversity and differentiation. Various countries and regions implement distinct assessment methods to fulfill their educational requirements and language learning goals [9]. In Chinese universities, the English assessment framework predominantly depends on standardized examinations, such as mid-term and final exams, along with the College English Test (CET-4, CET-6). Internationally, standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS offer students globally recognized certifications of English proficiency, featuring uniform test content and consistent scoring standards.

## **3 Problems with the existing university English assessment model**

### **3.1 Validity and limitations of current assessment methods**

In university English teaching, the evaluation criteria are biased towards traditional grammar knowledge and reading comprehension, neglecting the development of students' comprehensive language skills and learning strategies. One issue is the excessive emphasis on evaluating grammar knowledge and reading comprehension, while neglecting other language skills such as speaking and writing. English teaching is a process of comprehensively developing students' language abilities, yet most universities focus on assessing students' grammar knowledge and reading comprehension skills. The single evaluation criterion leads students to focus solely on memorizing and understanding grammar rules, ignoring the training for flexible language use, which may result in insufficient expressive abilities in actual communication and writing.

### **3.2 The impact of English language assessment on students' learning behavior and motivation**

The existing assessment system overemphasizes exam scores, fostering a test-centric education model. This focus prompts both students and teachers to allocate substantial time and effort to exam preparation, at the expense of developing practical language skills. Consequently, students often resort to rote memorization to pass exams rather than acquiring English for practical purposes, diminishing their motivation and limiting their comprehensive language mastery. Research indicates that the test-centric education model not only diminishes students' interest in learning but also leaves them feeling ill-equipped for real-life language use, thereby negatively impacting their overall language proficiency and confidence [10].

### **3.3 The necessity for teachers to enhance their pedagogical practices**

In the present context of university English teaching, it is imperative for educators to improve their instructional methods. This need is particularly pronounced in the following aspects:

#### ***3.3.1 Adapting to diverse learning needs***

In a diverse learning environment, students' backgrounds, interests, and learning needs vary greatly. The traditional "one-size-fits-all" teaching model often overlooks individual differences, failing to effectively engage all students, and even diminishing some students' enthusiasm for learning. Most universities evaluate solely from the teacher's perspective, using personal experience and subjective judgment to assess students' academic performance and quality, resulting in evaluation outcomes that lack objectivity and fairness. This is detrimental to both teachers' and students' professional development and self-actualization. Teachers' teaching skills and methods are limited, and students do not receive comprehensive evaluation and guidance.

#### ***3.3.2 Adapting to new technologies and teaching resources***

Modern educational technologies and resources, such as online learning platforms, multimedia teaching tools, and virtual reality technologies, are becoming increasingly abundant [11]. However, traditional teaching methods fail to fully utilize these new technologies, leading to suboptimal teaching results. Self-testing involves students completing teacher-assigned test content online or in an independent learning system, with the system providing grades. The primary purpose of these tests is to offer stage-by-stage

feedback on students' learning, helping them identify and address knowledge gaps, consolidate their knowledge, and solve problems promptly. This method also allows teachers to understand students' learning status and provide appropriate support.

### ***3.3.3 Providing more targeted feedback***

Effective teaching involves not only transferring knowledge but also providing timely and relevant feedback. Some colleges and universities fail to offer prompt feedback to students, preventing timely correction of teaching and learning issues. As a result, they cannot promptly adjust teaching methods and approaches, which affects the improvement of teaching quality. Furthermore, some colleges and universities provide only macro-level feedback, lacking detailed analysis of specific teaching content and methods. This general feedback fails to address particular issues accurately and hinders targeted improvements in teaching practices.

## **4 Measures to face the new university English assessment model**

### **4.1 Introduction of diversified forms of assessment**

By incorporating a variety of assessment methods, the dependence on single exam scores can be diminished, thus enhancing students' interest in learning and intrinsic motivation. Beyond traditional written exams, assessment forms such as short essays and research papers should be expanded [12]. College students come from diverse backgrounds and have different learning styles in their English studies. To accommodate these differences, teachers should establish specific evaluation criteria that consider factors such as language proficiency, learning interest, and motivation. For instance, language proficiency criteria could encompass listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, while motivation criteria could include learning attitude and eagerness to learn.

### **4.2 Increased weighting of listening and speaking**

In the current assessment system, listening and speaking tests have a low weighting and cannot fully reflect students' actual communication skills [13]. Listening tests can evaluate students' listening comprehension by playing audio materials of varying difficulty levels and types, followed by relevant questions [14]. Speaking tests can assess students' oral expression and interaction skills through regular oral interviews or group discussions [15]. English teaching should focus on developing students' multifaceted abilities rather than merely testing their grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. This approach helps prevent students from concentrating solely on test-taking strategies and neglecting the practical use of English.

### **4.3 The utilization of innovative evaluation methods**

Firstly, teacher evaluation is essential. Task-based teaching is an effective method where students can assess their English skills and application levels by completing various tasks. Teachers can promote student participation in class discussions and plan related activities. Secondly, self-evaluation is crucial. Before self-evaluation, students need to understand its significance and purpose thoroughly. They should learn various self-evaluation techniques to assess themselves from multiple angles. This process helps students recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, peer evaluation is valuable. It allows teachers to better understand and meet students' needs. Implementing group evaluation methods, where

students provide feedback to each other, can help them continuously identify and address their issues, fostering better self-improvement.

## **5 Proposals for modifying the existing approach to assessing English at the university**

In order to enhance the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of English language assessment methods in Chinese universities, the following practical suggestions for improvement can be made by drawing on international advanced experiences and combining them with the specific conditions of local education.

### **5.1 The utilization of advanced language assessment practices from abroad**

Chinese universities can learn from the advanced experience and methods of foreign countries in language assessment and adopt internationally recognized assessment standards and practices [15]. For example, referring to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can help enhance the quality of English language assessment.

### **5.2 The objective is to construct a robust evaluation feedback mechanism**

Feedback should cover students' performance in each assessment session, identify deficiencies, and provide specific directions for improvement. Teachers use the feedback mechanism to help students develop personalized learning plans to enhance their language skills. Feedback can be given verbally or in writing, with timeliness being crucial to facilitate communication between teachers and students. This ensures full participation and creates a collaborative teaching environment where everyone progresses together. Additionally, the evaluation system needs to be consistent with the teaching objectives to accurately reflect the real effectiveness of teaching.

### **5.3 The implementation of contemporary online testing platforms and technical resources**

Automated and data-driven assessments using intelligent technology can improve evaluation efficiency and accuracy while enhancing students' language application abilities and interest in learning. For instance, online self-assessment involves students completing teacher-assigned test content online or through self-learning systems, with the system providing scores. The main purpose of these tests is to provide periodic feedback on students' learning, helping them identify and address knowledge gaps, consolidate knowledge, and resolve existing issues promptly. This is also a means to understand students' learning status and assist teachers in timely adjustments to teaching methods and priorities. Modern technological tools have diversified, streamlined, and enhanced the efficiency of assessments, offering better support and services to both students and teachers.

## **6 Conclusion**

Chinese universities have seen some success in evaluating students' English proficiency, yet significant flaws persist in the current methods. This paper critically assesses the existing evaluation system, exposing the inadequacies of traditional paper-and-pencil exams and standardized tests in measuring listening and speaking skills as well as practical application

abilities. It highlights the urgent need to assess students' practical language use abilities. The current English assessment system places excessive emphasis on exam scores, causing students to prioritize test-taking strategies while neglecting overall language application skills. Thus, it is crucial to diversify assessment methods, optimize evaluation criteria and scoring systems, and increase the weight of listening and speaking tests. This paper suggests a series of improvement measures and recommendations, hoping that future research and practice will further explore and refine these areas, contributing to the scientific and rational development of English assessment systems in Chinese universities.

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