

On the IELTS Writing Problems of Chinese Students from the Perspective of English Backwash Effect of National Matriculation English Test

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Abstract: At present, IELTS has become a key way for Chinese students to study abroad. With China's economic development and people's increasing prosperity, more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad, which to some extent has also led to hot IELTS in China. However, the average IELTS score of Chinese students in 2018 is only 5.72, which can not help but arouse our thinking. The backwash effect of National Matriculation English Test (NMET) on English teaching and training in China also affects students' performance in IELTS to a great extent. This paper will analyze the impact of the backwash effect on Chinese students' IELTS writing based on the differences between NMET writing and IELTS writing, and explore ways to improve it, so as to provide corresponding ideas for Chinese students to improve their IELTS scores.

1. Introduction

After 30 years of development, IELTS has become the mainstream choice of English assessment in the field of international study, immigration and career development, aiming at a comprehensive examination of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. There are more than 3.5 million examinees worldwide in 2018. The reason why IELTS is so popular is because of its authority in language testing. At present, more than 140 countries and regions, and more than 10,000 educational institutions, professional associations, enterprises and government departments have recognized IELTS scores, especially many world famous colleges and universities, which has enhanced IELTS "heat". In 2018, the number of IELTS examination rooms in China reached 94, covering 43 cities. However, the IELTS scores of Chinese students are not optimistic. Through study, it is found that English teaching under the backwash effect of NMET is the key factor that causes IELTS writing problems.

2. Overview of IELTS Scores of Chinese Students

In January 2019, IELTS took the lead in completing the docking with the Chinese English proficiency scale, which has greatly improved the internationalization level of the Chinese English proficiency test. In view of the poor IELTS scores of Chinese students, CET 4 and CET 6 have also been reformed in recent years, increasing the intensity of oral examination. Both the reform of CET 4 and CET 6 in China and the reform of NMET take use of the backwash effect of language testing in order to change the problem of Chinese students' inadequate English ability.

2.1 IELTS Scores of Chinese Students

Table 1 Distribution of IELTS Scores of Chinese Students in 2017-2018

Score Echelon	Percentage
Less than 4.5 points	10.43%
5 points	16.6%
5.5 points	25.15%
6.0 points	23.12%
6.5 points	14.66%
More than 7.0 points	10.04%

Table 2 Statistics of Changes in IELTS Scores of Chinese Students in 2012 and 2017

Year	Total score	Listening	Reading	Writing	Oral English
2017	5.72	5.88	5.32	6.15	5.27
2012	5.56	5.67	5.16	5.9	5.25

Through the comparison of table 1 and table 2, it is not difficult to see that the IELTS scores of Chinese students were concentrated between 5.5 and 6 points, and only 10.04% can reach 7 points. According to the data in table 2, the IELTS scores of Chinese students had improved by 0.16 points in five years, and there is still much room for improvement. Faced with this result, we also need to reflect on the impact of NMET teaching on IELTS scores and the training methods of IELTS.

2.2 Distribution of IELTS Scores in Different Middle Schools

Table 3 Distribution of IELTS Scores in Middle School

Score Echelon	Middle Schools	Scores
First Echelon	Shenzhen College of International Education	6.9
Second Echelon	Hangzhou Foreign Language School	6.65
	Nanjing Foreign Language School	6.63
	Beijing National Day School	6.55
	Suzhou Foreign Language School	6.46
	Shanghai United International School	6.44
	Dalian No.24 High School	6.34
	Qingdao No.58 High School	6.34
	Jinling High School	6.27
	Pinghe High School	6.26
Third Echelon	Shanghai Nanyang Model School	6.24
	Shude Foreign Language School	6.23
	Wuxi No.1 Senior High School	6.21
	Yaohua International Education School	6.18
	Nanjing Normal University Affiliated High School	6.15
	Sanjian Branch of Jinan Foreign Language School	6.14
	Beijing No.80 Middle School	6.14
	Foreign Language School Affiliated to Shanghai Normal University	6.12
	Zhengzhou Foreign Language School	6.11
	Oxford International (Qingdao) Public School	6.1

From the figure above, we can see that Shenzhen Institute of International Exchange excelled in IELTS, followed by middle schools in Hangzhou, Nanjing, Suzhou and other eastern coastal cities. This also reflects that there are certain regional differences in the IELTS ability in middle schools in China. Compared with the eastern cities, there are also great differences in IELTS resources and educational concepts in Western cities, which leads to significant regional differences in English education in China.

2.3 Comparison of IELTS Scores and Age Distribution of Chinese Students

Table 4 Comparison of IELTS Scores of Chinese Students with World Average Scores

	Total score	Listening	Reading	Writing	Oral English
Global Average Female Academic Score	6.1	6.3	6.2	5.7	6.0
Average Academic Scores of Females in Mainland China	5.8	6.0	6.2	5.4	5.3
Global Male Academic Average	6.0	6.2	6.0	5.6	5.9
Average Academic Scores of Males in Mainland China	5.6	5.7	6.0	5.2	5.1

From table 4, we can see that IELTS scores of both female and male examinees in mainland China are lower than the world average, only reading ability reaching the average level.

Table 5 Age Distribution of IELTS Students in China

Age	Percentage
19-22	52%
≤18	18%
23-25	17%
26-30	8%
31-35	3%
>	2%

Through table 5, it is not difficult to see that the age of IELTS examinees is mainly under 18 years old and 19-22 years old. Among them, 18% are middle school students (under 18 years old). Long-term English preparation model for college entrance examination may have a negative impact on IELTS.

3. Analysis of the Differences between NMET Writing and IELTS Writing

There is a big difference between IELTS writing and NMET writing. It is not only the differences in the angle of question-making caused by the cultural differences between China and Britain, but also the differences in examining ability. The specific differences are listed in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Differences between NMET Writing and IELTS Writing

Examination Type Difference Type	NMET	IELTS
Requirements	Chinese	English
Stylistic Categories	practical writing	practical writing + argumentative writing
Content Tips	1. paragraph format 2. main argument 3. situations, etc.	None
Source Material	Mainly letters, with traditional models, and rules to follow	There are three kinds of materials in practical writing, but there is no in argumentative writing.
Strict Requirement	1. Letters: 100 words 2. Argumentative writing: 150 words 3. No time limitation	1. Not less than 400 words 2. Within 60 minutes

From Table 6 above, we can clearly see the differences between IELTS writing and NMET writing. Because NMET is of great significance to many middle school students, it can even rewrite their destiny, and is also related to the rate of entrance and social reputation of high schools. Therefore, in the process of English teaching, middle school teachers mostly rely on the requirements of NMET for corresponding teaching design, which also forms the backwash effect. However, due to this effect, Chinese students are able to achieve good results in College Entrance Examination, but it is difficult to make their performance in IELTS reach the world level. This is also a question that needs our deep reflection.

4. Backwash Effect of NMET

Backwash effect is a special term in the field of language testing. It mainly refers to the impact and influence of language testing on teaching and learning, producing a corresponding impact on curriculum, educators and personnel training.

4.1 Deeply Rooted Idea and Mode of Examination-oriented Education

NMET plays an important role in the process of middle school students' life growth, which gives birth to the examination-oriented education mode of English teaching. Although the examination-oriented education brought about by the backwash effect has been improved in recent years, its idea and mode has been deeply rooted in many English teachers and school management. In English classes of senior high schools, teachers take students to analyze the last five years' papers of College Entrance Examination, and use the "Three-year College Entrance Examination, Five-year Simulation" and other test-oriented guidance materials to improve Chinese students' English ability of College Entrance Examination. As for examination-oriented education, we can't deny that it cultivates students' English competence in an all-round way, but the deep-rooted ideas and patterns of examination-oriented education have also made Chinese students become "test machines" to a certain extent. In the process of English learning in middle schools, many students only have the ability to cope with the College Entrance Examination, but neglect the more important cultivation and improvement of English thinking, expressive ability and spoken English ability in the process of English learning which is the essential reason why Chinese students' IELTS scores can not even reach the world average level. In IELTS which examines listening, speaking, reading and writing, Chinese students are only able to achieve the world reading scores in writing. The backwash effect of NMET emphasizes the cultivation and improvement of students' English reading comprehension ability.

4.2 Solidification of Students' Thinking in English Learning and the Use of Templates as a Good Recipe for NMET Writing

The backwash effect of NMET leads to the solidification of middle school students' thinking in English learning. The main goal of learning is also to improve their English learning performance in College Entrance Examination. Under the influence of long-term psychological hints and teachers' examination-oriented education, middle school students unconsciously recite English composition templates and fixed sentence patterns. This phenomenon is not only manifested in the examination, but also in the daily learning process. Teachers usually print a large number of fixed sentence patterns at the beginning and ending of writing, as well as some fixed composition structure templates and let students recite them. Under the long-term influence of templates, such as As far as I'm concerned, many students fail to distinguish the specific differences or meanings of these fixed sentences. They only know that they are used at the beginning and the ending of an English composition. The backwash effect not only leads to the solidification of middle school students' English thinking, but also exacerbates the examination orientation of English teaching and learning in middle schools. The uniform NMET writing, to a great extent, limits students' thinking and imagination, which also causes IELTS writing problems. Because in the process of IELTS writing, there are neither universal laws and answer templates, nor clear writing tips.

4.3 Ignorance of the Cultural Differences between China and Britain and Lacking of the Cultivation and Construction of English Thinking Consciousness

English textbooks of middle schools involve the teaching of cultural differences between Chinese and Britain. However, in the course of teaching, teachers only pay attention to explaining text structure and new words, ignoring the expansive explanations of cultural differences between Chinese and Britain. Under the mode of NMET, this kind of education is beyond criticism. However, in a broader cultural perspective, ignoring the teaching of cultural differences between Chinese and Britain will greatly affect the cultivation and construction of middle school students' English thinking consciousness.

Chinese traditional culture has contributed to Chinese thinking. English thinking is derived from British traditional culture, having its own cultural characteristics in etiquette and oral expression. For example, in spoken English, inverted sentences are preferred. If teachers neglect to teach the differences between Chinese and British cultures in the process of education, they will just ask students to recite them. This will not only lead to students' lack of understanding, but also affect

their ability to use sentences. This problem is also one of the important reasons for Chinglish. Lack of cultivation of English thinking consciousness will lead students to write with Chinese thinking in the process of NMET or IELTS writing. Because the markers of NMET are Chinese, the influence of this thinking difference is not reflected, but reflected in IELTS writing test, which has produced a great impact on the improvement of students' IELTS scores and also led to the difficulty of IELTS writing.

5. Way to Avoid the Negative Effect of the Backwash Effect of NMET

The backwash effect of NMET has a negative effect in English teaching of middle schools. The negative backwash effect also leads to the difficulty of IELTS writing for Chinese students. In order to solve the problem, it is essential to avoid the negative effects of the backwash effect of NMET through the following ways.

5.1 Promote the Transformation of English Teaching Concepts and Enhance the Flexibility of Chinese Students' Thinking

English teaching in middle schools needs to promote the transformation of teaching concepts and constantly improve the flexibility of Chinese students' thinking. Facing the idea of examination-oriented education caused by the backwash effect of NMET, teachers and students need to change their idea through lectures and intensive training. In the process of English teaching in middle schools, students can be encouraged to explore divergent thinking actively and gradually change the previously solidified mode of thinking by launching English debating contests with English topics. In this way, Chinese students are also able to be more flexible in the face of various types of topics in IELTS writing and effectively avoid the impact of the backwash effect of NMET on thinking flexibility.

5.2 Promote the Development of Diversified Teaching Modes and Encourage Students to Learn Independently and Innovatively

The development of diversified teaching modes is the key to effectively avoid the backwash effect of NMET. In the process of English teaching in middle schools, teachers are required to change the "inculcation" teaching before, and encourage students to develop their autonomy and carry out English writing exercises independently. In middle school English teaching, teachers can teach in a diversified way, and organize English cultural festivals or English speech contests with the head teachers. There is no rigid requirements for the style and structure of articles. In this way, it can not only train students' English writing ability and language organizing ability, but also help to solve the IELTS writing problems faced by Chinese students so as to make students use flexible sentence patterns to complete IELTS writing more easily. At the same time, flexible and innovative sentences also gets the favor of marking teachers, which is of great benefit to NMET writing. However, in the process of students' independent and innovative learning, teachers are required to pay attention to checking students' grammar.

5.3 Introduce Network Teaching Resources to Help Students Effectively Grasp the Cultural Differences between China and Britain and Establish Good English Thinking

Middle school English teaching should not be confined to textbooks, but actively introduce network teaching resources to help students effectively grasp the cultural differences between China and Britain and establish good English thinking. In this process, teachers are suggested to use classical English plays or film and television materials to help students understand the British Dynasty culture, such as Victoria. In addition, teachers can also use the way of map display, combined with good PPT production as well as the areas involved in textbooks, to explain the local customs to students. Teachers are advised to encourage students to use the Internet to make British friends. While strengthening their English expressive ability, they can also learn about the cultural differences between China and Britain through conversation, constantly strengthen English thinking in English learning, and weaken the influence of Chinese thinking on English learning.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the negative effect of the backwash effect of NMET leads to the problem of IELTS writing for Chinese students. Only positive changes can improve the IELTS performance of Chinese students and the overall English performance.

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