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Perceived effects of CET4 test preparation, language ability, and test performance: An exploratory study of Chinese EFL learners



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Abstract

This study examined the perceived effects of test preparation for College English Test Band 4 (CET4) on development of language ability and test performance, which has not received sufficient attention previously. A total of 79 undergraduate students from two classes in a Chinese university participated in the study. At the end of the CET4 preparation program provided by the university, the participants completed a questionnaire indicating their perceived improvement in the various attributes (language skill development, skill understanding, test-taking strategies, and confidence) in relation to writing, listening, reading, and translating measured by the test. Six participants took part in one-to-one interviews to provide detailed information about their perceived effectiveness of learning as a result of the preparation program. Overall participants thought they made more progress in reading and translating, but less in listening and writing. Regression analyses mainly established that the perceived improvements of most of the attributes and language abilities are significant predictors of students' anticipated and actual CET4 performance. Implications for test preparation programs, language learners and instructors are discussed with reference to how to facilitate learners' learning and development of language ability and how to improve performance on future tests.

Keywords: EFL learners, CET4 test, test preparation, language ability

Introduction

Test preparation is of crucial importance to language learners (Knoch *et al.*, 2020). The immediate benefit would be to achieve desirable test outcomes and to reach the expectation of test takers and their families. Test preparation is also expected to aid with bringing about beneficial consequences of important tests. Hughes (1993) suggests that the ultimate product of beneficial consequence is the improved learning of the construct being measured. Seen in this light, a language test preparation

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program should be able to provide learning opportunities for increasing learner knowledge of and ability to use a target language. Thus the effectiveness of test preparation in improving test performance and language development is of considerable interest not only to educators and test takers but also to test developers and score users. Compared to the general consensus from research on admission tests, such as the SAT[®] exam, ACT and the GRE[®] General Test that there is a small effect of coaching on test scores (Liu, 2014), the effect of coaching on language proficiency tests is less clear. Meanwhile, while many studies investigating the effect of test preparation focus on major international tests, in particular the TOEFL and the IELTS, the concern for local test context is growing (e.g., Qi, 2005; Xie & Andrews, 2012). The present study examines how a group of Chinese students perceive the effects of CET4 preparation on their language development and test-taking performance and the relationship between such perceived effects and the subsequent CET4 performance.

Literature Review

There has been “little research about the effectiveness of language test preparation courses” (Gan, 2009, p. 25). Most of the existent studies generally employ a pretest and posttest design to examine the longitudinal effects of test preparation on test performance. A general consensus emerged from the research results that test preparation may improve test scores, but often with modest margins (Xie, 2013). Some studies look at the relationship between what students or teachers do to prepare for a test and improvement in test performance (e.g., Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003; Issitt, 2008; Liu, 2014; Xie, 2013). For instance, Liu (2014) investigated how TOEFL iBT test takers’ preparation is associated with their test scores, and found that coaching school attendance has little or no relationship with TOEFL iBT scores. Xie (2013) investigated the effects of CET4 test preparation practices on its scores with multiple regression and structural equation modeling. She found that the perceived effects of strategy use in improving test scores was a better predictor of test preparation pattern than the information processing mechanism underlying strategy use. The effects of test preparation, though small in absolute terms, constituted approximately one third of the effects from the pretest.

Many studies investigating the effect of test preparation on language tests involve a comparison between two groups to determine either 1) the effectiveness of test preparation as opposed to non-preparation course(s) (e.g., Brown, 1998; Gan, 2009; Green, 2007; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999), or 2) if both groups participate in different preparation courses, the difference between the effectiveness of the courses (e.g., Farnsworth, 2013; Hayes, & Read, 2004; Nguyen, 2007). Most of these studies did not find hard evidence to support the proposal that test preparation courses had significantly larger effects than regular English language courses. Gan (2009) examined the impact of IELTS preparation courses on IELTS test performance of a group of Hong Kong students by using a questionnaire survey that had been designed to elicit information about test performance. No significant differences in IELTS test scores were found between students who had enrolled in an IELTS preparation course before the test and those who had not, though the latter scored significantly higher in the university entrance English exam than the former. The researcher drew a compromised conclusion that IELTS preparation courses narrowed the gap between the two groups.

Some researchers found significant influences of preparation on test performance. Farnsworth (2013) investigated the effect of test preparation on two types of oral English as a second language test scores. Participants were pre-tested by both measures and randomly assigned to one of two instructional treatments. They underwent 12 hours of intensive strategy and test format training in one of the two test formats over 6 weeks during the treatments. Their scores increased significantly from the pretest to post-testing on both tests no matter which treatment group was assigned to.

Recently Xu (2021) investigated the processes and effects of test preparation for the writing task of a high-stakes English admission test in the context of tertiary education in China. Regression analysis of the participants' writing scores revealed that their preparation efforts and language proficiency had a significantly positive effect on test scores. The findings highlight two specific preparation activities that produce positive test outcomes: completing the writing tasks within the pre-set time limit and getting familiar with the task.

Some studies look at test takers' perceptions of test preparation experiences and expectations (e.g., Ma & Cheng, 2015; Yu, 2012). Ma and Cheng (2015) studied the perceptions of 12 Chinese students about the value of the TOEFL iBT test preparation courses they had enrolled in before admission to a Canadian university. Data sources included semi-structured interviews and document reviews. Drawing on Scriven's (1998, 2007) model, the researchers concluded that the students' accounts of the value encompassed various determinants of the "quality (merit), benefit (worth), and importance (significance)" of these test preparation courses (Ma & Cheng, 2015, p.75). However, the perceived value varied across these participants, and such variability was related to both internal factors (e.g., motivations for taking preparation courses) and external factors (e.g., limited time for preparing for the TOEFL iBT).

The inconclusive findings observed in the related literature point to the necessity of doing more empirical studies in this line of research. In particular, most previous studies focused on teachers' perspectives, leaving our understanding of how students perceive test preparation under-researched with regard to actual English language learning outcomes (Ma & Cheng, 2015). Specifically, little is known about how students perceive their improvement in language abilities as a result of coaching and how that perception affects their test performance. The lack of attention is irrational, as students are the most important participants in test preparation programs and arguably the most important stakeholders of tests. As Bailey (1999) accurately points out, "It is worthwhile to sort out the students from the other stakeholders since the washback processes that influence them will directly affect language learning" (p. 12).

Another issue of concern is that many previous studies used published test forms or mock tests to investigate the effect of coaching by investigating the relationship between score gains and test preparation activities (Liu, 2014). The problem is that students may have seen and even done the tests or part of them before, in addition to the possibility that they may not have exerted their best effort in these simulated testing situations. A recent meta-analysis study shows that motivation could have an impact as large as .64 SD on test performance (Duckworth, Quinn, Lynam, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2011). What's more, the majority of test preparation studies focus on international English language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS, with scant attention being paid to other tests that are also important to test takers, educators, test developers, users and many other stakeholders.

To address these concerns, the present study takes the CET4 in China as the target to explore how students perceive the effects of test preparation and the relationship between those effects and the actual test performance. Specifically, it attempts to seek answers for the following two research questions:

1. How do students perceive the effects of test preparation on the skills of reading, writing, listening, and translating measured in the CET4 test?
2. What is the relationship between the perceived effects of preparation and the actual CET4 performance with regard to the measured skills?

Methods

CET4

As a high-stakes test, the CET4 is one of the key outcomes used for assessing the effectiveness of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) for and by non-English majors in China (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). Mostly aligned with CEFR B1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), the purpose of the CET4 is to examine the English proficiency of undergraduate students and to ensure that they achieve the required English levels specified in the National College English Teaching Syllabi. Currently the test is administered twice per year, and the test modules appear in the order of Writing, Listening, Reading, and Translation. Recently educational researchers take an increasing interest in working on empirical studies on CET4 with a view to identifying factors that affect students' test performance (e.g., Cheng *et al.*, 2014) and its effect on teaching and learning, test preparation in particular (Zhan & Andrews, 2014; Xie, 2013; Xie & Andrews, 2012).

Participants

The participants were seventy nine undergraduate business majors (aged 18-20) from two classes in a Chinese university, and the researcher was their English teacher. When the study was conducted, the participants were in their spring semester when the CET4 were to be administered.

The preparation program

In order to improve test performance, each year the Department of College English of the university normally initiates a preparation program that focuses on the various skills and test-taking strategies in writing, listening, reading, and translating measured by the test. Typically, lectures with such focuses are delivered and the test papers of the past ten years and mock tests are given to students to complete as a part of the process. The preparation program reported in the present study lasted for about three months until the test date. During the process, the instructor tried to teach both the test and the test constructs so that the students will not only perform better on the exam, but also have sound development in their language skills. The program started from a general introduction to macro-level strategies including familiarization with the test format and test instructions, planning and time management in test preparation, and so forth, to micro-level strategies pertinent to individual test modules. The first two months were devoted to individual skills. First, the instructor elaborated on the test-taking strategies involved in a skill module. Then, he gave tasks to students to practice and drill the strategies. This is followed by questions and answers about the task results in the class. The last month focused on retired test papers and mock tests. The students finished the tests before they met the teacher. Then during the class hours, they checked the answers and discussed with the teacher and their classmates about the problems and difficulties they encountered.

Self-assessment questionnaire

Self-assessment is often used to measure students' perceived ability (Butler & Lee, 2010; Cohen, 1994; Dann, 2002; Ross, 1998; Zimmerman, 1990). In order to examine students' perceptions of the effects of the CET4 test preparation program they had taken prior to taking the test, a self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix A) that consisted of two parts was developed with all items using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = does not apply to me at all, 6 = apply to me entirely). Part 1 elicits information about students' perceived progress as a result of the test preparation program. This part covers four sections that were mainly built on Bachman and Palmer's (2010) conceptual framework of language use which includes language knowledge and strategic competence and other attributes.

Section 1 focuses on students' perceived improvement in the language ability (Reading, Writing, Listening, and Translating), section 2 their understanding of these skills, section 3 the strategies they use to complete the tasks, and section 4 their confidence in these skills. Part 2 asks students to predict their performance in the coming CET4 test. The questionnaire was distributed to the students in their regular English class on June 17, 2016, the day before the CET4 test.

Interview

The researcher conducted one-to-one interviews (Appendix B) to further probe to what extent the preparation benefited the participants. In order to encourage the students to tell the truth and elaborate on their experience and opinions, the researcher made it clear that what the participants say will not affect their term assessment. The researcher arranged interviews with 6 students two days after the CET4 test on June 20, 2016, so that the students could have a fresh impression of the immediate effects of the preparation program on their test performance.

Results

General descriptive statistics

The means of the individual item in Part 1 of the questionnaire range from 3.72 to 4.54, suggesting that the students generally agreed upon the benefits from the preparation program in terms of the various language abilities in English learning. One commonality of the questionnaire responses is that the mean of the reading-related item is the highest across the questionnaire sections. This seems to show that students believed their English reading improved the most among the four skills tested in the CET4 as a result of the preparation program.

The general descriptive information of the questionnaire was shown in Table 1. Also displayed here is the Cronbach's Alpha which shows that the four scales are of high internal consistency reliability. The means of the four attributes are either close to or above 4 (apply to me) indicating that students generally believed the program was helpful with regard to those attributes. The means of skill improvement and confidence are very close (3.91 and 3.90 respectively). Skill understanding is the highest ($m = 4.47$) across the four attributes in the questionnaire, which means that students thought they made more progress in the understanding of the skills tested by CET4, that is, reading, writing, listening, and translating.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of questionnaire survey (four attributes)

	Skill development	Skill understanding	Strategy	Confidence
Min	1	1	1	1
Max	6	6	6	6
Mean	3.91	4.47	4.31	3.90
SD	1.00	1.02	.95	1.06
Cronbach's Alpha	.901	.930	.913	.928

Table 2 shows participants' responses to Part 2 of the questionnaire indicating their anticipated CET4 performance. Participants generally believed that they will pass the CET4, but with moderate confidence ($m=3.03$). The anticipated performance is similar across writing ($m=3.11$), listening

($m=2.87$), and translating ($m=2.99$), suggesting a lack of confidence in these individual skills. In contrast, participants considered their reading performance with greater certainty ($m=3.46$).

Table 2 *Descriptive statistics of questionnaire survey (anticipated test performance)*

	Anticipated CET4 total score	Anticipated CET4 writing	Anticipated CET4 Listening	Anticipated CET4 Reading	Anticipated CET4 Translating
Min	1	1	1	1	1
Max	6	6	6	6	6
Mean	3.03	3.11	2.87	3.46	2.99
SD	1.18727	1.18741	1.3045	1.16352	1.2351

Students' actual CET4 test scores are shown in Table 3 below. Note that CET4 has a full score of 710, and writing and translating are combined into a composite score in the score report. If judged from the difference between the module means and Pass Fail point, it can be said that participants' score for Listening is the lowest. 14 participants failed the CET4 test (17.7%, with a score below 425), and 65 students (82.3%) passed the test, of whom 7 (8.9%) scored over 550, which qualified them to take the CET4 Spoken English test.

Table 3 *Participants' CET4 test scores*

	Total	Listening	Reading	Writing and Translating
Min	369	107	111	108
Max	627	240	210	195
Mean	478.4	161.9	168.5	148.0
Pass fail point	425	149.1	149.1	127.8
Difference	53.4	12.8	19.4	20.2

Effects of test preparation on CET4 performance as revealed by statistical analysis

Effects of perceived improvement of different attributes on actual CET4 performance

The relationship between CET4 performances and the effects of preparation was investigated using regression analyses. The main purpose was to determine to what extent the measured attributes, that is, the perceived improvement of language skill, skill understanding, test-taking strategies, test confidence, and anticipated test performance, were able to predict the students' actual CET4 performance and to account for the variance in it. A statistical model of multiple regression was built (enter method) with CET4 test performance as the dependent variable and the measured attributes as independent variables. Assumptions were checked by looking at the VIF collinearity statistics, Eigenvalue, and condition index.

Table 4 Collinearity statistics

Model		T	p	Collinearity statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	14.543	.000		
	Skill development	-.092	.927	.340	2.941
	Skill understanding	-1.080	.284	.311	3.217
	Test-taking strategies	.652	.516	.238	4.194
	Confidence	.940	.350	.287	3.482
	Anticipated CET4 score	3.071	.003	.758	1.319

Table 5 Collinearity diagnostics

Model	Dimension	Eigenvalue	Condition index	Variance Proportions					
				(Constant)	Skill improvement	Skill understanding	Test-taking strategies	Confidence	Anticipated CET4 score
1	1	5.853	1.000	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
	2	.075	8.828	.00	.01	.02	.01	.00	.87
	3	.036	12.722	.80	.02	.00	.00	.09	.01
	4	.015	19.512	.02	.80	.05	.00	.31	.00
	5	.012	21.658	.14	.05	.65	.01	.50	.12
	6	.008	26.618	.02	.12	.28	.97	.09	.01

a. Dependent Variable: CET4 score

As Table 4 shows, four out of the five VIF values are over 2. Table 5 shows that five out of the six Eigenvalues are close to 0, and four out of the six Condition index results are close to 15 (12.722) or much larger than it (19.512, 21.658, and 26.618, respectively). These figures seem to suggest possible collinearity among the variables (Lu, 2003, p.333); thereby separate regression analyses were conducted. Specifically, in the first regression model, CET4 score was used as the dependent variable (DV) and perceived improvement in skill development as the independent variable (IV). The regression analysis was then repeated four times with perceived improvement in skill understanding, test-taking strategy, confidence, and anticipated CET4 score as IVs, respectively.

Table 6 summarizes the results of the five regression analyses. The adjusted R square tells the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that can be predicted from the independent variables (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2005, p.96). It was found that apart from skill understanding ($p = .371$), all the independent variables significantly predicted students' CET4 performance. Anticipated CET4 score was the best statistically significant predictor, and it accounted for 22.2% of the variance in CET4 performance, followed by confidence which explained 10.2% of the variance in test performance.

Table 6 *Effects of perceived improvement of attributes on CET4 performance*

DV	IV	Adjusted R ²	F	p	Standardized coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
CET score	Skill development	.065	6.408	.013	.277	2.531	.013
	Skill understanding	-.002	.810	.371	.102	.900	.371
	Strategy	.054	5.480	.022	.258	2.341	.022
	confidence	.102	9.818	.002	.336	3.133	.002
	Anticipated CET4 score	.222	23.281	.000	.482	4.825	.000

Effects of perceived improvement of different attributes on anticipated CET4 performance

Regression analysis was also performed in order to examine to what extent the measured attributes, that is, the perceived improvement of skill development, skill understanding, test-taking strategies, and confidence, were able to predict students' anticipated CET4 performance and to explain the variance in it. Owing to the high multicollinearity among the variables, separate regression analyses were conducted and the results were summarized in Table 7. It was found that three out of the four IVs were statistically significant predictors of the DV, with confidence improvement being the best predictor accounting for 14% of the total variance in the anticipated CET4 performance. Similar to the information shown in Table 6, skill understanding was the weakest and non-significant predictor, and it explained only 1.9% of the variance in the anticipated CET performance.

Table 7 *Effects of perceived improvement of attributes on anticipated CET4 performance*

DV	IV	Adjusted R ²	F	p	Standardized coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
Anticipated CET4 score	Skill development	.080	7.769	.007	.303	2.787	.007
	Skill understanding	.019	2.531	.116	.178	1.591	.116
	Strategy	.041	4.333	.041	.231	2.082	.041
	confidence	.140	13.675	.000	.388	3.698	.000

Effects of perceived improvement in different language abilities on anticipated CET4 performance

As the questionnaire items were related to the language abilities tested in the CET4 test, a series of regression analyses were performed to examine the effects of the preparation program in terms of the different language abilities on students' anticipated test performances. We first put together the questionnaire items of different attributes (excluding those on anticipated performance) that were related to writing, listening, reading, and translating, respectively. The descriptive statistics of the variables were shown in Table 8 below. The mean progress of writing is the lowest (4.09) among the four abilities, and listening is the second lowest (4.10), followed by translating (4.11). Reading takes the lead by a large margin (4.29).

Table 8 Descriptive statistics of individual ability improvement

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Writing	1.00	6.00	4.0886	1.00801
Translating	1.00	6.00	4.1108	.95470
Listening	1.00	6.00	4.1013	.95870
Reading	1.00	6.00	4.2911	.94515
N=79				

We then performed regression analysis using the mean of the items about writing as the IV and students' anticipated CET4 performance in writing as the DV. We repeated these procedures for listening, reading, and translating. The results of these regression analyses were displayed in Table 9. All the independent variables were statistically significant predictors in these models. The relationship is the strongest between anticipated CET4 reading performance and the perceived effects of test preparation in terms of the perceived improvement in reading ($R^2=.208$, $p<.000$). The perceived effects of the test preparation program have the least powerful effects, though significant, on students' anticipated performance in listening ($R^2=.088$, $p=.005$).

Table 9 Effects of perceived improvement of language abilities on anticipated CET4 performance

DV	IV	Adjusted R ²	F	p	Standardized coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
Anticipated CET writing score	Perceived writing improvement	.127	12.344	.001	.372	3.513	.001
Anticipated CET translating score	Perceived translating improvement	.163	16.216	.000	.417	4.027	.000
Anticipated CET listening score	Perceived listening improvement	.088	8.503	.005	.315	2.916	.005
Anticipated CET reading score	Perceived reading improvement	.208	21.423	.000	.467	4.629	.000

Effects of perceived improvement in different language abilities on actual CET4 performance

Statistical analyses were performed to determine to what extent students' perceived progress in the various language abilities influenced their actual test performance in those corresponding abilities. Two sets of regression analyses were conducted. In the first set of data analysis, the mean of the items about perceived progress in different language abilities served as predictors, and students' CET performance in those abilities as the dependent variable. In the second round of regression analysis, students' anticipated test performance in different abilities was used as predictors. Note that in CET4 score report writing and translating are put together in a composite score. Thus the means of the questionnaire items related to writing and translating were calculated together and used as predictor, and the means of test scores in writing and translating served as the dependent variable. The results of these regression analyses were summarized in Table 10 below, which shows that overall the effects of anticipated test performance on actual test performance are greater than the perceived progress in related language abilities.

Table 10 *Effects of perceived improvement of language abilities on CET4 performance*

DV	IV	Adjusted R ²	F	p	Standardized coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
CET writing & translating score	Perceived writing & translating improvement	-.005	.598	.442	.088	.774	.442
	Anticipated CET writing & translating score	.096	9.245	.003	.327	3.041	.003
CET listening score	Perceived listening improvement	.065	6.432	.013	.278	2.536	.013
	Anticipated CET listening score	.107	10.346	.002	.344	3.217	.002
CET reading score	Perceived reading improvement	.016	2.271	.136	.169	1.507	.136
	Anticipated CET reading score	.045	4.701	.033	.240	2.168	.033

Effects of test preparation on CET4 performance as revealed by interview

The students expressed their views about the effects of the preparation program on their English learning and test performance. Generally speaking, students' perceived improvement of the various language abilities is similar to the pattern shown in Table 8. Reading is considered to have made the largest progress, followed by translating, listening, and then writing. This section summarizes the interview results about the perceived improvement of these abilities.

Writing

A general pattern of the interviewees' responses was that writing experienced the least advancement among the four language abilities. Three out of the six interviewees perceived their writing improvement as very small, and none of the 6 interviewees considered their writing had a very large development (see Table 11 below). Participant Yu, the highest CET4 scorer among the participants, expressed her disappointment about writing: "my writing has made the least progress. My writing resources have been used up and exhausted. I cannot think of anything (sentence structure, vocabulary) for a writing task. I have to cram something into my mind before the test so that I may feel I have something to write. But that's no good..." Participant Wang said: "I feel at a loss how to improve my writing, which is always the same."

The causes for the slow development of writing are 1) lack of practicing (for interviewee Zhang and Yu), and; 2) bottle-neck effect (for interviewee Wang). Interviewee Zhang said: "my writing does not have an impressive development because I practiced little. Apart from following the teacher in the regular classes, I should have practiced writing after the classes. But I did not." She told the researcher that she planned to seek further study abroad and was busy preparing for IELTS, and did not think CET4 was difficult. It could be inferred that interviewee Zhang attached much more significance to IELTS writing than CET4 writing. As a result, she made little progress in CET4 writing. For interviewee Yu, the little practicing in writing is the result of her "laziness." It should be pointed out that Yu is a hardworking student, and she is one of the only two students among the participants to have scored over 600 in CET4. She had a high expectation of test performance in all

the sections. Her account of “laziness” may be attributed to the differential amount of pressure from study between high school and university. Much more intensive hard work was involved in teaching, learning, and practicing writing while she was preparing for the college entrance examination than was for CET4. Interviewee Yu told the researcher that she currently did not have the perseverance and determination in learning that she had in high school. Her high school English teacher was also very hard working. Every time she completed a piece of writing, her teacher gave prompt and detailed feedback. Then she revised accordingly and resubmitted to her teacher who would normally provide feedback again. Sometimes she had several revisions for a single piece of writing until her teacher was satisfied. Yu said: “I think the progress in writing hinges on repeated revisions...but I don't think I did this well now. When I did the mock tests for practicing, I only finished the reading and listening sections. I seldom completed the writing and translating tasks.” She also told the researcher that she did little timed writing exercises. As a result, she felt time was so limited in the CET4 writing that she did not have time to put some of the good sentence structures into the test paper and had to hurry to the ending. “My hand shook. It was terrible!” she exclaimed.

Table 11 Interviewees' perceived improvement

	Zhou ^b	Yang	Zhang	Yu	Jin	Wang
Writing	small	medium	least	least	large	least
Listening	least	least	small	most	least	most
Reading	small	most	large	small	most	small
Translating	most	small	most	medium	medium	small
CET4 score	529	550	513	606	558	465

Note: a: according to interviewees' response, the degree of their perceived improvement in language abilities could be simplified in an ascending order as: very small/Least, small, medium, large, very large/most.

b: Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality.

Interviewee Wang considered her little improvement in writing as a result of a “bottleneck” effect. She said: “After you have mastered the skills and strategies for writing, you may come to a bottleneck. It does not mean that you have become a great writer, but you are confined to a certain model. Your writing would not change (improve) apart from the changes in the contents.”

Listening

Similar to writing, three participants considered their progress in listening as very small among the four language abilities. Participants described listening as “too difficult” (interviewee Zhou and Zhang) and “terrible” (interviewee Wang). At the beginning of her college life, interviewee Zhou noticed that the listening tasks in college English were much more difficult than those in her high school study. She then tried to improve her listening skills, such as listening to the news of English speaking countries on the internet, but only to find that she still could not figure out what the speakers said. Feeling disappointed, she did not want to do more exercises than those she had to in the regular classes. Interviewee Yang attributed his little improvement to his difficulty to concentrate. He said he had not developed the habit of using the strategies suggested by the instructor, such as looking at the options while listening. Interviewee Wang expressed the similar difficulty she had about listening. She said: “I tried to follow the speaker by reading after him or her. Although I could not repeat each word, it helps me concentrate, otherwise I would drift away. I would not know where I was, and I could not follow the speaker. Once I have gone away from the speakers, understanding of the subsequent information would be destroyed.” Interviewee Jin pointed out that she did not have enough time for training in the classes, and admitted doing few exercises after classes. She finished

the news task assignments that the instructor gave and thought she made some improvement afterwards. However, she felt terrible while doing the listening tasks during the CET4 missing the key words of the recording. She did not know why but perceived it maybe because she had done little practice.

However, there were also two participants (interviewee Yu and Wang) who thought their improvement in listening is greater than other areas. However, according to the two students, there was no listening section in the English test of the college entrance examination in their local test regions so that they could intensively practice reading and writing only in the high school. Yu told the researcher: "I only had a basic listening ability before I came to college. I learned many test-taking strategies for English listening this semester."

Reading

None of the interviewees thought their improvement in reading is the smallest among the four ability areas, and two (Yang and Jin) thought their improvement in reading was the largest. Students' progress in reading may be illustrated by their experiences with the following tasks. The first one was Information Matching, the first task in the reading section. Interviewee Wang told the researcher she did not know how to do the Information Matching task in the beginning of the preparation program. But gradually, she grasped the methods for that task. At the end she felt the task was almost given for free. The other task is Banked Cloze. According to participant Yu, she finished the Banked Cloze within just 5 minutes by employing a set of test-taking strategies, such as choosing a word for the blank after the conjunction "and" that has the same part of speech as the word before that conjunction, so as to quickly complete it. She admitted that she did not even know what the passage was about after finishing the task. Students (Yang and Wang) related their progress to intensive practice. Interviewee Yang admitted having done more reading exercises than writing, listening, and translating. Interviewee Wang said: "I did about three mock tests every night. But I chose part of the tasks to practice. I did not do the listening part and the Banked Cloze, which is the most difficult. I only dealt with the Information Matching and Reading in Depth (reading comprehension with multiple-choice format)." Jin ascribed her improvement to classroom activities. She said, "The teacher discussed with us the difficulties and doubts involved in the reading tasks in the class. After class, I summarized what the teacher had said and reflected on the causes of my wrong answers. Then I felt my efficiency improved."

Two participants (interviewee Zhou and Yu) thought they did not improve much in reading. Zhou said she sometimes had many wrong answers when doing reading tasks, while other times she did quite well. She attributed her little improvement to "attitude" in doing the tasks: "I would focus my attention on reading under testing conditions. But, I would be easily distracted when I do test exercises, and I would have many wrong answers." As for interviewee Yu, who said there were no listening tasks in her college entrance examination paper, she seemed to suffer from a "ceiling effect." She told the researcher her reading ability was "very good", thus it was difficult to make any noticeable improvement.

Translating

Similar to reading, none of the interviewees thought their improvement in translating is the smallest among the four areas, and two (Zhou and Zhang) thought their improvement in translating is the largest. Zhou said, "At the beginning, I didn't know how to do the translating tasks. Looking at the Chinese text, my mind went blank. I went to a lecture about translating. The lecturer gave us many tasks in the past test papers. She taught us translation strategies, such as how to translate the numbers

and difficult Chinese terms, etc. I myself accumulated some translating skills and experience, and translated many sentences from the past tests. Then I felt much better. At least I can put them all into English.” Zhang thought she benefited a lot from the classroom activities that involved translating exercises. “I felt I improved a lot in translating. I thought it beneficial to follow the instructor and I did not do much exercise after class. My translation is more accurate than before. In the past, I would just skip the Chinese characters that I don’t know how to translate. Now I will reflect on them and manage to work out.”

Discussion

This small-scale study examined the perceived effects of test preparation for CET4 on development of language skills and test performance as an attempt to expand and add to the limited amount of empirical evidence in this area. Xu (2012) once proposed what resonates with the present researcher’s belief that to examine high-stakes tests more closely, the voices of test takers should be heard because they provide evidence on what actually occurs along their test preparation. The findings provide the following answers to the two research questions formulated earlier in the paper.

Research question 1: How do students perceive the effects of test preparation on the skills of reading, writing, listening, and translating measured in the CET4 test?

According to the results of the questionnaire survey with the four attributes specified as understanding and development of the language skills, test-taking strategies and confidence, overall the participants thought that the test preparation program helped improve their language skills measured in the CET4 test. Table 1 shows that participants considered their understanding of the skills improved the most, while confidence the least. This seems to portray a natural development path that students first had to know what is tested in the CET4 and then know how to complete the tasks that involve the tested language abilities. Gradually, they would develop the skills required by the test. However, not all the students would fully develop the required language skills, thus the mean of the students’ confidence would naturally reach a moderate level.

The descriptive statistics shown in Table 8 suggests that participants’ perceived improvement in reading was much larger than in translating, whose progress was in turn greater than listening and writing. This finding is corroborated by results of the interviews (Table 11). The reasons for the better development in reading might be as follows. First, reading constitutes a large proportion of the activities in middle and high school as well as the college English classrooms. According to personal communication with English teachers from Chinese middle schools, the curriculum of secondary education does not have much room for writing and listening. Most of the time of the English classes is devoted to reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Thus, students might have developed better competence of reading than they might have of other modalities through over 10 years of training of this kind. This is particularly true for students who are from provinces where the listening section is removed from the college entrance examination.

Second, students (e.g., interviewee Yang, and Wang) seemed to spend much more time practicing reading than they did with other components (writing, listening, and translating) to prepare for the test. Reason for the focus on reading may be that it is more operational. Unlike writing and translating, the quality of which may be better determined by expert judges, students can check the reading performance just by looking at the keys accompanying the practicing material.

Students’ uncertainty about their progress in listening and writing is revealed in the descriptive statistics (Table 8). They expressed a feeling of helplessness with these abilities in the interviews.

The complexity and difficulty involved in writing may be reflected in Saville-Troike's statement: "Writing is probably the most dependent of the four language activities on linguistic knowledge" (2008, p. 164).

With regard to listening, overall participants thought listening tasks in general were difficult (evidence from interviews), and they considered their listening made little improvement (evidence from Table 8 and the interviews). They found the listening tasks in the CET4 test were difficult (among the 6 interviewees 4 thought the CET4 Listening was more difficult than the tasks they did before the CET4, and their test performance was unsatisfactory), and their actual CET4 Listening scores were not high (Table 3). When talking about listening, participants' feelings were most likely to be "too difficult" (interviewee Zhou and Zhang), even "terrible" (interviewee Wang). Participant Yu told the researcher: "Listening is difficult for me. It is always my greatest difficulty!" Buck (2001) has it right in this regard: "Listening is a complex process in which the listener takes the incoming data, an acoustic signal, and interprets it based on a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge" (p.247). For some students, this difficulty grew from the past experience. As have mentioned above, in some provinces in China, the education authority, for some reasons, has eliminated the listening tasks from the college entrance examination, which is arguably the most important examination in the country. Thus after being admitted into college, students from these provinces, compared to their peers, are at a distinct disadvantage and meet with great difficulties while completing listening tasks in both classroom activities and examinations.

In contrast to the predominant feeling of difficulty with listening, participants (Yu and Wang) who did not have listening tasks in the college entrance examinations expressed they made much progress. Similarly, translating is another area that some students (Zhou and Zhang) did not put in much practice but achieved impressive progress. The findings largely corroborate the general understanding that learners make more progress in areas that are relatively new to them or they are not good at after learning and practicing for a certain period of time.

Research question 2: What is the relationship between the perceived effects of preparation and the actual CET4 performance with regard to the measured skills?

Relationship in terms of attributes

Regression analysis suggests that students' perceived improvement in the four attributes, except for ability understanding, constitute significant predictors of their anticipated and actual CET4 test performance, confidence being the strongest, followed by skill improvement and test-taking strategies (Table 6 and 7). This is in keeping with Bachman & Palmer's description of language knowledge and strategic competence being two major components of language ability, and with Yang and Plakans' (2012) argument that test-wiseness strategy is an important factor of the strategy use in a multifaceted construct of test tasks. Xie (2013) also made similar findings with regard to the perceived effects of strategy use in improving test scores. The information represented in Table 1 and Tables 6 and 7 seems to be reversed. However, this is not unreasonable upon careful thinking. The relationship between skill understanding and test performance may not be as close as that between confidence (and skill improvement) and test performance. It may be fair to say that understanding of a certain skill precedes improvement of that skill and development of related cognitive strategies. The latter two help nurture confidence about test performance where those skills are required. Thus confidence seems to act as a mediator between skill understanding and test performance. In other words, skill understanding affects confidence, which then affects test performance.

Relationship in terms of language skills

Previous studies have found that test preparation produced a positive effect on test performance that involved different language skills, such as speaking (Farnsworth, 2013) and writing (Xu, 2021). Such effects are also borne out in the present research, which investigated the effect of test preparation for CET4 through a series of regression analysis. When using students' anticipated test performance in a language skill as dependent variable and their perceived improvement in that skill as the independent variable, it was found the latter constituted a significant predictor in the four regression models (Table 9). Perceived improvement in reading explained the largest amount of variance (20.8%) in the anticipated reading performance, followed by translating (16.3%), writing (12.7%), and listening (8.8%). The findings seem to show that participants were more confident about their anticipated reading performance in the coming test based on their perception about their development in reading than they were about their performance in listening and writing. The amount of variance that is accounted for follows a similar pattern as the perceived progress in language abilities that participants described in the previous section.

In the regression models (Table 10) where students' actual performance of a certain ability was used as dependent variable, and their perceived improvement and anticipated test performance of that ability as independent variables, the predictive power of the former IV (listening being the only significant predictor) was outperformed by the latter IV (all being significant predictors). The findings suggest that students' perceived improvement in language abilities could explain a small proportion of the variance of the actual performance of the corresponding language abilities in the models. This seems to reflect a common phenomenon in language test preparation programs. According to the general consensus from research on test preparation, there is a small effect of coaching on test scores (e.g., Gan, 2009; Liu, 2014; Xie, 2013). Given that perceived improvements all positively affect the anticipated test performances across the language abilities (Table 9), they presumably exerted an indirect effect on actual test performance. Thus the findings seem to show that students' perceived improvement in their language abilities affected their anticipated performance of those abilities, which in turn affected their actual test performance. To some extent, this is a realistic portrait of the actual path of the effects of preparation on test performance.

Another feature of the results is that anticipated listening performance in CET4 explained the largest proportion of the variance in actual CET4 listening performance (10.7%), while anticipated reading explained the smallest proportion (4.5%). A possible explanation is that there were divergences between the perceived and actual improvement in participants' reading and listening. In some cases the improvements were overestimated, and others underestimated. As for listening, it may pose a long-term challenge to test-takers, which led to modest prediction of future test performance ($m=2.87$). Whereas the perceived greater progress in reading contributed to a higher expectation ($m=3.46$). While students' anticipated much better performance in CET4 reading than listening ($t(78)=4.334, p < .001$), they had similar mean scores for the two components in CET4 (Table 3). As the full scores for CET4 listening and reading are the same (248.5), this might explain why the anticipated listening score was a better predictor of actual listening performance than anticipated reading of actual reading performance (Table 10).

Uncertainty is also involved in predicting test performance. Just as interviewee Wang said:

“I really felt this CET4 test is easy, really. But that is a problem. In the past, whenever I thought a test was easy after I took it, my test results were bad. The easier I think a test is, the poorer my performance would be! Do I have an illusion of it being easier?”

Interestingly, such an impression was confirmed in Wang's CET4 score, which was the lowest (Table 11) among the six interviewees. Interviewee Jin had a similar feeling. Therefore students might have different levels of uncertainty thus end up making inaccurate predictions about future test performance sometimes.

Conclusion

This study examines how a group of Chinese students perceived the effects of CET4 preparation on the development of their language skills and the relationship between those effects and their CET4 performance. It was found through the questionnaire survey and individual interview that overall students thought that they made some improvement in terms of the four attributes related to the language skills, that they made more progress in reading and translating, but less in listening and writing. Regression analyses mainly established that students' perceived improvement in the four attributes related to the various language skills were significant predictors of their anticipated as well as actual test performance. Similarly, students' perceived improvement in the individual language ability was also found to significantly predict their anticipated test performance in that ability, which in turn significantly predicted the actual performance of that language ability as measured in the CET4 test. However, the power of the perceived improvement in predicting participants' actual performance of the language abilities in the test was less strong.

Any interpretation of these findings is clearly restricted by the small sample size of the research. It is possible, however, to make some general comments and to suggest implications for test candidates, test preparation programs, and EFL instructors. The findings that improvement of the attributes defined in relation to language skills, test-taking strategies and confidence significantly predicted the students' anticipated as well as actual test scores, confidence being the best predictor, have implications for test preparation programs, those operating in colleges and universities in China in particular, which is the context of the present research.

In order to help students achieve desirable performance, instructors should update their knowledge of the constructs of the language tasks and of the effective strategies for completing those tasks, both of which are significant predictors of test performance. They should effectively communicate the knowledge to the students. The findings that students perceived their listening and writing as making limited improvement were revealing and worrying. Students, maybe even instructors, pay unbalanced attention to the different language skills, resulting in unbalanced development of them. Students should be encouraged to do more exercise on listening and writing. Based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the research results, the more practice on a skill, the more confident students would develop in that skill, which is a significant predictor of test performance, thus contributing to achieving optimal test outcomes.

In the test preparation process, students may be encouraged to assess their learning regularly to make better predictions about their future test performance. Teachers should draw on the results of students' self-assessment to think of ways for effectively helping students overcome the obstacles and solve problems in learning or test preparation. If there is not a good perspective, timely changes should be made to the instruction and study plan so as to improve chances of success. Employing self-assessment to assess students' perceived ability is also potentially helpful for fostering positive attitudes toward learning (Paris & Paris, 2001).

Psychological intervention should be carried out to help manage the negative feeling of, among other things, bottle-neck effect, test anxiety, and helplessness along language learning that were revealed in the present study. Test preparation programs and instructors should attend to these psychological

factors in preparing students for tests, especially when students experience negative affect (Cheng *et al.*, 2014), and help improve their confidence, which is a powerful predictor of students' future test performance. Once their confidence improves, so will their chances of success. Such an association resonates with Dörnyei's (2001) emphasis on the significance of fostering a positive self-image and the challenges of engaging students in tasks in which they may feel inadequate in comparison with their peers. In language learning and assessment, where confidence is one of the essential psychological attributes for success, how to bolster learners' confidence appears to be an issue that needs to be tackled with serious consideration, an issue that, as Issitt (2008) puts it, has "confronted the majority of people" involved in getting students ready for high-stake tests.

Students should also understand the power of the improvement of individual attributes as indicators of their future test performance. Their potential of predicting the score of a coming test should not be underestimated, which as the present study shows, may explain a considerable amount of variance in their test performance. As language learners, students should make efforts to exercise effective control over their learning. They should be aware of and improve the uncertainty in the development of their language abilities. In so doing, they may draw on the relevant information revealed in the interviews in the present study about the causes of inefficient learning about a particular language skill as a reminder to avoid meeting the same obstacles and difficulties and to improve their learning outcomes. They should reflect regularly on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as on how to improve learning efficiency and self-discipline. To conclude, a final message that would be useful to students is as follows: Know where your limits are and try to transcend them. After all, no one knows you better than yourself.

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Appendix A

Perception of CET4 Questionnaire (English version)

Dear students, thank you very much for participating in our study on test preparation. We want to know your opinions on the outcome of the preparation program. Please think about your own study and decide whether the following statements apply to your own situation. There are no Right or Wrong answers; you need only to choose ONE option that is the closest to your situation. Your information will be used ONLY for research purposes, and will NOT have any negative influence on you.

Student No.:

Gender: Male Female

For the following questions, please use the number 1 to 6 to indicate your situation: 1= does not apply to me at all, 2= does not apply to me, 3= somewhat apply to me, 4= apply to me, 5= very much apply to me, 6= apply to me entirely. Choose the number that is the closest to your situation.

Part one

Section one

Compared with the beginning of the program,

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 My CET4 writing skill has improved at the end of the program						
2 My CET4 listening skill has improved at the end of the program						

3 My CET4 reading skill has improved at the end of the program						
4 My CET4 translating skill has improved at the end of the program						

Section two

Compared with the beginning of the program,

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 My understanding of the skill required for CET4 writing has improved at the end of the program						
2 My understanding of the skill required for CET4 listening has improved at the end of the program						
3 My understanding of the skill required for CET4 reading has improved at the end of the program						
4 My understanding of the skill required for CET4 translating has improved at the end of the program						

Section three

Compared with the beginning of the program,

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 I developed better strategies for coping with CET4 writing tasks						
2 I developed better strategies for coping with CET4 listening tasks						
3 I developed better strategies for coping with CET4 reading tasks						
4 I developed better strategies for coping with CET4 translating tasks						

Section four

Compared with the beginning of the program,

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 I have greater confidence in my CET4 performance						
2 I have greater confidence in my CET4 writing						

3 I have greater confidence in my CET4 listening						
4 I have greater confidence in my CET4 reading						
5 I have greater confidence in my CET4 translating						

Part two

Please indicate how you would anticipate your performance outcome in the upcoming CET test administration? 1= likely to fail, 2=may pass, 3= will pass, 4=better than pass, 5=much better than pass score, 6=excellent.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Total score						
2 Writing						
3 Listening						
4 Reading						
5 Translating						

Appendix B

Interview

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. Please let me know what you think about the CET4 test preparation program and the CET4 test you have just taken. The conversation between us will be kept private and confidential. What you tell me will be used for this research project only.

- 1 Why do you take the CET4 test?
- 2 Did you actively participate in CET4 test preparation? What encourages your active participation?
- 3 When the preparation program finished, did your CET4 writing improve? Please elaborate.
- 4 When the preparation program finished, did your CET4 listening improve? Please elaborate.
- 5 When the preparation program finished, did your CET4 reading improve? Please elaborate.
- 6 When the preparation program finished, did your CET4 translating improve? Please elaborate.
- 7 Among your four CET4 language abilities of writing, listening, reading, and translating, which one improved the most? Which one improved least?
- 8 When the preparation program finished, did your interest in English learning increase or flag?
- 9 When the preparation program finished, did your motivation for English learning increase or flag?
- 10 Do you think this CET4 is difficult? If yes, in what respects is it difficult?
- 11 Do you think your performance in this CET4 writing/listening/reading/translating is good? If not, why?

Closing remark: Thank you very much for sharing your views with me. We can talk again if you have anything to add or explain! Thank you!