

University of Groningen

The Dynamics of English Writing Development in Advanced Chinese Learners

Hou, Junping

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hou, J. (2017). *The Dynamics of English Writing Development in Advanced Chinese Learners*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Chapter 2

Exploring attitude and test-driven motivation towards English at Chinese universities

This chapter is a slightly edited version of Hou, J., Loerts, H., & Verspoor, M. H. (2018). Exploring attitude and test-driven motivation towards English at Chinese universities. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 12(1), pp. 37-60.

2.1 Introduction

Chinese students have been heard to complain that studying English at university is a waste of time. They have to take English courses to pass College English Tests (CET4/6), which will help them obtain better jobs, but they do not seem to feel that they learn much. As these complaints are only anecdotal, the goal of this study is to explore whether Chinese students really feel that they do not improve in English and are only motivated to study English because of the tests they have to take.

English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching is a nationwide endeavor in China, pursued at all academic levels, from kindergarten to university. In order to make sure that the students are motivated to learn English and to assess the effectiveness of the teaching environment, different tests are administered at different levels of study. Due to the large population, which plays a role in creating a highly competitive environment in education and employment in China, some tests are no longer seen as assessment methods, but are viewed as a means to an end. At the end of high school, students must take the College Entrance Examination (CEE), which includes the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), an English test that helps determine admission to different universities. At university, all students must take and pass College English Tests Band 4 (CET-4); those more advanced aim to pass Band 6 (CET-6). By means of a survey, the current paper explores to what extent university students in China studying EFL perceive their improvement and are motivated by the tests they have to pass. The study involved 418 ($n = 418$) advanced L2 learners of English at a prestigious university in Xián who responded to a questionnaire. The questionnaire asks about whether they feel they have improved in English, what motivates them to study English, how often they have taken each test, how much time they actually spend on English, and what they find helpful in improving their English (see Appendix 1 for the entire questionnaire). In regression analyses we explore the main predictors of perceived improvement and test-driven motivation.

2.2 CET-4 and CET-6

CET is a national examination administered by the Ministry of Education and was established in 1987 for non-English major college and university

students. It is ‘a test battery’ (Cheng, 2008) and meets the College English Curriculum Requirements (Chen, 2004), which were to improve the quality of English teaching and to evaluate objectively and accurately the English proficiency of non-English majors in institutions of higher learning in China (National College English Testing Committee (NCETC), 2006: 3). The CET-4 is designed for second-year students who have finished the College English Band 1 to Band 4 syllabi and aims to test at the B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council, 2001). The CET-6 is for students who have passed CET-4 and aims to test at a C1 level in the CEFR. A student may sit for CET-6 only if s/he has passed CET-4. Over the years, the CET has gone through changes and in 2013 a new scoring system was adopted with a maximum score of 710; students who score 425 or higher are awarded a certificate issued by the National CET Commission on behalf of the Department of Higher Education of the National Ministry of Education (NCETC, 2006). Even if students have passed the tests, they may take it again to obtain a higher score. The higher the scores the better chances are in the labor market (Chen & Klenowski, 2009) and in access to a residential certification in big cities (Gu, 2005; Wang, 2007).

Table 2-1 gives some further information on the tests. Because all Chinese university students have to take and pass the CET-4, the CET-4 has the highest numbers of test takers per year in the world. In 1987, the number was about 100.000, which increased to about 13 million in 2006 (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). In 2012, the number decreased drastically to 9.38 million because the government decreed that students could sit for the test only after 2 years of English instruction at university. In recent years, the number of testers has remained stable.

Table 2-1. General information on NMET & CET

Types	Participants	Times	Max Score	Testers (2012)	CEFR Level
NMET	High school	2 hours; June	150	9.15 million	B1
CET4	University	140 minutes; June, Dec.	710	9.38 million	B2
CET6	University	140 minutes; June, Dec.	710	No record	C1

Chapter 2 | 20

Table 2-2 gives an overview of how the CETs are structured. As can be inferred, the test is communicatively oriented as it addresses mainly holistic skills such as reading, writing, listening, and translation, rather than explicit grammar or vocabulary. It does focus more on receptive skills than on productive skills: the test includes only a productive writing task that counts for 15% of the total test score.

Table 2-2. Structure of the CET

Content		Item type	Number of items	Points	Percentage %
Part I	Writing	Outlined writing	1	106.5	15
Part II	Fast reading	MC	10	71	10
Part III	Listening	MC/Blank filling	36	248.5	35
Part IV	Reading in depth	T or F, MC	20	177.7	25
Part V	Cloze	MC	20	71	10
Part VI	Translation	C-E	5	35.5	5
Total			91+1	710	100

The CET is grounded in psychometrics to secure an ‘objective, scientific and fair’ measure of whether the undergraduates meet the requirements prescribed in the syllabus (Yang & Weir, 2001) or to motivate English teaching and learning in higher education sectors (Chen & Klenowski, 2009). A fair number of empirical studies on CET have been conducted on the development of the test itself, but some others are about test validity, test washback effects, and test-takers characteristics (Cheng, 2008: 21). There are both positive and negative views on the CET.

Some positive views on the CET concern the fact that it is a standardized test planned, designed, performed, assessed and reformed by a group of experts and scholars in the field of English teaching, language research and assessment in China. CET administrators claim that the test has high reliability and validity (Cheng, 2008; Yang & Weir, 2001; Zheng & Cheng, 2008) and it is the most mature, most valid and most widely recognized English test in China promoting the implementation of the College English Teaching Syllabus. According to Yang and Jin (2001), CET is a communicative test and has had a positive backwash effect on college English communicative teaching in China. Zheng and Cheng (2008) claim that the ‘multi-trait assessment procedures focus on identifying the levels of

the students' overall language proficiency, which contributes greatly to the route of development in English language teaching and learning for Chinese society' (p.416). Yang (2003) reports a discriminant validity index of 0.82 meaning that the CET scores were a strong discriminator of test-takers' English abilities, thus serving the function of its norm referencing well (Zheng & Cheng, 2008: 413). In Jin and Wu's (1998) introspective verbal protocol study, the skills students reported on completing the CET reading are in line with the skills expected by the test designers. Jin and Yang (2006) reported that the CET reading passages are far more difficult than those in Reader's Digest: the readability index of the CET-4 is 57.7 and CET-6 is 49.1, while those in the Reader's Digest is scaled 60-70, according to the Flesh reference scale. The lower the readability score is, the more difficult a text is to comprehend. Gu (2005), who studied the relationship between the CET and college English teaching and learning, found that most of the stakeholders think highly of the test, especially in terms of its design, administration, marking and the new measures adopted in recent years. Li (2002) points out that CET promotes the role of English teaching and learning at the tertiary level; Han and Yang (2001: 5) argue that the CET has strengthened the utilitarian values of education, stressing the key role that examination plays in education, but emphasize the fact that there are only one-off results and that the tests neglect formative assessment.

However, not everyone is equally impressed with the CET. Adamson and Xia (2011) report that although Chinese students' English level has improved during the past few years, their English writing ability has not improved much yet. Researchers like Han, Dai and Yang (2004) and Gu and Liu (2005) pointed out that the test did not assess communicative competence as much as the teaching syllabus requires and some even advocated abandoning college English and the CET (Cai, 2005). They argued that students spend most of their time memorizing vocabulary and doing mock tests rather than developing their communicative competence. Developing test taking skills is common practice (Gu, 2005; Jia & Yang, 2005; Wang, 2007). Han et al. (2004) conducted a survey among 1194 English teachers from 40 universities on their attitudes towards CET and found that over 70% of the teachers do not believe that the test improves overall English teaching at the tertiary level, and 78% of them don't think

that the CET scores correlate with the students' actual language ability. Shu (2006) considers the CET a 'nightmare' for low-achievers and claims it has affected their psychological well-being. Zhang (2005) maintains that the CET has impacted not only College English education negatively, but that it also goes at the expense of subject courses that should be more important to university graduates, for 75% of the students spend an average of three hours per day on English, 80% of the students think English takes relatively the most time with relatively the least effect, and 95% of the students consider College English as the most examination-oriented subject of all their courses. Based on these negative views, College English Assessment was in need of change (Han et al., 2004) and in 2006 substantial changes like the emphasized structures, the score scales were indeed made to the CET. However, the grip of certificate addiction is strong and there is still 'a long way to go (Bao, 2006).

The role of CET scores in modern Chinese society may have become exaggerated to some extent, but the scores on CET-4 and CET-6 are still the most important instruments for employers to gauge the students' ability and qualification. Therefore, for university students, a good performance on these tests is not only key to academic success but also their career (Cheng, 2008). The CET results are also important for university institutions and regarded as 'the main indicator of the quality of English teaching' (Zhu, 2003); the passing ratios on the CET are often regarded as 'one of the criteria to judge the prestige of a university' (Cheng, 2008). Universities want high passing ratios and that is why some universities offer short courses of 1.5 years rather than the standard 2-years, offering more opportunities to sit for the CET exams. English teachers spend a lot of time studying the Learning Teaching Plan to find effective teaching methods to help the students improve their test scores. Both teachers and students tend to concentrate on practicing for the tests and believe that this is the most useful and helpful way for students to do well. Since the tests are held in such high esteem, Chinese university students find themselves under great pressure to perform well.

However, Chinese students lose their English very fast once the instruction stops. Xu (2010), who investigated the main contributors of attrition of English as a foreign language, found that initial language

proficiency, language use, self-assessment on language proficiency, and attitude to language were the main factors.

Because the CETs are so important for both university and employment careers, they may be the most important motivator to study English. Zhao and Cheng (2010) explored the relationship between 212 Chinese third year university students' attitudes towards the CET-4 by means of a 39-item questionnaire and their CET-4 test scores. They found that students were motivated to do well on the CET, but were not sure of their ability to perform well on the test. The relative contribution of four factors was explored: test-taking anxiety or lack of concentration, test-driven motivation, belief in the CET-4, and test performance on the CET-4. For female students, test-driven motivation and test-taking anxiety or lack of concentration were the best predictors of test performance. For male students, belief in CET-4 was the best predictor of test performance. The overall results show that student's attitudes were a significant predictor of their performance. This study gives a clear indication that CET-4 is an important test in the eyes of Chinese students, and that for female students, the motivation to study English is mainly test driven. The current study will address some similar issues, but will also relate the findings to perceived improvement in English proficiency, as we want to explore whether the anecdotal complaints that they do not improve much during their college classes is justified. The study therefore explores how the students feel about their improvement in English and how this perceived improvement relates to attitude, test driven motivation and various other factors such as social pressure, and out-of-class exposure. The main research questions are what factors contribute most to perceived improvement in English, and what factors contribute most to test-driven motivation in English.

2.3 Methodology

A questionnaire was designed by the authors with questions pertaining to perceived improvement in English proficiency, how much time is spent on studying for the CETs, how often students sit for CET-4 and CET-6, what resources are used to improve English proficiency, and how students feel about the English language and tests. The questionnaire was piloted and adjusted before it was administered.

2.3.1 Participants

434 participants from the College of Science of a prestigious science and technology university in Xián, China, took part in this investigation. 418 (details see Table 2-3) completed the questionnaire completely and adequately enough to be included in the current study. The university offers shortened courses of 18 months to allow advanced students to take part in CET-4 after their first year of English learning.

Table 2-3. Participant details

	Chemistry		Mathematics		Physics		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Year 2	38	19	46	13	40	11	167
Year 3	44	13	39	6	57	9	168
Year 4	25	9	0	0	42	7	83
Total	107	41	85	19	139	27	418

Overall		
	Male	Female
Year 2	124	43
Year 3	140	28
Year 4	67	16
Total	331	87

Participants from Year 2 are those who have finished their 3rd semester, Year 3 their 5th semester and Year 4 their 7th semester. All had been exposed to English learning for 18 months' at this university, with the same text books but different teachers. Although teachers are to follow the specific teaching principles and approaches suggested by the University Professional Guiding Group, they have the right to adapt their teaching strategies.

2.3.2 Material and Data collection procedure

To collect the data, *WeChat*, a very popular internet communicating platform in China similar to *Facebook* was used. Every class has its own WeChat group forum, which is convenient for students, teachers and counselors to communicate with each other. Each WeChat group has a leader, who has the right to add or remove members from the group and make group announcements. The dean of the college, a friend of the first author, helped make the arrangements. The WeChat group leaders posted the electronic questionnaire in Chinese on their announcement pages and asked students to

download it, finish filling it in and then return it by uploading it on the Chat page. All filled-in questionnaires were sent back to the first author by email. It took nearly one month to administer and collect the questionnaires.

The questionnaire (see the Appendix 1) addressed the following 8 elements:

1. Personal information
2. Information on CEE scores and CET (whether passed or not) and the number of times the tests were taken
3. Perceived improvement on English proficiency in general and specific skills
4. Attitude towards the English language in general
5. Time and effort spent in English in general and on specific skills
6. The scores students receive in their English academic tests
7. Motivation for studying English
8. Useful contributors to improving English proficiency

The first author translated and entered all responses to the individual items in Excel, assigning numbers to Likert Scale responses. Negative questions (items 32, 33 & 47) were made positive.

2.3.3 Analyses

Responses to relevant items were subjected to a factor analysis. To gauge the strongest predictor for perceived improvement and test-driven motivation, multiple linear regression analyses with these factors were carried out with SPSS 23.

2.4 Results

The responses to the various questions are shown in the tables below. Tables 2-4 to 2-15 show descriptive results. Where relevant (Tables 2-7 to 2-15), the responses are grouped according to the nine factors that emerged from the factor analysis. SPSS originally calculated 14 factor loadings above 0.4, which were all significant, but some adjustments were made, especially in the case of our dependent variables ‘perceived improvement’ and ‘test-driven motivation’. For example, the items ‘I like the English language very much’ and ‘I’m still learning English because of interest’ were initially factored with ‘perceived improvement’, but a new factor ‘positive attitude’

Chapter 2 | 26

was created for them. In Tables 2-7 to 2-15, the percentages of all item-choices are given separately, but they are also averaged to give a general impression of the factor.

For the regression analyses, the factors ‘perceived improvement’ and ‘test-driven motivation’ were entered as the dependent variables in two separate analyses; all others were considered as independent variables. During the modeling process, the relationships between the factors and the dependent variables were tested. Factors contributing nothing or little to the dependent variables were removed from the model one by one. Standardized residuals of both dependent variables were checked for normality and homoscedasticity with normal P-P Plots and scatterplots. The regression models were built back and forth until the final best fitting models were found (see Tables 2-16 and 2-17).

2.4.1 Questionnaire responses

The score for the NMET, obtained before the students enter university, can be considered to represent the level of proficiency before students take the CET-4 and CET-6. In order to examine whether there were any significant differences between participants’ English NMET test score based on their gender, year and/or major, we ran Kruskal-Wallis H tests and subsequent Mann-Whitney U tests for post-doc comparisons between sub-groups. The results can be found in Table 2-4.

Table 2-4. Differences in NMET score between different groups (Mann-Whitney U tests post-hoc comparisons)

	NMET Scores	Mean Ranks	Z	Sig.
Gender	Male-Female	196.95-257.23	-4.146	.000**
Year	Year2-Year3	180.26-155.82	-2.313	.021*
	Year2-Year4	138.46-99.43	-4.023	.000**
	Year3-Year4	133.60-110.61	-2.363	.018*
Major	Chemistry-Mathematics	129.28-122.40	-.750	.454
	Chemistry-Physics	170.64-145.79	-2.424	.015*
	Mathematics-Physics	144.11-130.11	-1.435	.151

** Difference is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2-4 shows that females scored significantly higher on the NMET than

males ($\chi^2(1) = 17.189, p < .001$).

Year significantly impacted NMET score ($\chi^2(2) = 17.331, p < .001$) with a mean rank score of 234.72 for Year 2, 204.92 for Year 3 and 168.04 for Year 4. Post-hoc comparisons confirmed that students in Year 2 scored significantly higher than students in year 3 and 4, and students in Year 3 showed significantly higher mean ranks than students in Year 4.

When looking at the different majors of the participants, a significant difference in NMET was also observed ($\chi^2(2) = 6.089, p < 0.05$) with a mean rank score of 225.52 for chemistry, 214.00 for mathematics and 192.39 for physics. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that Chemistry majors scored significantly higher mean ranks as compared to physics majors in NMET (details see Table 2-4). The differences between Chemistry and Math majors and between Math and Physics majors were not significant.

Table 2-5 shows how often students have taken the CETs. Note that students may take the CETs repeatedly until they pass or obtain a higher score. However, they may take the CET-4 only in the second year and the CET-6 only after they have passed the CET-4. The picture that emerges from this table is that most students will take the CET-4 only once in their university career. The numbers for CET-6 are quite different. Most students seem to attempt CET-6 at the end of their second year (after they have passed CET-4). But judging from the numbers in year 3, only 50% of the students had taken it once, 50% twice and 22% thrice.

Table 2-5. Times and percentages of the students having taken CETs

Times taken	CET-4				CET-6				
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Year 4	89	11	1	2	55	45	38	7	4
Year 3	96	4	8	3	50	50	22		
Year 2	89	11			97	3			

Figure 2-1 shows in which years the students passed the tests. In line with what could be deduced from Table 2-5, most students (90%) passed CET-4 in their second year, but the CET-6 is a different story. Only 34% has passed it in the second year, 53% in the third year, and 69% in the fourth year.

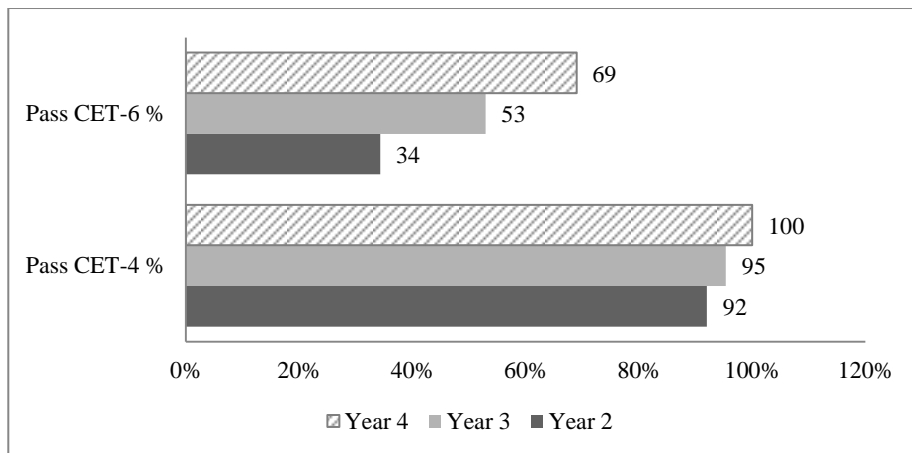


Figure 2-1. CET pass ratios for the different years

Table 2-6 shows how students feel about the various skills during their EFL training. Many students find listening the most difficult skill and reading not only the most time-consuming but also the most improved skill.

Table 2-6. Student perceptions on the most difficult, most time-consuming and most improved EFL skills (in percentages)

	listening	speaking	reading	writing	translating
difficult	65	6	9	13	7
time consuming	24	6	56	9	4
improved	20	3	47	13	17

Table 2-7 shows the percentages of the students in different score ranges obtained in their English classes.

Table 2-7. Test scores in English classes (in percentages)

Scales	1 = <45	2 = 45-60	3 = 60-70	4 = 70-80	5 = 80-90	6 =>90
32* The highest score	0	1	18	41	36	4
33* The lowest score	3	21	44	25	6	2
The score range mean	1.5	11	31	33	21	3

* These two are negative questions and have been changed into positive in the calculation.

Table 2-8 shows the distribution of answers for the items related to the factor perceived improvement. It shows that students are about equally divided in terms of whether they perceive improvement in their English skills in general and in specific skills. About 53% of the students don't think their English has improved; 47% do think so.

Table 2-8. Skills and areas with highest perceived improvement (in percentages)

		1=Completely disagree	2=disagree	3=Agree	4=Totally agree
40	English level	18	41	31	10
41	vocabulary	12	30	45	13
42	grammar	25	49	21	5
43	listening	12	36	41	10
44	speaking	12	35	42	11
45	reading	14	31	44	11
46	writing	13	38	37	12
47*	<i>English level</i>	25	34	26	14
	Average	16	37	36	11

* Item 47 is a negative question and has been changed into positive in the calculation.

Table 2-9 shows the attitude to the English language. More than half of the students, almost 60%, are negative towards English, but about 40% have a positive attitude.

Table 2-9. Attitude (in percentages)

		1	2	3	4
13	I like the English language very much	28	33	26	13
57	I'm still learning English just because of interest	18	40	34	8
	Average	23	36.5	30	10.5

(1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Much; 4 = Very much)

Table 2-10 gives an indication of the degree that the students are motivated to study English purely to pass the test or obtain a good job. More than 60% study English to pass the tests or obtain a good job. Less than 40% are not necessarily motivated to study for the tests.

Chapter 2 | 30

Table 2-10. Test-driven motivation (in percentages)

		1	2	3	4
14	I studied English because I needed to pass the CET test.	16	23	33	28
51	Passing the test is the main motivation for my learning of English	21	40	27	11
53	I'm still learning English to pass CET-6	28	18	35	19
54	I'm still learning English to pass the Graduates Entrance Examination	18	14	48	20
20	I'm preparing to take the Graduate Entrance Examination	17	17	38	28
19	I studied English because it is important for my future work.	10	20	43	27
55	I'm still learning English to benefit my employment in the future	8	14	55	24
Average		17	21	40	22

(1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Much; 4 = Very much)

Table 2-11 shows how the students feel about the amount of time and effort they spend on English. About 65% agree with the statements that studying English takes both a lot of time and effort.

Table 2-11. Effort (in percentages)

		1	2	3	4
37	Learning English takes a lot of time.	10	41	34	16
38	Learning English takes a lot of effort	8	12	38	43
Average		9	26	36	29

(1 = Completely disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Totally agree)

Table 2-12 shows to what extent the students feel social pressure to study English. Most students (about 70%) do not feel social pressure plays a role, but about 29% does.

Table 2-12. Social pressure (in percentages)

	<i>I studied English because</i>	1	2	3	4
17	my parents believe it is important	43	29	22	6
18	because my friends believe it is important	36	34	24	5
Average		39.5	31.5	23	5.5

(1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Much; 4 = Very much)

Table 2-13 shows how students feel about their instruction; about 57% think

they benefit from both classroom instruction and their textbook.

Table 2-13. Instruction (in percentages)

<i>To learn English in college</i>		1	2	3	4
21	My teacher helps me	14	24	42	20
22	My textbook helps	16	33	38	13
Average		15	28.5	40	16.5

(1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Much; 4 = Very much)

Table 2-14 shows how students feel about the use of outside sources in contributing to their English learning. It is interesting to note that internet is not used too much (or at least students do not feel they learn English from them), but 45% apparently feel that watching English movies helps them improve. Still more than half of the students (62%) do not see outside sources as helpful.

Table 2-14. Exposure (in percentages)

<i>To learn English in college</i>		1	2	3	4
23	Using the internet helps me	28	41	26	6
24	Watching English movies helps me	17	39	30	15
26	Using dictionaries helps me	12	24	42	21
Average		22	40	28	10

(1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Much; 4 = Very much)

Table 2-15 shows the percentages the students reading materials involved in English; only about 30% indicate that more than 50% of the materials they read is in English.

Table 2-15. Reading (students indicating the percentages of their reading in English-item #35)

	1 =	2 =	3 =	4 =	5 =	6 =
	< 10%	10 -30 %	30 -50 %	50-70 %	70-90 %	>90 %
frequency	23	25	22	16	11	3

2.4.2 Regression analysis

Perceived improvement and its main predictors are found in Table 2-16. The final best fitting multiple linear regression model with perceived improvement as the dependent variable predicted 28.2% of the variance ($F = (7, 410) = 23.029$; $p < .001$). The coefficients for the explanatory variables are tabulated in Table 2-16.

Table 2-16. The coefficients for the explanatory variables of perceived improvement

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Constant	12.012	2.785	4.313	.000
Positive attitude towards English	1.258	.151	8.311	.000
Time and effort	.659	.150	4.394	.000
Previous test scores	.515	.149	3.464	.001
Exposure	.373	.129	2.894	.004
NMET scores	-.059	.021	-2.891	.004
Female	-1.198	.600	-1.996	.047
Physics	-1.584	.480	-3.298	.001

Table 2-16 shows that positive attitude, time and effort, previous test scores and out-of-class exposure positively affect the dependent variable perceived improvement, as evident from the positive coefficients *B*. On the contrary, the perceived improvement score was more negative for students with a higher NMET score, female participants and students with a physics major. Generally, a positive coefficient *B* means that if the score of that particular predictor increases, the level of the dependent variable also increases. A negative coefficient suggests that if the score of that predictor increases or, in the case of nominal variables with two levels (e.g., gender), if the variable takes the level mentioned in the table, the score of the dependent variable decreases. The strongest positive predictor was positive attitude, indicating that for every unit increases in positive attitude, the model predicts an increase of 1.258 in the perceived improvement score. If the value for positive attitude increases with 10 units, the perceived improvement score will be 24.59 ($12.012 + (10 \times 1.258)$). The strongest negative predictors are belonging to the group of students from Physics major and having female gender.

Test-driven motivation and its strongest predictors are found in Table 2-17. The final best fitting multiple linear regression model with test-driven motivation as the dependent variable predicted 38.7% of the variance ($F = (8, 409) = 32.278; p < .001$). The coefficients for the explanatory variables are tabulated in Table 2-17.

Table 2-17. The coefficients for the explanatory variables of test-driven motivation

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Constant	14.459	1.356	10.664	.000
Social pressure	.929	.104	8.931	.000
Number of times CET-4 was taken	.819	.328	2.493	.013
Number of times CET-6 was taken	.751	.199	3.768	.000
Time and effort	.747	.112	6.696	.000
Formal instruction (appreciation)	.397	.117	3.410	.001
Positive attitude towards English	-.522	.110	-4.737	.000
Previous test scores	-.668	.111	-6.004	.000
Year 4	-2.612	.485	-5.389	.000

Table 2-17 shows that test-driven motivation is positively predicted by social pressure, the number of times the CET-4 and CET-6 were taken, time and effort, and appreciation of formal instruction as evident from the positive coefficients *B*. Negative predictors are positive attitude, previous test scores, and students belonging to year 4. Social pressure was the strongest positive predictor of students' test-driven motivation, indicating that for every unit increases in social pressure, the model predicts an increase of .929 in the test-driven motivation score; If the value for social pressure increases with 10 units, the test-driven motivation score will be 23.75 ($14.459 + (10 * .929)$). Year 4 is the strongest negative predictor of students test-driven motivation.

2.5 Discussion and conclusion

Around 9 million Chinese university students who do not major in English take the CET-4 exam and a smaller population takes the CET-6 exam every year. The current study concerned only 418 students at a highly selective university in Xián, so obviously the results cannot be generalized to China as a whole. If anything, because the students in the current study are probably more advanced in English than their peers at less-selective universities, this

case study is likely to show results that are more positive towards English and the tests than if students elsewhere had been surveyed.

Based on the literature, we assume that both the CET-4 and CET-6 test are well-constructed, reliable and validated tests (Yang & Weir, 2001) that set out to test English communicative abilities at the B2 and C1 levels of the CEFR (Yang & Jin, 2001), but mainly of receptive skills. As Table 2-2 shows, there is no speaking task; there is a writing task that constitutes 15% of the score. In line with Li (2002) who found that CET promotes the role of English teaching and learning at the tertiary level, the first author observed that English classes at this university were taught by highly professional teachers with a high English proficiency; they spoke English in class throughout and on the whole conducted the classes in line with a communicative approach with communicative tasks for the students. The classes observed are estimated to contain only about 10% to 15% explicit grammar teaching and practice. The survey showed that more than 60% of the respondents felt that their teacher and textbooks were very useful in helping them improve their English proficiency.

The respondents indicated that almost all (90%) passed the CET-4 test after one trial and that in Year 3, all had passed the test, meaning that the CET-4 is relatively easy for these students to pass. This means that most students in our study probably already had a rather high level at high school. The CET-6, however, is clearly much more challenging for these students as only 70% passed it by year 4 and many students took the test at least twice. And they will take it again as the university has an approximate of 75% pass rate of CET-6 according to the dean. Of the different skills, they find listening the most difficult, but they spend the most time on reading, and they also find reading the most improved. More than 50% of the students feel they have improved in specific aspects of English such as vocabulary, listening and speaking, but the two most general questions about improved English proficiency are answered more negatively with more than 50% feeling they have not improved much. This may not be so surprising as it is assumed that at the higher levels of L2 proficiency, it becomes more and more difficult to reach a higher level (Verspoor, Schmid & Xu, 2012).

As far as attitude towards the English language is concerned, about 60% do not like English very much and there is clearly a test-driven

motivation in this group, as about 60% study English to pass the CETs, which is also good for their future chances in the job market. More than 65% agree that English takes a lot of effort. What is interesting is that the 60-40% divide is also seen in out-of-class exposure. About 30% of the students feel that using the internet improves their English and 45% feel that watching movies improves their English proficiency.

The subsequent analyses (Table 2-4) revealed some interesting findings. On the whole females scored better on the NMET. Also the major plays a role, with physics students scoring significantly lower on the NMET than chemistry majors. However, most interestingly, there are differences in Year. The lower the year, the higher the NMET score, suggesting that the student population is changing.

Only about 40% of the respondents felt they had improved in English. The regression analysis shows that the best predictors of perceived improvement were positive attitude towards English, the amount of time and effort one spent on English, one's previous academic test scores and out-of-class exposure to English. In other words, students who like studying English are more likely to spend more time on it and seek more exposure outside class; their higher previous academic tests scores also confirmed their perceived improvement. The NMET score, female and physics major were negative predictors for perceived improvement, this means that if one's score at the end of high school is already very high (for details see Table 2-4), it may be difficult for her/him to perceive further improvement in English proficiency at university level. Physics majors felt significantly more negative about their perceived improvement than the chemistry and mathematics majors; this may be related to the fact that their initial proficiency was lower to begin with.

Our survey suggests that 60% of our respondents were motivated to study English to pass the test; they did not enjoy the language, but just studied it to pass the tests. The second regression analysis shows that the best positive predictors of test-driven motivation were social pressure, the number of times the CET-4 and CET-6 were taken, time and effort and appreciation of formal instruction. In other words, if one feels more outside pressure, s/he will spend more time and energy on studying for the tests. Meanwhile, the less successful they are in passing the test, the more they are

Chapter 2 | 36

motivated to pass the test, rather than to learn English for the sake of learning English. They also seem to appreciate their formal instruction more. The strongest negative predictor was Year 4, not surprisingly as they had probably already passed the tests and they were no longer under pressure to perform well on the test. Other negative predictors were positive attitude and higher previous academic scores. In other words the more students like English and the higher their scores are, the less they are motivated to study for the tests only.

In conclusion, we may infer that our anecdotal evidence that Chinese students feel that studying English at university is a waste of time is confirmed. More than 60% of the participants in our study feel that they have not improved much in English proficiency, but they do spend a lot of time and effort to pass two important English tests, especially the CET-6, which will help them obtain better jobs. This is unfortunate because pure test-driven motivation showed to be the worst predictor for success. However, there are some items that suggest that things may be changing somewhat. For one thing, the lower the year, the higher the scores on the NMET; this may have various reasons such as stricter selection criteria the university uses, but it may also be related to more effective high school teaching, a matter that needs further research. As the NMET score is a good predictor for passing the CET-4 and CET-6, it would be excellent if students do better at the end of high school. Another observation is that the role of out-of-class exposure rather than appreciation of formal instruction is a strong correlate of a positive attitude towards the language, which in turn is an important predictor for perceived improvement. Not only do the students feel they get better at English and pass the CET-6, but they will probably also enjoy it more than listening to standardized listening exercises. This is in line with Xu (2010) who showed initial language proficiency (NMET in our case) and attitude to language are also good predictors to retain the language. In other words, our hard-working colleagues who teach English to university students should encourage their students to watch movies and use the internet to develop more native-like English proficiency.