

The Importance of Mastering Pronunciation for Improving CET-4 Listening Comprehension

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Abstract: Listening is a major mark-losing section in CET-4 for vocational college students. Many students recognize written words yet struggle with audio materials, largely due to poor phonetic awareness rather than limited vocabulary. Focusing on under-achieving vocational college learners, this paper discusses the value of phonetic training for listening improvement, analyzes major pronunciation-learning difficulties, and proposes practical strategies to help students break listening bottlenecks and enhance their overall English competence.

Keywords: Vocational College Students; English Pronunciation; CET-4 Listening; Listening Improvement; Teaching Strategies

1. Introduction

The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is a standardized examination that measures vocational college students' comprehensive English proficiency. Listening comprehension accounts for 35% of the total score, making it a decisive module for passing the test. Compared with university undergraduates, vocational college students generally suffer from weak English foundations, low learning initiative and insufficient linguistic intuition. Under the long-standing exam-oriented education model, vocational English teaching mostly focuses on vocabulary memorization, grammar exercises, reading and writing training, while phonetic teaching has long been neglected. This creates a dilemma of "mute English" and "deaf English" among students.

When preparing for CET-4, most vocational college students blindly do practice papers and memorize word spellings mechanically, yet they struggle to improve their listening scores despite tremendous time investment. Fundamentally, English is an alphabetic writing system, and pronunciation serves as the core carrier of language input and output. Listening comprehension is essentially a process of

receiving, distinguishing and decoding phonetic signals. Students with incorrect pronunciation and ignorance of natural phonetic changes cannot recognize standard pronunciations in listening recordings, which leads to confusion between visually similar words, misjudgment of homophones and failure to split connected sentences. Therefore, systematically mastering phonetic knowledge and correcting pronunciation standards constitute an efficient and core path for vocational college students with weak foundations to break through listening barriers in CET-4.

2. The Significance of Learning Pronunciation for Vocational College Students' CET-4 Listening Improvement

2.1 Distinguishing Phonemes Precisely to Avoid Basic Mark Losses

The basic examination points of CET-4 listening focus on word sound discrimination and short sentence comprehension, with a large number of high-frequency error-prone items centered on similar phonemes and homographs. Vocational college students with weak foundations commonly mix up long and short vowels, confuse voiced and voiceless consonants, and ignore dental fricatives. Typical confusing pairs include /wind/ (wind) and /warn/ (wine), /i:/ and /ɪ/, /θ/ and /ð/.

Students' inherent wrong pronunciations form fixed auditory biases. When hearing standard pronunciations in listening tests, they cannot quickly match sounds with word meanings, resulting in unnecessary basic mark loss. On the contrary, solid phonetic foundations enable students to distinguish subtle phonetic differences accurately, eliminating mishearing of words and deviations in sentence comprehension, thus laying a solid foundation for scoring in CET-4 listening.

2.2 Mastering Phonetic Changes to Overcome Barriers in Long Sentence Listening

The playback speed of CET-4 listening materials approximates daily oral English. Words are not pronounced separately according to dictionary transcriptions; phonetic phenomena such as linking, weak forms, loss of plosion and assimilation pervade the recordings, which become the primary source of lost marks for vocational college students. Most vocational students read word by word rigidly without understanding natural phonetic changes, resulting in the common problem that they recognize individual words but cannot understand sentences as a whole.

2.3 Cultivating English Linguistic Intuition to Accelerate Listening Response Speed

Listening comprehension is highly time-sensitive, and CET-4 listening imposes tight time limits that require students to grasp meanings the moment they hear sounds. Phonetic learning involves repeated following, imitation and pronunciation calibration. Long-term systematic pronunciation training cultivates students' linguistic intuition and builds an interconnected thinking mode linking sound, meaning and context.

Insufficient linguistic intuition is a universal weakness among vocational college students with poor English foundations. Standardized phonetic training familiarizes students with English intonation, word stress and pause rules, greatly accelerating their listening response speed. Meanwhile, standardized pronunciation habits create a positive learning cycle integrating listening, speaking and reading, freeing students from inefficient exam preparation relying solely on mechanical exercise drills.

2.4 Optimizing Exam Preparation Systems to Achieve Long-Term Listening Progress

Most vocational college students hold misconceptions about CET-4 listening preparation: they overemphasize exercise drills, memorizing vocabulary and test-taking skills while ignoring foundational abilities such as pronunciation. As a core underlying linguistic competence, phonetics differs from short-term test-taking skills. Mastering phonetic rules is applicable to all listening question types and generates long-term, universal benefits. Consolidating phonetic foundations reduces blind spots in listening and cut down error rates, while lowering the difficulty of intensive and extensive listening practices in later stages,

making exam preparation more systematic and efficient.

3. Core Difficulties Faced by Weak Vocational College Students in Phonetic Learning and Listening Improvement

3.1 Solidified Wrong Pronunciations Create High Correction Difficulty

After years of English learning in primary and secondary schools, vocational college students have formed ingrained incorrect pronunciation habits. Most students apply Chinese Pinyin rules to English pronunciation, lacking standard lip shapes and tongue positions. Common problems include mixed long and short vowels, swallowed consonants and omitted dental fricatives. Long-term wrong pronunciations shape fixed auditory perceptions; even after repeatedly listening to standard listening audio, students cannot identify deviations between their own pronunciation and the standard version, leading to low correction efficiency that continuously undermines their ability to distinguish sounds in listening.

3.2 Blank Phonetic Knowledge System Lacks Systematic Cognition

Current vocational public English courses tilt teaching focus towards exam-oriented reading and writing, with extremely limited class hours allocated to phonetics. Phonetic knowledge is explained fragmentarily without constructing a complete knowledge framework. The majority of students with weak foundations have no basic understanding of phonetic changes such as linking, weak forms and loss of plosion, and only master simple word spelling rules. Without logical comprehension of sound changes in listening recordings, students can only guess sentence meanings intuitively and easily face comprehension breakdowns when encountering life-like, oral listening materials of CET-4.

3.3 Biased Learning Perceptions Undermine the Core Value of Pronunciation

Most vocational college students hold severe misconceptions about exam preparation. They one-sidedly believe that improving CET-4 listening depends on exercise drills, vocabulary memorization and test skills, and regard pronunciation practice as a task for oral tests irrelevant to listening. This biased cognition makes students voluntarily abandon phonetic training and invest massive time into inefficient

exercises, trapping them in a vicious cycle of incomprehension, wrong answers and stagnant progress. In addition, students with weak English foundations suffer from severe learning anxiety, viewing phonetic learning as complicated and tedious, which deprives them of initiative and motivation for deliberate practice.

3.4 Weak Learning Environments Hinder Immersive Phonetic Training

Campuses of vocational colleges lack regular English phonetic communication scenarios. Students barely encounter English listening and speaking opportunities in daily life, with no instructors available to correct their pronunciation after class. When imitating recordings alone, students cannot judge whether their pronunciation meets standards, which further solidifies wrong habits. Moreover, most listening training materials provided to students adopt slow, word-by-word reading, with rare exposure to real phonetic materials matching the speed of CET-4 tests, leaving students unprepared for the phonetic environment of formal examinations.

4. Solutions to Improve Vocational College Students' CET-4 Listening via Phonetic Teaching

4.1 Targeted Pronunciation Correction to Break Solidified Wrong Pronunciation Habits

To address students' ingrained wrong pronunciations, teachers shall carry out special targeted sound discrimination training. Instructors shall sort out high-frequency confusing phonemes and homographs frequently tested in CET-4 listening, compiling comparison banks for confusing pairs such as /w/ & /v/, /l/ & /i:/, long-short vowels, and voiced-voiceless consonants, paired with typical confusing vocabulary including wind and wine for word-by-word discrimination exercises.

Meanwhile, the follow-and-correct mode shall be adopted. Students use intelligent scoring English learning applications to calibrate lip shapes and intonation word by word, comparing gaps between standard pronunciations and their own versions to eliminate incorrect habits one by one. Training shall follow the principle of "precision over quantity with repeated consolidation" to match students' weak foundations and avoid weariness caused by excessive drills.

4.2 Systematic Lectures to Construct a Complete Phonetic Knowledge Framework

Vocational college English classrooms shall make up for deficiencies in phonetic teaching by incorporating CET-4 core phonetic phenomena into routine teaching, building a lightweight, exam-oriented phonetic system. Three core phonetic rules shall be prioritized: linking rules, function word weak form rules and loss of plosion rules, demonstrated with original example sentences extracted from CET-4 test papers. This enables students to grasp the underlying logic of sound changes in listening immediately after learning.

Obscure theoretical explanations shall be abandoned; all knowledge points shall be accompanied by original CET-4 sentence cases to ensure immediate application after learning. For students with weak foundations, professional jargon shall be simplified with plain-language explanations of phonetic changes, paired with short sentence following and sentence splitting exercises to help students quickly master skills for phonetic decoding.

4.3 Correct Exam Preparation Perceptions to Establish the Concept of "Phonetics as the Foundation of Listening"

Teachers shall correct students' exam-oriented misunderstandings in daily classes, and intuitively demonstrate mark losses resulting from phonetic defects with real test paper cases. Students shall gain an in-depth understanding that incomprehensible listening materials stem not from unknown vocabulary but unfamiliar phonetics. Instructors shall analyze wrong questions caused by misjudged linking and confused phonemes from students' frequent error lists to break the false belief that "exercise drills alone guarantee progress".

Hierarchical learning objectives shall be formulated for students at different levels. For learners with weak foundations, phonetic training shall be designated as the top priority of listening exam preparation. Students shall consolidate sound discrimination and sound change recognition before practicing test papers, forming a scientific preparation workflow of "basic phonetics → intensive listening training → mock paper drills" to boost preparation efficiency.

4.4 Innovative Training Modes to Build

Immersive Phonetic Practice Scenarios

Low-threshold, high-efficiency phonetic and listening training plans shall be designed to fit vocational college students' learning characteristics. First, the shadow reading method shall be promoted: students follow CET-4 listening audio synchronously to imitate speed and intonation, familiarizing themselves with natural phonetic changes. Second, short-sentence intensive listening training shall be implemented. Students listen to sentences with linking and weak forms extracted from test papers, conduct dictation and split phonetic structures sentence by sentence to strengthen phonetic memory. Third, standardized-speed CET-4 audio shall be played during fragmented time to create an immersive listening environment.

In addition, classroom mutual correction groups shall be established: students work in pairs to listen to each other's reading and correct pronunciation, making up for the lack of one-on-one tutor guidance, lowering the difficulty of phonetic practice and continuously improving students' ability to distinguish sounds and comprehend listening content.

5. Conclusion

English pronunciation serves as the underlying core competence of CET-4 listening comprehension, and the key to solving vocational college students' dilemmas of inaccurate listening and stagnant score growth. For vocational college students with weak English foundations, listening improvement cannot rely on blind exercise drills, but must return to the essence of language with phonetic learning as the foundation.

Currently, vocational college students are widely plagued by solidified wrong pronunciations, incomplete phonetic knowledge systems, biased learning perceptions and insufficient training, all

of which severely restrict their progress in CET-4 listening. Vocational colleges need to optimize teaching systems and make up for gaps in phonetic teaching. Meanwhile, students shall correct their learning misunderstandings and carry out systematic, targeted phonetic training to master core knowledge including phoneme discrimination and natural phonetic changes. Only by consolidating phonetic foundations can students accurately decode phonetic signals in listening materials, enhance linguistic intuition and response speed, fundamentally lift their CET-4 listening performance, pass the examination smoothly, and comprehensively upgrade their comprehensive English application abilities.

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