

A Study on the Content Validity of the Listening Tests in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020

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Abstract: Based on the framework of the test task characteristics proposed by Bachman & Palmer's (1996), this paper conducts a diachronic study on the content validity of the listening tests in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020. The results show that the content validity of the tests is high, basically in line with the requirements of the “Test Syllabus” and the “New Curriculum Standard”, but there is also problem that the listening content is fragmented and not rich enough, which could not help cultivate students' thinking quality and cultural awareness. Based on these, the author put forward some suggestions on the design of the listening test and the English language teaching in senior high school.

1. Introduction

“Gaokao”, known as the national college entrance examination, is a very important test for high school graduates in China. The quality of the tests not only affects whether the examinee's knowledge and ability can be comprehensively tested, but also affects the teaching and learning. Listening, as an important English skill, is one section of the College Entrance Examination. On this account, the quality of the listening test arouses a wide public concern for people involved.

Sichuan Province has used independent proposition texts in the College Entrance Examination from 2006-2015. However, in order to improve the fairness, Sichuan Province began to adopt the national test paper in Gaokao in 2016. After “Wenchuan earthquake” in 2008, Sichuan Province canceled the listening test in the College Entrance Examination and the listening test did not be restored until 2016 when the conditions permitted. In 2016, Sichuan province used the independent proposition tests in Gaokao, with a listening test score of 30 points in total and from 2017-2020, Sichuan Province adopted the National Volume III in Gaokao, with the listening part score of 30 points in total.

Content validity, referring to the representativeness of the testing objectives involved in the test to the items needed to be tested ^[1], is an indicator to represent the quality of a test. If the content validity of the test is high, the accuracy of measuring is high. When searching and reading the relevant literature, the author found that the researches on listening tests in the College Entrance Examination mainly focus on the analyses of listening theories and teaching courses (Xing, Xue, 2019; Dong, 2017) or the study of listening training and scoring skills (Cao; Lei, 2018) However,

there are few texts that used the scientific and appropriate framework to study the content validity of the College Entrance Examination. Therefore, this paper uses the framework of the test task characteristics proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and with reference to the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School (2017 edition 2020 revised edition) (hereinafter referred to as the New Curriculum Standards) and the English Syllabus of the National Unified Examination for College Enrollment (hereinafter referred to as the Test Syllabus), to measure the content validity of the English listening tests in Gaokao of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Object

This paper has analyzed five sets of English listening tests, including 50 texts and 100 questions, in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020. Each listening test is divided into two sections. The first section is listening to a short dialogue with a total score of 7.5. The second section is listening to a long dialogue or monologue with a total score of 22.5. The total listening test time is about 20 minutes.

2.2 Research Methods

Based on the framework proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and the characteristics of the listening part in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020, the study establishes a test analysis framework (Table 1). For research methods, the author mainly uses the text analysis method and the statistical methods. The research is mainly implemented from three aspects: the first is to study the input characteristics, including the length of the text, the topics that covered, the readability of the article and the rate of the speech of the speaker. The second is to analyze the characteristics of the expected response, which mainly studies the listening skills examined in the test compared with those listed in the “Test Syllabus”. The third part is to study the relationship between the input and the response according to the framework proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996).

Table 1 Analysis Framework Of the Content Validity

Characteristics of the input	Text related variables	Length
		Topic
	Readability	
Characteristics of the expected response	Speaker related variable	Rate of speech
	Coverage of listening skills	Acquisition of detailed information
		Infer based on the listening content
		Understand the speaker's attitude and point of view
		Understand the gist
	Response type	Selective response
		Limited response
Expanded response		
Relationship between the input and expected response	Relevance	Narrow relevance
		Broad relevance
	Dependence	Indirect dependence
		Direct dependence

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics of the Input

4. 1.1 Topic

Through text analysis, the topic distribution of the listening contents in the College Entrance Examination in Sichuan from 2016 to 2020 (Table 2) is found. The topics listed in Table 2 are classified according to the 10 topic groups mentioned in the New Curriculum Standards, which are under three theme contexts: man and self, man and nature, man and society.^[4] Besides, if multiple topics are mentioned in one listening text, each topic is also counted.

As shown in Table 2, the topics covered in the five-year listening tests mainly include contents on learning and life, interpersonal communication and others, such as art, science, etc. Those are the contents that students are familiar with. However, the listening contents seldom cover topics such as history, culture, society and nature, which has weakened the richness of listening contents to some extent.

The listening test in 2016 mainly reflects the theme context of “man and self”, while from 2017 to 2020, the tests not only reflect the theme context of “man and self”, but also reflect the “man and society”. For example, the listening Text 7 in 2017; Text 8 and Text 9 in 2018 both have covered the topics in interpersonal communication. However, through comparison and analysis, the author found that the listening tests from 2016 to 2020 do not fully reflect the theme context of “man and nature” and there are few contents about “natural ecology, environmental protection, disaster prevention, and universe exploration”, which are some of the topics under the “man and nature” theme context.

In addition, the listening contents are fragmented, which are not enough to create a theme context. The “New Curriculum Standards” has pointed out that “Students' understanding of the theme directly affects students' level of thinking and language learning.”^[4] As a way of language input, listening contents need be abundant enough to create the theme context, so that it can not only help examine students listening ability, but more importantly, it can have a good impact on students' development.

Table 2 Distribution of The Topic

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Quality and doing things	1	1	1	0	1
Life and learning	6	4	7	4	2
Technology and Science	0	0	1	0	0
Literature, art and sports	1	0	0	1	1
History, culture and society	0	0	0	0	0
Interpersonal communication and social service	2	7	4	6	7
Universe exploration	0	0	0	0	0
Environment protection	0	0	0	0	0
Natural ecology	0	1	0	0	0
Disaster prevention	0	0	0	0	0

4.0.1 Length

There are 809, 879, 770, 831 and 863 words in the listening texts from 2016-2020 respectively, with an average of 830 words. Besides, the length of listening text in the College Entrance Examination is on the rise in general, however, it does not mean that the listening difficulty is on the rise. The length of the listening text cannot solely determine the difficulty of listening, while the speaker's speaking speed is also one of the decisive factors.^[5]

4.0.2 Readability

Readability refers to the degree to which it is easy to read. The main factors that could influence readability are language forms, such as sentence length, amount of new words, grammatical complexity, etc. [6] Based on the Flesch readability reference scale (Table 3), this paper analyzes the listening texts in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020. The higher the readability is, the easier the texts are to understand. Using Microsoft Word 2007 to calculate the readability (Table 4) and the results show that the average readability is 85.82, which indicates that the texts are easy to read, and it equals the reading level of the fifth- grade primary school in the United States. Listening in a test sometimes has the characteristics of irreversible, which means, after the speaker has finished speaking, there is no chance of relistening. Therefore, the high readability of the listening texts can greatly reduce the difficulty of listening.

Table 3 Flesch Readability Reference Table

Readability	Measure description	Grade
0-30	Very confusing	College
30-50	Difficult	High school
50-60	Fairly difficult	Some H.S.
60-70	Standard	7 th or 8 th grade
70-80	Fairly easy	6 th grade
80-90	Easy	5 th grade
90-100	Very easy	4 th grade

Table 4 : Readability Of the Listening Texts from 2016 to 2020 in Sichuan

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Average
Readability	86.1	89.3	86.7	86.1	80.9	85.82
Measure description	easy	easy	easy	easy	easy	easy

4.0.3 Rate of Speech

Listening duration refers to the time that the recording is played once, excluding the time of audition and intermission. From 2016 to 2020, the average rate of speech in the listening tests is 153 words / min (shown in Table 5). This requires teachers to choose the appropriate materials for students to practice, so as to avoid the situation of not adapting to the speed while do the listening test.

Table 5 : Rate Of Speech in the Listening Tests from 2016-2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Average
Rate of speech (word / min)	151	163	150	156	145	153

5. Expected Response Characteristics

5.1 Response Type

The type of listening tests in Sichuan Province in the past five years is single choice questions, belonging to the type of selective response, also, the type of questions is stable. In other provinces, there are different types of questions, such as filling in the blanks, etc. In addition, listening and speaking tests have been set up in Shanghai and Guangdong provinces, which adopt the method of “man-machine dialogue” to comprehensively examine students' language ability.

5.2 Coverage of Listening Skills

Listening skills is classified according to those listed in the Test Syllabus. There are four categories, namely, understanding the main idea, obtaining detailed information, understanding the speaker's attitude and viewpoint, and inferring based on the listening content. [7] Through the analysis of the listening texts in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020 (Table 6), the author found out that the skills of “obtaining detailed information” are the most frequently examined, followed by “understanding the speaker's attitude and viewpoint” and “inference based on the contents”, while the tests seldom examines the ability of “understanding the main idea”, especially in the year 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020. The author believes that questions set for testing the ability of “understanding the main idea” are conducive to training students' ability of summarizing, which can also help students quickly understand the general content of the text. Moreover, the absence of this assessment may also produce negative backwash effect, which may exert a negative impact on teaching and learning.

Table 6 : Listening Skill Coverage from 2016 to 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Understanding the main idea	0	1	0	0	0
Obtaining detailed information	13	8	14	14	14
Understanding the speaker's attitude and viewpoint	4	3	2	4	0
Inferring according to the listening content	3	8	4	2	5

6. The Relationship between the Input and Expected Response

6.1 Relevance

The relevance refers to “candidates’ need on the range and quantity of the input in the process of answering questions”. [2] Relevance is divided into the broad type and the narrow type. The broad type refers to “Candidates should listen to and deal with a large number of materials to answer.” [2], such as some questions like getting the main idea and some inferential questions. The narrow type refers to “Examinees can answer with limited input” [2]. For example, most detailed comprehension questions are narrow type. From 2016 to 2020, the listening questions in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan mainly are narrow type (shown in Table 7). Also, the test items show high requirements on examinees’ ability to capture details and key information.

Table 7 Relevance of Questions in the Listening Tests from 2016 to 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Broad type	2	5	2	3	4
Narrow type	18	15	18	17	16

6.2 Dependence

Dependence refers to “Examinees in answering questions are mainly based on input content or on other knowledge.” [2] If the examinee mainly relies on the listening language materials when answering the test questions, the question is direct dependence; while the examinee still needs other knowledge or needs to refer to the context, it is indirect dependence. From 2016 to 2020, listening test questions are mainly direct dependence (shown in Table 8), focusing on testing examinees' understanding of English language knowledge itself and less on testing examinees' comprehensive listening ability, such as induction, summary, etc.

Table 8 Dependence of Questions in the Listening Tests from 2016 to 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Direct dependence	17	16	17	17	14
Indirect dependence	3	4	3	3	6

7. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the analyses of the English listening tests in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020, some conclusions can be drawn: in the first place, listening texts have covered the contents under the theme contexts of “man and self” and “man and society”, but seldom mentioned contents under the theme context of “man and nature”. In the second place, the length of listening text is on the rise in general, while the readability is on the decline. Though listening texts are easy to read, the difficulty is increasing year by year. In the third place, the rate of speech in the listening tests is float from 140 to 160 words / min, which belongs to “fast rate of speech” according to the China’s Standards of English Language Ability. In the fourth place, the type of the questions is stable, which is single choice questions. The examining of listening skills mainly focuses on testing students’ listening skills like “obtaining detailed information”, “making inferences based on the listening contents” and “understanding the speaker's views and attitudes”, while less examined the skill like “understanding the main idea”. Last but not least, most questions are of narrow relevance and direct dependence, which meets the requirement of “the listening contents need be simple and short “ in the Test Syllabus to some extent. Generally speaking, the content validity of the listening tests in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020 is relatively high and also basically in line with the requirements of the “Test Syllabus” and the “New Curriculum Standards”. However, there are still some problems that need to be fixed, such as the contents of listening are not rich, the type of questions is single and the examination of listening skills is not comprehensive.

Based on the results of the study, the author puts forward the following suggestions.

7.1 Suggestions on the Proposition of Listening Test in the College Entrance Examination

7.1.1 Enriching the Listening Contents Could Inspire Teaching and Learning.

It is found that the listening contents in the College Entrance Examination of Sichuan Province from 2016 to 2020 mainly cover the topics under the theme context of “man and self” and “man and society”, while the topics under the theme contexts of “man and nature” are hardly involved. According to the washback effect, the lack of contents under the theme context of “man and nature” may exert a negative impact on teaching and students’ learning. Teachers may tend to skip the practice of the related listening materials in teaching, so do students, which would hinder the development of students' English language ability.

7.1.2 Diversifying Listening Test Types Could Exam Students More Comprehensively.

“Cultivating students' thinking quality in English is mainly through the complex thinking process of analysis, evaluation and creation”^[8], so it is necessary to improve the way of training and examining students’ listening skills. By diversifying listening test types, we may achieve it. For example, we can add some multiple-choice questions or information filling questions and other types of questions to diversify test types. Besides, “using pictures, maps and charts to set listening test questions can test listening skills more effectively according to some researches, because the listening performance of examinees is less dependent on reading, vocabulary and other factors.”^[3]

7.1.3 Adding Cultural Elements Could Help Cultivate students' Cultural Awareness.

“New Curriculum Standards” lays emphasis on cultivating students' cultural awareness and requires high school graduates in China should “have the ability of cross-cultural communication and dissemination of Chinese culture”.^[4] Though there are many authentic oral English expressions in the listening contents, such as “My head is spinning” in Text 5, 2017 and “How are things?” in Text 7, 2017, which are beneficial for students to tell the differences between spoken and written language, however, these are not enough to cultivate students' cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication ability. Therefore, some Chinese elements and social hot spots need to be added into the listening content to enrich the students' language input. The positive washback effect of the test may raise students' attention to cultural learning, so as to gradually cultivate students' cultural awareness. Besides, the inviting of “listening and speaking test” may also effectively promote students' intercultural communication ability.

7.2 Suggestions on English Language Teaching in Senior High School

7.2.1 Teachers Need to Lead Students to Fully Explore the Theme.

The contents taught in the senior high school English courses are guided by the theme of each unit. Emotions, attitudes and values that the authors of textbooks want to convey are embedded under the theme, therefore, teachers should avoid only teaching the skills and do mechanical exercises, but also need to lead students to explore the theme, so that students can have a deeper understanding of what they have learned and their thinking ability will also be developed in the process.

7.2.2 Combining Listening and Speaking Training Could Fuel Learning.

“The listening comprehension ability includes six aspects: understanding oral description, understanding oral narration and so on. As a comprehensive cognitive ability, listening comprehension ability develops through various listening activities.”^[9] Therefore, teachers could design some oral activities or tasks while teaching listening, which could enrich listening training activities. Through participation, students can develop both listening and speaking ability via interaction with others and their language ability can be improved more comprehensively.

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