

Reform of the English Component in the *Gaokao*

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In late 2014, the Chinese ministry of education (MOE) issued a policy initiative regarding the English component of the *gaokao* (the national university entrance exam), as part of the plan to deepen reforms of the national examination and enrollment system. This initiative stated that the English tests would be held twice a year and only the highest score would be counted in the students' overall results. It aimed to alleviate students' study pressure and to promote proficiency-oriented language learning and teaching in China. This initiative has been gradually piloted in a small number of selected provinces and municipalities since 2017, and more provinces intend to join this "test-twice-a-year" initiative. This has caused heated debate among the general public on its impact on English language teaching and learning and its implications on the status of the English language in China.

Rationales behind this Policy

Ever since the university entrance exam was reinstated in the late 1970s, the English component has always been one of the focuses in the *gaokao* reform. Over the years, the overall score of the English component has increased, from not being included in the entrance exams in 1978 to being granted the same weight as Chinese language and maths in terms of score points in the 1990s. The status of English has been significantly enhanced along with China's rigorous engagement with the world: English language education is considered to play a vital role in national socioeconomic development and English proficiency is viewed as a generic skill for individuals.

Compared with previous reform initiatives, this "test-twice-a-year" initiative appears to place emphasis on students' choices, equity, and quality education, and to have at least three policy intentions. First, it aims to change the "once-in-a-lifetime" exam system and alleviate students' study stress. The initiative places students at the centre and allows them to choose when and whether to take the test once or twice.

Second, the initiative intends to transform English teaching and learning approaches, focusing on practical use and communication rather than on the examination itself. English education in China tends to teach just what is covered by the *gaokao*. Students only manage to learn "broken English," memorizing vocabulary and grammar points, and as such may lack cross-cultural communication skills. Thus, under the guidance of this initiative, in a few provinces the listening and speaking components in the English test have been increased, with a stress on testing students' basic knowledge and skills.

Third, researchers and experts argue that this initiative can lead to redefining the status of English in the *gaokao*, thereby reinforcing the societal importance of the Chinese language and culture. Because of the perceived roles of English in both national socioeconomic development and individual career development, some research points out that students and teachers have given high priority to English (the so-called "English fever"), while to some extent marginalizing their own native language, culture, and traditions. The changes proposed in the "test-twice-a-year" initiative may help students to understand the need to learn their native language well, and to redistribute their study time and effort between Chinese, English, and other subjects.

Less Stress but More Workload

When first announced in 2014, the initiative received support but also raised doubt among various stakeholders. While the general public tended to support the initiative, education experts doubted whether it would actually relieve the burden of students (see Wang and Li, "English Fever' in China Has Reached a Watershed," in *IHE* #75). Since

Abstract

As a result of an initiative of the Chinese ministry of education in 2014, an English test will be held twice a year and only the higher score will be counted in the students' overall *gaokao* results. This article reviews the policy rationales of this decision and its impact on students and teachers, and discusses its implications on promoting proficiency-oriented teaching and learning and on redefining the status of English in China.

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its implementation, have these views changed? Some recent research projects on the “test-twice-a-year” initiative (such as research conducted by the National Education Examinations Authority at MOE and Tsinghua University) have reached similar conclusions, in spite of their different focuses, such as changes in the English test structure and content and its impact on students, teachers, and parents. These studies find that while students and teachers have adapted to the new initiative and agree on some positive developments, issues and concerns are emerging.

From the students’ perspective, the initiative may have eased the stress and anxiety related to the *gaokao*, as it allows them a second chance to improve their performance, if needed. However, due to the *gaokao*’s high pressure level, few students give up the opportunity to try to achieve a higher score, which results in most students taking both tests anyhow. As a result, students spend twice as much time and effort to prepare for English tests, which increases their academic workload and hardly reduces any study burden.

From the teachers’ perspective, the new initiative has impacted their teaching and work load. High-school English teachers have to start teaching senior-year content in sophomore year, so as to prepare students for their first test, which is generally held in the first term of their senior year. While rushing to complete their teaching task, teachers then have less time to help students with their speaking and listening skills, thus returning to the exam-oriented teaching and learning style. A survey by the National Education Examination Authority reveals that more than 90 percent of respondent teachers agree that their workload has increased substantially since the initiative was implemented, while only half of the respondents think that the initiative has had a positive impact on teaching and learning outcomes. In addition, stakeholders are concerned about how to ensure the exams’ reliability (whether both tests are equally challenging) and validity (whether the tests can assess students’ proficiency and intercultural competence), as well as other logistic issues and costs.

Deemphasizing English?

When first introduced, the “test-twice-a-year” initiative was considered as a means to possibly play down the excessive “English fever” in China and raise the importance of Chinese. However, since its implementation, students have had to spend more time overall preparing for the English test. Yet there is no doubt that it is imperative for Chinese students to learn their native language, traditions, and culture well. Chinese and English should be considered complementary to each other. The strategic role of English (and other foreign languages) in international communication and to promote China’s exchanges with the world remains crucial. Rather than deemphasizing English, focus should be directed toward how to further enhance proficiency-oriented teaching and learning. This will take more than a single government initiative.

One fundamental challenge when promoting the “test-twice-a-year” initiative, as well as proficiency-oriented teaching and learning, is the exam culture that is deeply embedded in Chinese society: The *gaokao* is seen as a social ladder determining individuals’ social status. In the past four decades particularly, it has evolved into a score-focused enrollment system. Students are under tremendous pressure to achieve higher scores in order to enter higher-ranked schools. Teachers are expected to prepare students for exams and their teaching performance is largely assessed according to students’ test results and admission rate to universities. While the “test-twice-a-year” initiative might be a good start for providing students with choices, more changes are needed to develop an effective teaching and learning system and transform the Chinese “score-oriented” ideology. ▲

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