Consequences of English Tests on Young Learners: Test-Takers' Experiences in Context of Complex and Dynamic Learning Environments[1]

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Abstract

This study examines the test uses and consequences of English tests for young learners in China from a sociocultural validation perspective. Drawing on Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Layered Structure of Culture and in response to Chapelle's (2020) special call for investigating consequences of language test use throughout the world, we analyzed how English tests for young learners have shaped young learners' experiences through five aspects (1) emotions, (2) family and social interaction, (3) efforts and supports, (4) barriers and challenges, and (5) motivation and aspiration. Employing the draw-a-picture technique and follow-up interviews with 14 young test-takers aged five to ten, we probed into the complex interplay of their emotions, family support, peer pressure, and societal expectations involved in their testing experience in context. The findings reveal that test uses and consequences are deeply mediated by sociocultural factors such as the supporting system, social dynamics, and cultural value within the given sociocultural context.

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[2]Introduction

English tests for young learners have become prevalent over the past decade (Papp & Rixon, 2018). This trend has been driven by the geopolitical power of English as the global language (Cheng, 2018) and its vital role in the educational and career path of young learners (Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021).

In some Asian regions like China, young learners begin learning English as early as three, much earlier than formal schooling (Graddol, 2006), which led to the gap between school learning and young learners' language proficiency. When schools fall short in English programming, parents turn to external training centers to meet their expectations and seek extra tests to monitor their children's progress (Qi, 2016). Well-recognized commercial tests of English, such as the Cambridge English Tests for Young Learners, TOEFL Primary Tests, and Pearson Test of English (PTE) Young Learners, have become popular among those parents to fill the gap in schooling and "show off" their children's English proficiency (Chik & Besser, 2011). Despite their global prevalence, research on these tests' societal uses and consequences remain limited. Given that these tests operate outside the mainstream public education, it is crucial to explore their socio-cultural implications.

In response to Chapelle (2020, p. 6), in her introduction to *Language Testing*'s first Virtual Special Issue: Investigating consequences of language test use,

> *It remains to be seen whether future studies of consequences will be interpreted with respect to validity, but in view of the findings presented in these articles [included in this special issue] investigating language tests throughout the world, it seems clear that consequences will remain an important area of investigation in language testing.*

Our study examined the consequences of English Tests on Young Learners on young learners – one of the most vulnerable test-taker population. We drew on Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Layered Structure of Culture as the theoretical framework (See Figure 1) to analyze complex and dynamic learning environments and the interactions between learners and their surroundings (Moss et al., 2006) that mediate the uses and consequences of testing. The framework provides a sociocultural lens to uncover how cultural and contextual factors influence test-takers' and their parents' perceived uses and consequences. Such a sociocultural lens also fits the special characteristics of young test-takers who have a heightened sensitivity to the environment (McKay, 2006) and are cognitively and developmentally immature to accomplish the testing process alone (Hasselgreen, 2012). Therefore, this approach responds to and expands Chapelle's (2011) validation work by highlighting the importance of considering how various

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external factors, such as cultural norms and learning environments, influence the validity and fairness of language tests, particularly when applied to diverse context and vulnerable populations like young learners. Specifically, this study examined young test-takers perceived experience of taking English tests specifically designed for young learners and the consequences of the tests in China from a sociocultural perspective by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are test-takers' perceived experiences in preparing for and taking English tests for young learners?

RQ2: What are the consequences of English tests for young learners on test-takers at the sociocultural level?

Figure 1
Layered Structure of Culture (Hofstede et al., 2010)
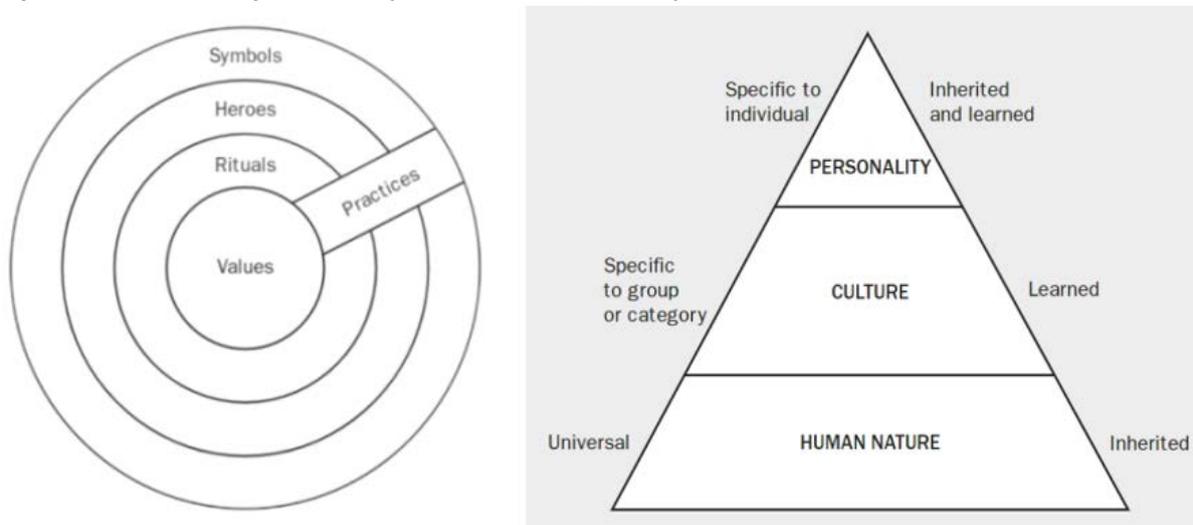
Literature Review

The past decade has witnessed a noticeable increase in empirical studies on test uses and consequences of English tests for young learners (Aydin, 2012, 2013; Carless & Lam, 2014; Ito, 2016; Scaramucci & Kobayashi, 2013; Yan et al., 2014). As the most direct users of and participants in these tests, young test-takers experience the most immediate impact through their preparation for and participation in English tests. Since most of the English tests for young learners, such as the Cambridge Young Learners English Tests and TOEFL Primary Tests, occur outside of mainstream public school education in China, preparing for and participating in these tests inevitably influence young test-takers' after-school learning and personal lives (Ashton et al., 2012; Breeze & Rooth, 2014; Chik & Besser, 2011; Gu & Saville, 2012).

Studies have reported that young test-takers suffer from test anxiety due to various factors related to English testing (Aydin, 2012, 2013; Carless & Lam, 2014; Ito, 2016;

Scaramucci & Kobayashi, 2013; Toews-Shimizu, 2013; Yan et al., 2014). Among them, Aydin (2012, 2013) and Yan et al. (2014) reported the likelihood, level, and symptoms of test anxiety experienced by young test-takers. Other studies reported that test anxiety levels varied depending on the uses of the tests in different contexts (Carless & Lam, 2014; Ito, 2016; Scaramucci & Kobayashi, 2013; Yan et al., 2014). These studies together showed that young test-takers' anxiety was linked to their perceived purposes and motivations for taking the tests. Their anxiety tended to increase when they used the test scores to impress or meet the expectations of their parents, teachers, and schools (Carless & Lam, 2014; Scaramucci & Kobayashi, 2013; Yan et al., 2014). On the other hand, anxiety decreased when the test was used as an internal motivation for learning, which aligned with studies in previous washback literature (Ito, 2016). From the sociocultural perspective, the exploration of test anxiety should go beyond examining the above individual student variables to include the broader social, cultural, and political contexts (Yeo & Ong, 2020).

A large number of studies revealed the test consequences on learning perceptions and learning strategies. Studies reported the effects of test preparation for and participation in English tests for young learners on their motivation during the test preparation period (Yan et al., 2014), as well as motivation for long-term learning at school and home (Ashton et al., 2012; Breeze & Rooth, 2014; Chik & Besser, 2011; Docherty et al., 2014; Gu & Saville, 2012). Other studies focused on test consequences on young learners' learning strategies (Carless & Lam, 2014; Chik & Besser, 2011; Gu & Saville, 2012; Yan et al., 2014).

Studies also noted the influence of English tests for young learners on test-takers' interpersonal relationships with their teachers, parents, and peers (Carless & Lam, 2014; Chik & Besser, 2011; Docherty et al., 2014). Docherty et al. (2014) reported that 37% of learners in primary school tended to please their parents with their performance on English tests. Carless & Lam (2014) reported negative parental involvement was found to have detrimental side effects on parent-child relationships and children's psychological well-being and physical health, such as using punishment or scolding when their children had poor test results in English tests for young learners. English tests for young learners also affect test-takers' relationships with their peers (Carless & Lam, 2014; Chik & Besser, 2011). For example, Chik and Besser's (2011) study revealed that young learners tended to take multiple English tests and were fond of comparing and contrasting tests available on the market with each other. According to the Layered Structure of Culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), test scores served as symbols of achievement and social recognition, influencing young learners' social dynamics by emphasizing competition over cooperation, with social and cultural values playing a significant role in shaping these perceptions.

Consequences of test use also showed to impact test-takers' sense of belonging among peers and in intercultural communication. Docherty et al.'s (2014) study provided

evidence for the positive influences of participating in Cambridge English tests on young test-takers' willingness and confidence in intercultural communication. Further, language learners were likely to use external test results to identify themselves as language learners, especially those who use the tests for pragmatic purposes, as revealed in Besser and Chik's (2014) study. Test scores serve as social capital, symbolizing shared values and providing a sense of belonging, particularly in test-driven cultures like China, where success is often measured by exam performance.

Methods

Two qualitative methods, the draw-a-picture technique and the follow-up interview, explored young test-takers' experiences preparing for and taking English tests. The draw-a-picture technique is a method, suited to young learners and their developmental stage, used in qualitative data collection in which participants are invited to create simple drawing to represent their experiences, feelings or perceptions in a given phenomenon or event (Carless & Lam, 2014). By shifting from the focus from spoken to visual, it allows young children to share their feelings and testing experiences through a familiar picture format so they can freely express themselves (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Xiao & Carless, 2013). Follow-up interviews collected data on test-takers experiences based on their drawings.

Participants

Fourteen participants aged five- to 10-years old, nine females and five males, took part in the study. More than half attended public school and five attended private school. Eight participants took TOEFL Primary Tests, and six took Cambridge English Tests for Young Learners. Most participants were from Beijing (4 participants) and Shanghai (6 participants), and others were from Tianjin, Baotou (Inner Mongolia), Nanjing (Jiang Su Province), and Anhui (Anhui Province), with one test-taker participant from each region respectively.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through an online video platform. The draw-a-picture activity lasted approximately 20 minutes, followed by a 40-minute interview. The draw-a-picture activity (Xiao & Carless, 2013) was conducted in the participants' homes, where they spent time virtually with the researchers with parental consent. The drawing procedure was explained to participants in simple Chinese. Participants were given 30 minutes to draw three comic-strip-style pictures representing their feelings during test preparation, during the actual test, and after receiving their test scores. The drawings were imported to MAXQDA 12 for analysis.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to allow participants to reflect on their drawings and provided in-depth information about their test-taking experiences (Creswell, 2008). The interviews followed a protocol adapted from He and Shi's (2008) study on students'

perceptions of a standardized English writing test and based on the Layered Structure of Culture framework (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Data Analysis

Interview data were thematically analyzed (Patton, 2014). Themes are derived from test-takers' test-taking experiences and consequences of English language tests on young test-takers in response to the two research questions. Interview data in Chinese were transcribed and translated into English, then imported into MAXQDA 12. Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic coding procedures were used to analyze the data (Table 1).

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Procedure for Interview Data Based on Braun and Clarke (2006)

Step		Description
1. Familiarize yourself with the data	–	Read through the data multiple times to gain a general understanding of the content.
2. Generate initial codes	–	Identify words, phrases, or passages in the data that capture the main topic or theme. Label these segments with short, descriptive codes.
3. Search for the themes	–	Look for patterns or connections among the codes and group them into themes.
4. Review and refine the themes	–	Review the themes that have been identified and make sure they are distinct and meaningful.
	–	Refine or combine themes as necessary.
5. Define and name the themes	–	Write a brief description of each theme, including key characteristics and defining examples from the data.
6. Produce the report	–	Consider the overall pattern or story that emerges from the themes and reflect on how they relate to the research question.
	–	Present the report on the codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Drawings were analyzed following Glaw et al.'s (2017) visual content analysis procedure, and further coded following Kuhn's (2003) model of children's drawings analysis for interpretative thematic analysis of symbols, colors, and people into themes and sub-themes, such as negative feelings or peer interaction (Table 2). The themes were refined and merged into major/overarching or related themes. The results were cross-referenced with interview data to ensure consistency, providing a comprehensive understanding of test-takers' experiences.

Results

Five themes were derived from an analysis of drawing and interview data together collected from the 14 test-taker participants. These results reflect the test-takers' experiences and the consequences of taking various English tests for young learners, as illustrated in the table (Table 3). The numbers in Table 3 indicate the number of participants (N=14) who expressed each feeling in their drawings and interviews, respectively.

Table 2

Kuhn's (2003) Model of Children's Drawings Analysis

Level	Category	Example Elements in the Context of Taking English Tests of Young Learners
Initial, Descriptive Level	People	student, teacher, parents, examiner
	Environment	light, colour, plant, pet
	Objects	book, test paper, pencil, clock, table
	Text	title, labels, words, or phrases in balloons
	Symbol	heart, question mark, exclamation mark, arrow
Interpretative Meaning	Space or location	home, test preparation centre, test centre
	Social relationships	with parents, with friends, with teacher
	Activities	reading, reciting, playing games, chatting
Thematic Interpretation of Drawings	Static display of a person or object	student, teacher, parents, examiner book, test paper, pencil, clock, table
	Action	learning, test preparation, recreation, test participation
	Display of a special occasional event	award-winning ceremony
	Display of abstract values	the emotionality of communication, friendship, parenting style, attitudes toward peers and adults

Table 3

Themes and Sub-themes of Test-takers' Experience and Consequences in Taking English Tests for Young Learners

	Drawing	Interview
I. Emotions Behind Test-taking		
1.a. positive emotions	9	12
1.b. negative emotions	6	11
1.c. ambivalence	7	6
1.d. emotional transition	0	6
II. Family, Peer, and Community Interaction		
2.a. family love and support	13	10
2.b. peer competition/collaboration	4	14
2.c. environment nuance	10	12
III. Efforts and Supports		
3.a. intensive and targeted immediate test preparation efforts	13	13
3.b. on-going and consistent daily efforts	1	5
IV. Barriers and Challenges		
4.a. unexpected difficulty level	0	5
4.b. physical and emotional discomfort	0	4
V. Motivation and Aspiration		
5.a. motivation	0	5
5.b. improvement on language learning and test preparation strategies	0	4
5.c. future plan for testing and learning	0	7

Theme 1: Emotions Behind Test-taking

Fourteen participants expressed a range of positive and negative emotions, together with mixed feelings or changes in their emotions, as summarized in Table 3, which were catalyzed by specific factors during different testing stages.

Positive emotions

Twelve participants reported positive emotions in the interview and nine in their drawings. For example, 6-year-old Minnie jotted down her big smile and wrote the captain "I'm happy" when asked to describe her feeling in test preparation, which demonstrated her joy during the process.

Lewis attributed his positive experience to his self-regulation strategies.

> *Pleasant, because I have been comforting myself that it is just an exam. Thinking this way can help me improve my scores. Being nervous, I won't get better results. (Lewis-Age 8-Beijing).*

Willa was overjoyed upon receiving her test results.

> *My mom told me that I scored 113 out of 115. I was super happy. I might have missed one listening question, but I got the rest correct. (Willa-Age 10-Beijing)*

Negative emotions

Eleven participants reported that they had negative feelings of nervousness, frustration, and confusion at different stages of their testing experiences. Zoe, as an example, expressed her anxiety about test preparation during the interview.

> *I was not familiar with this exam and was particularly nervous. I had nightmare that I had a fever the night before the exam and didn't take it, or that the internet was lagging during the exam. I couldn't sleep and had insomnia. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)*

Leo expressed his exhaustion during vocabulary memorization.

> *It was troublesome. I wanted to go out and play. I was really annoyed, like pulling my hair out. (Leo-Age 7-Shanghai)*

Ray expressed his anxiety due to time limit during the test.

There wasn't enough time. I was hurried. When I finished the listening section, I immediately started thinking about the questions. I was worried that time would run out because I only had a few seconds, so I felt pretty anxious. (Ray-Age 10-Beijing)

Yuki experienced disappointment upon receiving the unsatisfactory reading scores.

I was very surprised; my reading score was much lower than I expected. I was not satisfied with three stars, but the result was only two. My mom said I was illiterate. I kept wondering why I was called illiterate. I've been learning English from elementary school to university, so why am I called illiterate? (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)

Ambivalence
Six participants expressed ambivalence, often simultaneous happiness and nervousness, at different testing stages. Seven reflected their mixed feelings in their drawings. Jenny described her conflicting emotions during the test.

During the exam, I was happy but a little nervous. I was happy because I met my classmates from my English class, and I knew the answers to the questions. I was nervous because it was my first time taking such a large-scale exam, and I was afraid I wouldn't do well. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)

Emotional Transition
Six participants reported their emotional transition at each stage of testing, influenced by factors: (a) adjustment to test difficulty, (b) familiarization with testing environment, and (c) using strategies to mitigate pressure. Positive transitions were more common. Zoe managed to cope with her nervousness with her mother's help.

Since I started preparing for the exam in October, I did some practice tests and realized I was lacking in some areas, which made me really nervous. I had nightmares. After my mom talked to me, I suddenly thought that this exam was just a bit more difficult than my usual tests, actually not that different. It was also taken online at home. Although it's entirely in English, I had done small quizzes in English before, so I suddenly stopped being afraid. I improved a lot. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)

Jenny described her perceived positive emotional transition after familiarizing herself with the test center.

> *After visiting this floor, I no longer felt unfamiliar, and answering the questions became easier. In the second half, I wasn't nervous anymore and even felt a bit happy. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)*

However, not all transitions were positive. Yuki experienced increased anxiety due to unexpected perceived difficulty.
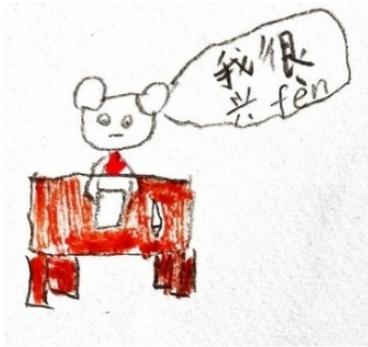
> *During the exam, I started to panic. It felt like I was reading something completely foreign. My mom said everything in the test was something she had already gone over with me, but when I looked at the test, I was stunned—I only met one similar question. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Theme 2: Family, Peer, and Community Interaction
Participants' test-taking experiences were significantly influenced by their interactions with family members, peers, and the testing environment. This theme encompasses four sub-themes: (a) parental support, (b) peer competition/collaboration, (c) extended family love, and (d) environment nuance.

Family love and support
At each testing stage, family support and love played a significant role. Such support comes from both their parents and their grandparents as reported. Parents' involvement in the test preparation was mentioned by eight participants. They provided support through (a) practicing past tests, (b) offering learning strategies, and (c) easing test anxiety.

For instance, Zoe illustrated her mother's support by drawing her alongside test preparation tools.
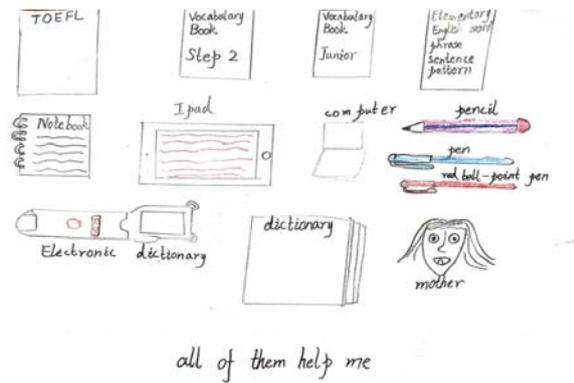
I drew my mom because she helped me during test preparation. After I finished writing, she would check my answers and ask me to explain why they were correct. If I got something wrong, she would explain the words or look them up in the dictionary with me. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)

Even though most test-takers appreciated their parents' involvement, Leon reported his tension with his mother out of her strict approach.

I usually didn't have homework for English, but my mom gives me tests. My mom got really upset, and as a result, she often kept me at home and didn't let me hang out with friends. I got frustrated too and often argued with her. (Leo-Age 7-Shanghai)

Three test-takers recalled the feedback from their parents towards their test results. For example, Jenny's parents offered a trip as a reward for passing the exam.

Dad said that if I could pass the exam, he could take me to the seaside to play. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)

Upon unsatisfactory test results, parents provided balanced comments with both support and constructive recommendation, recalled by Ray.

My parents said it's okay, just keep trying next time. It's no big deal to do poorly once. We'll sign you up for another test in June (one month later), and you can do better next time. (Ray-Age 10-Beijing)

Apart from parents' support, three participants also highlighted their interactions with extended family members, an often overlooked aspect that represents a unique dimension of the family landscape. Ivy described the active role her grandmother took in her test preparation.
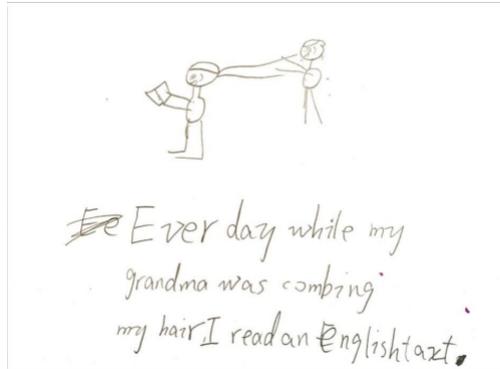
My grandma read me the words and let me told her the meaning of word. Sometimes she asked me the word-spelling, and then ask me the meaning. (Ivy-Age 7-Beijing)

Peer competition/collaboration
Peer competition is a significant component in test-takers' experience, though positive collaboration was less commonly reported. Only three test-takers shared their positive peer interactions, and Jenny was one of the few.

I could discuss the test questions with others at school. After discussion, I had a better understanding. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)
Conversely, many test-takers expressed their perceived implicit peer pressure.

Jenny recalled her initial nervousness and feelings of inadequacy while comparing herself to seemingly more competent peers and become more confident after realizing her strength.

I felt nervous when I went to that place... I felt that other students were better than me, because I didn't know that some of the students who were going to take the exam were younger than me. I became confident and not anxious at all when I found I can answer questions others couldn't. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)

Yuki highlighted negative feeling after observing peers finishing the test earlier.

They finished 10 minutes earlier. I looked at them and thought they had taken the TOEFL before and were better than me. Then I started to panic. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)

Interestingly, participants tend to be selective in sharing test results with peers. Only five participants chose to share their test results, often to establish reputation. Zoe shared her success and received positive reaction.

> *My classmates were so shocked they almost jumped to the ceiling and said, "Zoe, you really took TOEFL?" After I confirmed multiple times, they were surprised and extremely happy because they knew they had a super academic friend who excelled at studying. They thought I was good at studying, but not quite at the top. This time, the label of 'academic top student' has been firmly established. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)*

However, nine participants avoid sharing results to prevent competition or judgement. Lewis refrained from sharing the results to maintain his competitiveness.

> *I don't tell them because sharing gives them a connection. He doesn't like TOEFL himself but would still pursue it. So, I'm too lazy to tell them. Hiding my abilities gives me more time to improve. (Lewis-Age 8-Beijing)*

He further explained his reasoning using the "Dark Forest Theory" from a science fiction novel.

> *When I was 8 years old, I read The Three-Body Problem and learned about the Dark Forest Theory that you should not tell them about your progress... The more ahead you are, the less you can tell. If you are ahead, others will feel anxious to learn something even harder as soon as they hear about it.. (Lewis-Age 8-Beijing)*

Tony avoided sharing the results for the fear of judgement from classmates.

> *I didn't share myself, and I don't dare to ask my classmates how they are doing either, for fear that they might be doing too well... so I just don't say anything. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)*

Testing environment

The physical testing environment affected participants' emotional comfort and readiness. Twelve participants shared the effect of physical environment on their test-taking experience.

Among eight participants taking traditional tests, six illustrated the testing room in their drawings, and three drew the overall test centre; all of them described the test room in the interview. For instance, Willa drew the layout of both the test room and the campus where the exam was conducted, both scenarios described in detail in the interview, with a detailed description of the testing center.

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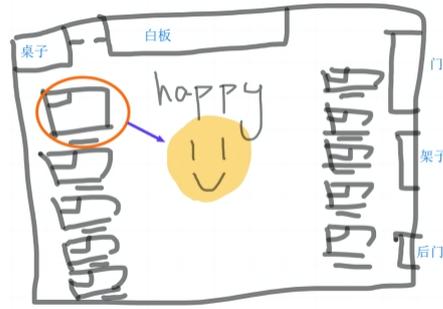
(Willa-Age 10-Beijing)

> *The exam took place in an international school, and the classroom setup didn't resemble a typical school setting or a formal exam environment. The desks were rectangular white plastic tables, not wooden desks. (Willa-Age 10-Beijing)*

Coloring her drawing in bright color, Jenny described the test centre as a hotel, which played a significant role in reducing test anxiety.


> *After I visited the first floor, I felt more familiar with this place, and answering questions become easier. I feel like this is a hotel, and I am staying here. (Jenny-Age 8-Beijing)*

Five participants took remote-proctored tests, and they all drew their home testing environment, and two talked about their experiences in the interview. For example, Tony expressed his nervousness during the test.

> *I took the exam at home. I am quite nervous, actually quite nervous. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)*

In contrast, Zoe felt comfortable in the familiar setting.
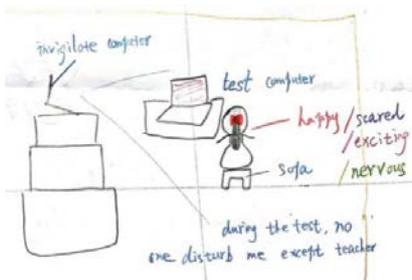
Taking this kind of international exam at home provides a familiar environment, which helps me maintain an excellent mindset... This kind of setting helps me stay calm and focus on the exam without getting distracted by other thoughts. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)

Theme 3: Efforts and Supports

This theme uncovers participants' efforts with support from families and schools in test preparation, including intensive and targeted immediate test preparation, and ongoing consistent daily efforts (see Table 3).

Intensive and targeted immediate test preparation efforts

Thirteen participants shared their strategies, encompassing focused on practicing past test papers, memorizing vocabulary, and familiarizing themselves with test formats. The most common effort was the practice on mock test papers, reported by nine participants. Tony found it beneficial for test familiarization.

(My mom) had me do many practice tests to understand how the (Junior) TOEFL is structured so I could figure out what it's asking for in reading comprehension. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)

Christina described her experience with extensive mock exams assigned by her school teachers.

Our school is incredibly annoying. They distributed many mock exam papers to prepare flyers, but they were impossible to finish. (Christina-Age 8-Shanghai)

Memorizing vocabulary was another effort, mentioned by six participants. Zoe illustrated her use of a dictionary in her drawing and explained.
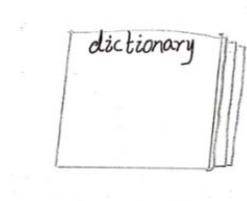
> *(I draw) I use a dictionary because I use it to look up the meanings of words I do not know after I finish going through the questions. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)*

Leo expressed frustration about the drilling practice tasks mandated by his mother.

> *Every day, I had to write out 160 words, copying each of the 16 words ten times. I found it useless because I was copying without actually memorizing them. (Leo-Age 7-Shanghai)*

Four participants focused on practicing specific skills. Yuki even skipped regular school before her test day and concentrated on listening and reading exercises.

> *At that time, on Fridays, I did not even go to school; I stayed at home working on listening exercises. Then, I did reading exercises on the train because my reading was relatively weak. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Participants also made efforts to familiarize themselves with the test, as Ray shared.

> *I first looked at the book's table of contents and found the first chapter about the TOEFL Family test, which explains various types of TOEFL Family exams. (Ray-Age 10-Beijing)*

Ongoing and consistent daily efforts
Three participants reported consistent daily efforts through structured English learning activities at school or in extracurricular lessons. Joanna described her exposure to new vocabulary and sentence structures in after-school reading.

> *In second to third grade, I read Magic Tree House. At school, we learned some basic knowledge and would read English books together, like reading about the Great Fire of London in second grade. Right now, I'm reading Holes, but I haven't started it yet. When you get to an interesting part, you want to keep reading, but there are many words you don't know, so you keep looking them up in the dictionary. (Joanna-Age 8-Shanghai)*

Minnie (age 6) highlighted her regular participation in extracurricular English lessons.

> *Every day is Wednesday or Saturday. (Minnie-Age 6-Anhui)*

Theme 4: Barriers and Challenges
Twelve participants discussed four major barriers they faced during their test experience, including unexpected difficulty levels, unfamiliarity with test tools and modalities, time pressure, and physical and emotional discomfort.

Unexpected difficulty level

Six participants experienced a significant gap between their expectations and the actual difficulty level of the test. Yuki struggled with reading comprehension, finding the tasks more difficult than anticipated.

> *When it came to the letter, I became anxious and confused when my mom ask me to do the tasks in the mock exam. Usually, some of them are relatively simple, and then I can read them, but some of them are not simple, and I do not understand them. I can't find the answer to the question. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Tony and Lewis shared their challenges in applying language components during exams. Tony found it hard to understand sentences even when he knew individual words.

> *I can't sink into it, and even if I understand all the words, I still feel that I cannot connect them into sentences. In fact, my mother also asked me to speak Chinese with me and let me translate by myself. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)*

Lewis experienced difficulty recalling vocabulary under test conditions, particularly when writing.

> *It's harder to write. I forgot some of the words. Another point is grammar. That's my weakness. (Lewis-Age 8-Beijing)*

Unfamiliarity with test tools and modalities

Four participants recalled their difficulties due to unfamiliar test tools and modalities. Yuki was confused about how to fill in the answer sheet.

> *It gives you a form to complete, and then there's a book that you have to answer first. In the remaining 10 minutes or 5 minutes, take the answer sheet. I didn't understand what the teacher said and did it my way when it was distributed. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Tony encountered challenges in note-taking during listening sections, especially when audio was played only once.

> *You only listen once for the listening test, and then they give you 10 seconds. The questions appear one by one after you finish listening, and you can't choose them until you've heard them all. My dad asked if I could use a blank paper to take notes, but they said no, so I didn't prepare anything, thinking a blank paper would be fine. Then they said I could use a whiteboard, but he didn't tell me in advance. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)*

Physical and emotional barriers
Two participants mentioned physical and emotional barriers having affected their performance. Yuki faced physical discomfort.

> *Recently, my rhinitis has been acting up, and I can't stop my runny nose. I do feel a little bit uncomfortable during the title. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Nancy (age 5) shared emotional challenges related to separation anxiety.

> *(Laughs) Because I didn't want to leave my mom. (Nancy-Age 5-Nanjing)*

Time constraints were a significant challenge for participants, which were found to be one of reason for test-takers' anxiety. Yuki became anxious when she realized she was slower than others.

> *I was really slow. First, I finished answering the questions in the booklet, then moved on to the answer sheet. By the time I finished with the booklet, there were only 5 minutes left. Everyone else had finished 10 minutes earlier, and I started to panic... I started guessing randomly because there was no time left. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou)*

Tony experienced word-slip and panic during the speaking section of the remote-proctored tests.

> *(During the speaking exam) they played some videos, and then at the end, they asked you to describe them, but they only gave you 10 seconds. I got nervous and kept forgetting words. The more anxious I got, the harder it was to remember, and time just slipped away, so I ended up just muddling through it. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)*

Theme 5: Motivation and Aspiration
Participants were motivated to take the tests for various reasons, ranging from self-verification of language skills to improvement on school learning and communicative competence. Their experiences also shaped their future learning plans and aspirations (see Table 3).

Motivation
Five participants shared diverse motivations for undertaking the test. Willa wanted to assess her English proficiency.

> *I still feel that I will have some expectations of my own strength. After studying English for so many years, I don't know what level I am at. (Willa-Age 10-Beijing)*

Others found tests beneficial for their school learning, like Tony.

Every class in my class will have an entrance exam, each entrance exam has a ranking. I think this is a great harvest. The big harvest is at the top of the ranking list. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)

Ray expressed his sense of achievement after experiencing the recurrence of vocabulary in his daily school learning and became more motivated.

Can you help me accumulate some words? Last time, when I was spelling, there was a word I also learned at school, and I don't need to think about it like others anymore, I can just recognize it immediately. It felt like it had already been accumulated at that time. (Ray-Age 10-Beijing)

Improvement on language learning and test preparation strategies
Four participants considered the tests as tools to evaluate their English learning and testing strategies. Tony recognized the need to adjust his English learning strategies after identifying weaknesses.

I hadn't memorized (the words) before, and my mom found out it wasn't working. I realized that I need to review from now on and also know which areas are my weak spots. I need to memorize more and listen more. (Tony-Age 9-Beijing)

Future plan for testing and learning
After receiving satisfactory test results, seven test-takers discussed their future plans. Yuki was determined to improve her English skills.

I am ready to change and let them stop calling me illiterate. (Yuki-Age 8-Baotou). Zoe confirmed her ability to learn English independently and aimed to keep pushing forward.

I found that I could learn to this level on my own, which proves that the foundation I built before was quite solid. So, when you have such a good foundation, you should keep pushing forward and improve even more. (Zoe-Age 9-Tianjin)

Ray planned to take higher-level tests.

The next test he's registering for is TOEFL Junior, which is more complex, so he bought two new study materials. (Ray-Age 10-Beijing)

In contrast, three participants, including Leo, showed disinterest in further testing.

I'm not considering it anymore. Just put all the homework into the Castle for the people inside it, and then it's okay for me just to have toys falling from the sky every day. (Leo-Age 7-Shanghai)

Discussion

Guided by Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Layered Structure of Culture, we build connections between the findings and the cultural layers of symbols, heroes, rituals, and values to better understand the test-takers' experience and consequences of testing from sociocultural perspective, i.e., the connection from test uses to test consequences. Figure 2 illustrates the four cultural layers of socially embedded phenomena of test uses and consequences of English tests for young learners within the Chinese context of this study. This interpretation expands Chapelle's (2020) collection of the traditional validity perspective of research on test uses and consequences.

Figure 2
Two-Dimensional Matrix of Adapted Layered Structure of Culture (Guo, 2024)
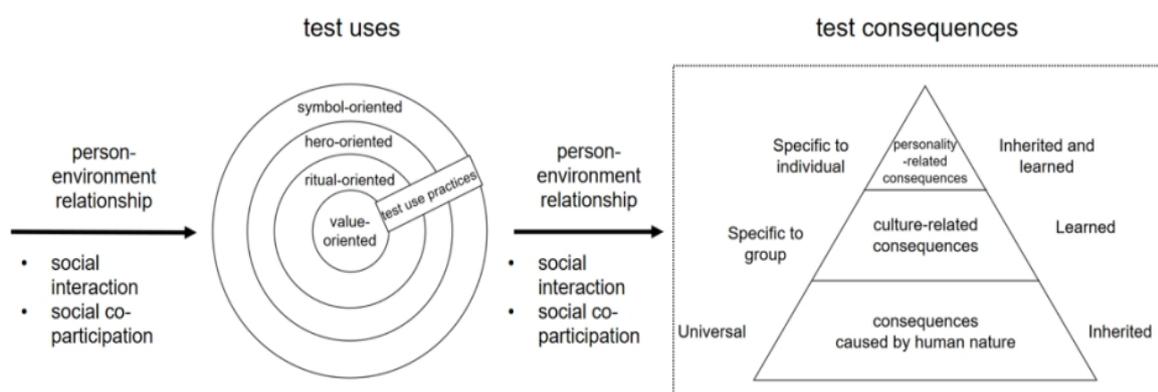
Symbol Layer: Emotions
In this study, test-takers' emotion is the most visible within this symbol layer. These symbols are not isolated but interconnected with other elements in the testing relationship. The earlier studies also found the positive and negative feelings involved in young test-takers preparation and participation in the English tests for young learners (Carless & Lam, 2014; Toews-Shimizu, 2013; Yan et al., 2014). The positive emotions revealed in the current study expanded the earlier literature (Carless & Lam, 2014) and identified the link between positive emotions and factors like test-takers' satisfaction with their support systems, perceived readiness to take the tests, and satisfaction with their test results. Similarly, the current study uncovered the negative feelings that occurred in testing situations (Yan et al., 2014) and further identified the reasons behind these feelings, including test-takers' unfamiliarity with the test format and fear of failure, as expressed by our participants.

This study uniquely contributed to the literature on the emotional consequences of

English tests for young learners by identifying mixed feelings and transitions in emotions. Aydin's (2012, 2013) and Toews-Shimizu's (2013) research explored various emotions in test preparation and participation, ranging from enjoyment and anticipation to nervousness and lack of confidence, reflecting the complex emotions associated with the tests. However, these studies did not build the link between different feelings, whereas the findings of this study uncovered the mixed feelings and emotional transitions as well as the factors that contributed to these emotions. The mixed feelings were represented as the coexistence of excitement and nervousness due to test-takers' uncertainty of their English proficiency and the unpredictability of test outcomes. The most commonly reported emotional transition was a positive emotional shift. The test-takers gave credit for the shift to the following conditions that (1) their parents' effective intervention and support in the test preparation stage, (2) their adjustment to the test difficulty or testing environment, and (3) their use of strategies to mitigate test pressure. The emotional transition reflected the unique characteristics that existed among young test-takers. Their initial anxiety resulted from their lack of prior formal testing experience. The anxiety started at the test preparation stage, even as soon as their parents told them about the test registration. Their parents' support acted as the catalyst for the positive emotional transition. However, the negative transition took place when they failed to achieve the three conditions.

Such phenomena, uncovered in this study where test-takers tied their feelings to their parents, internalizing and synchronizing with the emotional feedback test-takers receive from parents, can be called 'emotional synchronization.' The occurrence of positive or negative feelings most likely accompanies the corresponding interaction with parents or other members of society. The phenomenon of being prone to their parents' support and sensitive to the environment reflected the unique characteristics of young learners. According to McKay (2006), young learners are vulnerable and sensitive to their surroundings, and it is essential for them to have positive experiences. It was explained by O'Loughlin (1998) that there exists a link between individual's emotions and their social interactions, which aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (2010) perspective considering emotions as a form of practical consciousness that aids individuals in interpreting situations and facilitates their responses in social contexts. In this study, the test-takers' emotions and their interactions with their parents served as navigators and precursors for social behaviour, and the emotional qualities can be identified as a resource for a more holistic understanding of these interactions.

Hero Layer: Role Models and Peer Influence
Defined as individuals who set standards and serve as role models, the concept is given new meaning in the context of English tests for young learners in China. In a testing culture such as that found in Confucian-heritage cultures (CHC) like China (Cheng & Curtis, 2009), test scores define the "hero" within the learning environment.

The study uniquely identified dynamic peer interactions, showing how high-achieving students boosted their self-confidence and earned reputations among their peers, establishing social standing. The reported phenomenon that the test achievement earned them titles such as "top student" and "super scholar" among their classmates exemplified how academic achievement in tests can advance a student's status among peers, elevating the test-taker's social standing in the classroom even if their peers did not participate in the same tests. Being labelled as a "top student" or "super scholar" by peers due to test achievements clearly reflects the hero layer in action. At the individual level, the recognition as a "super scholar" enhances the test-taker's personal achievement and self-perception and reinforces their identity as a successful learner, enhancing their motivation and engagement in academic pursuits. The finding aligns with Ashton's (2012) study that the tests empowered academically inclined students and gave these students confidence in their English proficiency. At the collective level, the status as a "top student" creates a ripple effect in their community. It sets a benchmark for academic excellence, inspiring their peers to aspire to similar achievements and fostering a culture of academic ambition.

However, some test-takers chose not to share test results with their peers to avoid attracting undue attention or being in the spotlight. They tried to avoid becoming the hero in their social groups as they saw the controversial effects of doing so. The desire to avoid competition was a significant motivator for young test-takers to withhold their test results from their peers. In this way, they did not care about being a role model or hero among peers but targeted becoming a long-term winner among peers. According to social comparison theory, individuals assess their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves with others (Garcia & Tor, 2024). Friends who begin to compete are more likely to exhibit rivalry symptoms more frequently than strangers who enter into competition (Converse et al., 2024). By not sharing their achievements, these individuals sought to maintain harmonious relationships within their social groups, avoiding the potential negative consequences of being perceived as heroes, such as envy and peer competition.

Rituals: Test Preparation Practices and Societal Norms
The ritual layer refers to the collective activities that serve as generally accepted social standards (Hofstede et al., 2010). The test signals the completion of the learning stage, and stakeholders use the test scores to announce their learning achievement and their readiness to move forward. In this context, test-takers test preparation practice and their envision on future plans can be considered as rituals.

Test-takers test preparation practice includes immediate test preparation and daily English learning. Immediate efforts, often guided by parents, included drilling and memorization, as documented by Carless & Lam (2014) and Gu & Saville (2012). The findings aligned with earlier research by Xu (2017) and Yao (2019) on the lack or sacrifice

of personal relaxation time in pursuit of academic achievement, suggesting test-takers' intrinsic motivation to succeed, which reflected both the family and broader societal values on education at large. Test-takers also recalled their daily learning experiences as part of their overall testing experience, as documented by Tse et al. (2017) and Cheung et al. (2017) emphasizing the importance of daily learning on test performance. It, in turn, affects test-takers' future plans for learning and test preparation, reflecting the previous studies by Dos Santos (2019) and Ito (2016) on the lasting influence of test experiences on the development of learning habits and practices.

For some test-takers, taking the test becomes a periodic activity integrated into their routine at the individual level, which reflect the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). Test-takers aim to keep up with the schedule and pace of their peers at the collective level, treating the test as a customary step of language learning rather than a critical milestone. This sentiment is very common among test-takers from international schools where school-level test registration and preparation are offered. To a certain extent, this arrangement makes the tests feel more common, and test-takers begin to see testing as a routine. For test-takers from the public school system, these tests function as milestones, marking their proficiency level as in other extracurricular activities, such as dancing or basketball. Taking these tests symbolizes students' improvement and mastery in the field, suggesting their readiness to move to a higher level.

Value Layer: Cultural Emphasis and Personal Aspiration
In the core of the onion model is the value layer. To understand the value behind the test-taking, we need to dig into test-takers' motivation and the societal emphasis on test achievement at both individual and collective levels to develop in-depth understanding of how personal beliefs, cultural values, and social expectations shape test-takers' perceptions and attitudes toward English language learning and testing.

At the individual level, the perceived value of test results affected test-takers' confidence and motivation. Positive test results boosted test-takers' self-confidence and motivation, whereas tests perceived as overly challenging or followed with unsatisfactory results demotivated them. The finding aligns with the earlier studies by Chik and Besser (2011) and Ashton et al. (2012) that test-taking fosters learners' confidence. Their anticipation of the positive effects of tests on school learning drove them to overcome the challenges and barriers reported. Formal recognition, such as certification, further played a key role in motivating students—a finding consistent with Docherty et al. (2014), who noted that students sought Cambridge English certificates for self-verification. In this sense, tests served not merely as evaluative tools but also as catalysts for change and modification of their learning plans, extending prior research (Carless & Lam, 2014; Dos Santos, 2019) by showing how test outcomes shape their future learning plans and aspirations.

At the collective level, the value test-takers held for testing was influenced by the broad societal emphasis on academic achievement and the cultural values in the society at large. In the context where this study was conducted, the high value placed on academic success, especially success in large-scale tests, in the Chinese society (Ryan, 2019) drives test-takers' motivations and aspirations. Test-takers' desire to assess their English proficiency after years of study reflects an internalization of such cultural values. The popularity of English tests for young learners in China also reflect the collective belief in the importance of large-scale tests. The collective prioritization not only motivates individuals but also reinforces such cultural norms. Despite the physical discomfort and negative emotions expressed by some test-takers, they still follow their parents' arrangement in test preparation and participation, which reflects the "unpopular norm" discussed by Willer et al. (2009) that individuals follow certain social standard or expectation not because they personally enjoy it but rather due to the desire to conform societal and familial expectations. These norms are maintained through socialization process where individuals internalize the importance of adhering to such practice even then they find disagreeable. Therefore, the consequences of test use for this vulnerable group of test-takers need to be studied more in depth alongside with their parents (Guo, 2024) to develop a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusion
Despite the limitation of the study due to the lack of the analysis on parents' data and as a family unit in pair-up manner and together to understand the dynamics and interactions between test-takers and their families, this study provided an in-depth exploration of young test-takers' experiences with English language tests, focusing on their emotional responses, family and social interactions, efforts and supports, barriers and challenges, and motivations and aspirations. One of the key contributions of this study is the emphasis on understanding test-takers' experiences from their own perspectives, using draw-a-picture techniques and interview. The findings have implications for educators, test developers, and policymakers. First, the study revealed the need to improve communication and transparency in test administration and accommodation to reduce misunderstanding and confusion. Standardizing the administrative process across different locations could alleviate this barrier. It will also be helpful to build up communication platforms for previous and new test-takers as it can allow experienced test-takers to share their insights and tips, promoting a supportive community around the test. Secondly, it will be important for test developers and policy makers to take into consideration on the test-takers' feedback and comments to ensure that tests can represent test-takers from diverse sociocultural background, especially those from underrepresented groups. Test uses and test consequences are the results of our testing practices within a social environment which need to be studied *in context.*

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Ethics Declarations
World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study was conducted in full accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the appropriate institutional ethics board. Informed consent was obtained

from all participants, and parental/guardian consent was obtained for minors prior to participation. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and the ability to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Competing Interests
The author declares that there are no competing interests related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

Data Availability
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request. To protect participant confidentiality and comply with ethics approval requirements, only de-identified data may be shared.

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