Cambridge English
Transforming Language Education

Developing a National Public Language Test

Client: State Education Commission
Country: China

In 1996, Cambridge English Language Assessment won a major contract to develop a publicly available English testing system for use across China, the result of an agreement between the UK Department for International Development and China's State Education Commission.

The test was needed to support China's national policy of 'opening up' to the outside world; the brief was to create a publicly available English test, designed to operate within a coherent national framework, which would improve the skills of China's workforce while also supporting the concept of lifelong learning. Quality control was also essential, given China's diversified educational system.

In response, we created PETS – the Public English Test System.

PETS was designed to assess and certificate communicative English skills at five levels, ranging from the equivalent of Junior High School (or three years' English study), up to the level required by graduates hoping to study or work abroad.

Initial test design for the PETS project (which was overseen by China's National Educational Examinations Authority) began in 1997, with materials production and trialling starting nine months later. By 1998, we were able to undertake live test production, together with live test administration, and also began to monitor test performance ahead of PETS' full launch in 1999.

Our model of language test development – based on a cycle of trial and review – provided a sound and effective basis for the development of PETS. Equally important was early recognition of the need for a comprehensive infrastructure to support test production and delivery, one which encompassed test development and analysis services, and examiner management.

As a result of its painstaking development, and ongoing technical support, PETS has proved to be both robust and effective, as shown by its impressive candidature across China; in 1999, over 33,000 candidates took part in the first live tests, a figure which had risen to 870,000 by 2005, and 2.1 million by 2012. Among these, 1.5 million are senior high school students from four provinces where PETS has been used to replace the English test for Higher Education entrance (Gaokao).

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