

Impact of China's National College English Test (CET-4) on ESL Instruction

Abstract:

Standardized testing results have been used as an indicator of quality of instruction. While advocates claim that the tests help to establish and maintain high standards and motivate students and teachers, there has not been sufficient empirical studies showing either a positive or negative relationship between standardized testing and improved teaching and learning. The present study investigates the impact of China's national standardized College English Test (CET-4) on ESL instruction at Guizhou University, Guiyang, Guizhou Province. The correlation between the students' English achievement scores and their CET-Band 4 scores and how the CET-4 affects teachers' curricular and pedagogical decisions and students' perceptions, motivation, and anxiety are examined. The results of the study have strong implications for what can be done to improve the students' proficiency in English.

Background

High-stakes standardized tests have been viewed as a primary mechanism to control and reform educational practice in the United States since 1979's. Many states have begun to use them for the purposes of establishing school accountability, determining student promotion, and driving standard-based curriculum reform (Luna & Turner, September 2001). Among other advocates of standardized testing, Ravitch (1995) asserted that the tests were the best way to establish and maintain high standard, motivate students and teachers, and ultimately achieve educational equality. At the other end of the pendulum, resistance to high-stakes standardized tests has also been evident. For instance, Lunar and Turner (September 2001) conducted focus group interviews with 9th and 10th grade teachers in their study on the impact of the new Massachusetts Comprehension Assessment System (MCAS) on what and how English teachers were teaching and how their students were learning. The results revealed that the teachers strongly opposed to the test and called it a test of "excellence" rather than "competence" and said the state was headed toward "education just for the elite." They felt they were forced to make curricular and pedagogical changes in the school's attempt to improve students' scores, that is, they were forced to teach to the test on the expense of what their students should be learning. Similar negative effects of standardized tests were also noted in other studies (Thomas, 2001, Walker, 2002, & Zitlow, 2001).

Assessing large numbers of undergraduate students using standardized, forced-choice testing instruments remains relatively rare in American higher education, but there has been a significant increase in the