

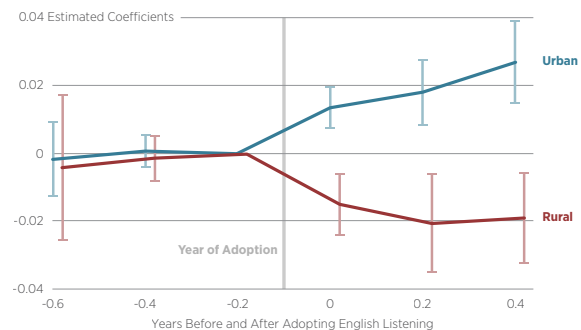
English Language Requirement and Educational Inequality: Evidence from 16 Million College Applicants in China

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2024-20 “[English Language Requirement and Educational Inequality: Evidence from 16 Million College Applicants in China](#),” by Hongbin Li, Stanford University; Lingsheng Meng, Stanford University; Kai Mu, University of Hong Kong; and Shaoda Wang, University of Chicago

The introduction of English listening tests in China’s National College Entrance Exam significantly lowered rural students’ exam scores, college access, and future earnings compared to their urban peers.

The economic globalization in the past few decades has been accompanied by the globalization of English education, as many non-English-speaking countries have established English curricula and relevant assessment and selection criteria in their educational systems. While English language skills have been shown to have positive returns in the labor market, rich anecdotal evidence also indicates that imposing English language requirements for higher education might exacerbate inequality in educational opportunities. Learning English as a second language, especially listening and speaking skills, typically requires rich extracurricular resources that are less available to disadvantaged students. For example, students from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have better access to resources like interactive tutoring, radio programs, and movies.

Figure 1 • Impact of English Listening Adoption on Urban vs. Rural NCEE Scores



Note: This figure plots the impact of adopting English listening in the NCEE on students’ test scores. The effects are measured in terms of coefficients from the authors’ event study. The vertical lines show the 95% [confidence intervals](#).

In this paper, the authors study how English language requirements, and in particular listening requirements, affect educational inequality.

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Confidence interval: a range that estimates where the true answer lies, with a certain level of certainty

The authors examine this question in the context of China's National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), a high stakes exam that determines college admissions for high school graduates. Between 1999 and 2003, provinces across China introduced English listening tests in the NCEE. The listening tests consisted of English conversations and corresponding comprehension questions that were played aloud in exam rooms, and were worth 20% of students' scores for English and 4% of their total NCEE scores. The authors use administrative data on NCEE participants between 1999 and 2003 to measure how the rollout of listening tests affected the rural-urban gap in college access. They find the following:

- The introduction of listening tests lowered rural students' average **percentile rank** in the English section of the NCEE by 2 percentage points and their overall percentile rank in the NCEE by 1.1 percentage points. As a result of these score changes, rural students' chances of college admission were reduced by roughly two percentage points, which amounts to nearly 30% of the baseline rural-urban gap in college admission.
- These changes imply that more than 54,000 rural students lost college seats to their urban peers between 1999 and 2003. Among those admitted to college, nearly 11,000 rural students who would have been admitted to elite colleges lost their seats to their urban peers due to the introduction of listening tests on the NCEE.

- Using existing estimates of the returns to college education in China, the authors calculate that the rural students who lost their college seats due to English listening tests later experienced a reduction in their starting wages of more than 40%, which is equivalent to a yearly income transfer from rural to urban students of 450 million Chinese Yuan.

This research has important implications for English language requirements in high-stakes educational exams. In the case of the NCEE, the English listening test was riddled with controversy since the very beginning. Immediately after the Ministry of Education's announcement in 1999, heated debates erupted in the popular media, worrying that such a policy would harm students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds because extracurricular resources would be needed to develop English listening skills. Due to the mounting concerns that the NCEE English listening test could exacerbate the rural-urban divide in college access, in 2005, after the English listening test was rolled out nationwide, the Ministry of Education issued a follow-up policy allowing each province to decide for itself whether to keep or abolish the test in future NCEEs. Over the following decade, more than half of the provinces eventually removed the English listening test from the NCEE, often citing "fairness for rural students" as their key motivation.

Percentile rank: a statistical measure indicating the percentage of scores in a distribution that a specific score is greater than or equal to

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