

# Use of language assessment for decision-making: The HKDSE Chinese Language Speaking Examination

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## Abstract

Language test is a common tool for inference of language ability. Based on these inferences, decisions can be made about individuals. For example, attaining Level 3 or above in Chinese Language and English Language in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) organised by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) is the minimum language proficiency requirement for university admission. In Hong Kong, nearly all candidates' first language is Chinese. Unlike other places, the HKDSE Chinese Language is characterised by having a first language speaking examination. People may ask “Why do we need to assess speaking ability in the first language?”, “Are there any other elements included in the speaking examination?”, “What does language proficiency in HKDSE Chinese Language really mean?”, “How the assessment results of HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination facilitate stakeholders to make decision?”. This paper first describes the specific content and structure of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination. It then reviews some past papers, marking criteria and examination reports of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam to illustrate what is being assessed and how stakeholders can refer to the assessment results to make relevant decision. Lastly, some suggestions on the future developments of the speaking examination will be discussed.

**Key words:** HKDSE Chinese Language, First language speaking examination, Language proficiency

## 1. Introduction

Under the New Academic Structure (NAS) in Hong Kong, all students are expected to complete three years of junior and senior secondary education respectively. Upon completion of this six-year secondary education, students will take the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), which aims at measuring the academic attainment of students and providing general qualification to S6 graduates for further education, employment and training. Chinese is the Mother Tongue Language (MTL) of an overwhelming majority of Hong Kong students. Thus Chinese Language is one of the core subjects that most candidates take.

The assessment of Chinese Language is based on *the Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 to 6) for Chinese Language* jointly prepared by the Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. The overall aim of the assessment is to evaluate candidates' achievement of the learning targets and objectives of the curriculum. The assessment consists of a public examination component and a school-based assessment component as outlined in the following table:

Table 1: The components of the HKDSE Chinese Language

Component		Weighting
Public Examination	Paper 1 Reading	24%
	Paper 2 Writing	24%
	Paper 3 Listening & Integrated Skills	18%
	Paper 4 Speaking	14%
School-based Assessment (for school candidates only)		20%

In other Chinese-speaking regions, large-scale Chinese Language tests are carried out to assess language proficiency. The National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as Gaokao is a large-scale examination usually taken by students in their last year of senior high school in Mainland China. It is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level. The Standard Chinese Language is a compulsory subject and the exam paper consists of two parts:

Table 2: The question types of the Gaokao Standard Chinese Language

Question Type	
Reading questions	Modern article reading Ancient poetry and article reading
Expression questions	Language application Writing

The General Scholastic Ability Test (GSAT) and the Advanced Subjects Test (AST) are the two main Taiwanese university entrance examinations. Candidates are tested on their knowledge and skills of the required high school subjects to determine their readiness for college study. Both GSAT Chinese and AST Chinese consist of two parts:

Table 3: The question types of the GSAT Chinese and the AST Chinese

Question Type		Weighting
Multiple choice questions	To test basic knowledge of Chinese language, literature and culture.	50%
Response writing and essay writing	To test the ability to form rational arguments, express emotions and thoughts in Chinese.	50%

Comparing the HKDSE Chinese Language with other large-scale Chinese Language examinations in Chinese speaking regions, the speaking component is a salient feature of the HKDSE. Some past papers, marking criteria and examination reports of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam will be examined to illustrate what is being assessed and how stakeholders can refer to the assessment results to make relevant decisions.

## 2. The development of Chinese Language tests in public examinations

Over the past two decades, the Chinese Language curriculum and assessment have faced great changes.

### 2.1 The HKCEE Chinese Language

The Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) was one of the most well-established and recognised public examinations in Hong Kong. The HKCEE was normally taken by students at the end of their five-year secondary school education. The HKCEE Chinese Language consisted of two papers, namely Paper 1 Writing and Language Usage and Paper 2 Reading Comprehension and Set Text Questions. Speaking examination was not included.

### 2.2 The HKALE Chinese Language

Chinese Language and Culture was implemented as an Advanced Supplementary Level (AS-Level) subject in Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination since 1994. It was mainly taken by students upon completion of the two-year sixth-form education. Attaining grade E or above in this subject had always served as one of basic requirements for students to pursue further studies and employment. The assessment consisted of a public examination component and a school-based assessment component. The speaking examination was launched. The assessment framework is outlined in the following table:

Table 4: The assessment framework of AS-Level Chinese Language and Culture

Component		Weighting
Public Examination	Paper 1 Practical Writing & Reading Comprehension	35%
	Paper 2 Cultural Issues	25%
	Paper 3 Listening	15%
	Paper 4 Speaking	15%
Paper 5 School-based Assessment (for school candidates only)		10%

The AS-Level Chinese Language and Culture speaking paper was divided into two parts, Part A was Individual Presentation and Part B was Group Discussion. The assessment objectives were to test the ability of candidates to describe, present plans, express personal judgments and feeling in a small-group discussion, etc.

### 2.3 The HKCEE Chinese Language in the new curriculum

To align with the development of the new Chinese Language curriculum in 2005, the HKCEE Chinese Language also underwent corresponding changes. The content of the assessment was mainly based on several aspects: Chinese literature, Chinese culture or morals and ethical education. The focus was on candidates' ability to express their opinions. The subject was composed of five components, including:

Table 5: The components of HKCEE Chinese Language

Component		Weighting
Public Examination 80%	Paper 1 Reading	25%
	Paper 2 Writing	25%
	Paper 3 Listening	12%
	Paper 4 Speaking	18%
	Paper 5 Integrated Skills	20%
School-based Assessment (for school candidates only)		20%

There were two parts in the speaking paper, Part A was Reading Aloud and Part B was Group Discussion.

## 2.4 The HKDSE Chinese Language

The New Academic Structure was implemented in Hong Kong in 2009. The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) was designed to replace the existing public examinations: the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE). The first HKDSE Examination was held in summer 2012. The HKDSE Chinese Language maintains the assessment framework of the HKCEE (shown in Table 4). Following the medium-term review of curriculum and assessment launched in October 2013, the Chinese Language speaking examination was streamlined. Only Part B Group Discussion is retained.

Based on the Group Discussion of the HKDSE Chinese Language, the following questions will be addressed:

- Why do we need to assess the speaking ability of candidates' first language?
- Are there any other elements included in the speaking examination?
- What does language proficiency in HKDSE Chinese Language entail?
- How does the assessment result of HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination facilitate stakeholders' decision-making?

## 3. Overview of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination

The HKDSE Chinese Language is developed around the New Senior Secondary Chinese Language curriculum guide and is composed of four papers: Reading, Writing, Listening & integrated skills, and Speaking, and a school-based component with each carrying different weighting. The Speaking paper carries 14% of the subject mark.

### 3.1 Assessment objectives

The overall aim of HKDSE Chinese Language is to assess candidates': (1) reading, writing, listening and speaking, thinking, aesthetic and self-learning skills; (2) interests, attitudes and habits in language learning; (3) literature, cultural literacy and morality; (4) awareness of responsibility for the family, the country and the world. The speaking examination is conducted basing on these objectives and focuses on assessing the ability of candidates to express ideas, maintain spoken exchanges using appropriate communication strategies during discussion.

### **3.2 Assessment tasks**

Five candidates are grouped together to take part in a group discussion based on a given topic. They have fifteen minutes for group interaction. Each candidate has one minute for opening speech. Before the group interaction begins, candidates will have ten minutes for preparation.

### **3.3 Question Papers**

The group interaction is based on given topics. The topics may vary considerably and are within the everyday experience of young people in Hong Kong. Topics are drawn from campus life, popular issues, Chinese culture, social phenomena, value reflection, etc. Prompts will be given. These prompts may be presented graphically in the form of tables, graphs, flow charts, pictures and so on. Candidates may be required to make suggestions, give advice, make and explain a choice, argue for and/or against a standpoint, or discuss the pros and cons of a proposal.

The following are some topics from the 2017 HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination:

- Which of the following activities is most helpful for improving the well-being of young people? Try to talk about your opinion.  
Chess/ Learning music instrument/ Learning martial arts
- Which of the following is more appropriate to symbolize friendship? Try to talk about your opinion.  
Eyeglasses/ Map
- The following are principles that must be considered when rewarding one's behaviour. Try to rank their importance.  
Fairness/ Timeliness/ Appropriateness in Quantity
- In recent years, the location of many public facilities has been opposed by the community. Try to comment on this phenomenon.

### **3.4 Rating Scale**

Each candidate will be assessed independently by two examiners. Candidates will be assessed on the quantity and quality of their ideas; the clarity and accuracy of their delivery; the appropriacy and accuracy of their language patterns; and their ability to establish and maintain interaction. There are four domains of assessment:

- Elaboration: to assess the quality of the content relevant to the topic.
- Language: to assess the quality of language used in presenting and responding.
- Response: to assess the ability to communicate.
- Attitude: to assess candidates' participation and manner.

Considering the feasibility and reliability of marking, elaboration & language, response & attitude are combined to form two marking domains. A candidate will be awarded a mark from 0 – 9 on each of the two domains. The maximum mark awarded by each examiner is 18, making a total of 36 marks. The rating scale is as follow:

Table 6: The rating scale of HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination

Score range / Score criteria	Elaboration & Language	Response & Attitude
8-9	Expresses an impressive range of well-developed and complex ideas that is relevant to the topic. Expands and elaborates with impressive detail. Uses varied and highly accurate language patterns. Speaks fluently and naturally.	Consistently responds effectively to others. Initiates and maintains interaction skillfully. Speaks positively, politely and with self-confidence.
6-7	Expresses some well-developed and relevant ideas clearly. Expands and elaborates in detail. Uses varied and accurate language patterns. Speaks fluently and naturally.	Consistently responds effectively to others, sustaining and extending conversational exchanges. Speaks positively and politely.
4-5	Expresses some relevant ideas clearly. Organizes, clarifies or supplements the content of the discussion. Makes generally appropriate use of vocabulary. Speaks fluently and naturally.	Responds appropriately to others, sustaining and extending conversational exchanges politely.
2-3	Attempts to express relevant ideas. Attempts to sort out, clarify or supplement the ideas.	Makes brief responses to others and participates in the discussion politely.
1	Occasionally produces brief ideas relevant to the topic. The ideas are unclear and rough.	Does not respond to others, or often dominate the group interaction. Acceptable attitude.
0	Does not participate in the discussion, or deliberately undermine the discussion, or the performance cannot be assessed.	

### 3.5 Reporting System

In the HKDSE, Standards-referenced Reporting (SRR) is adopted to report candidates' assessment results. For Chinese Language, candidates' levels of performance are reported with reference to a set of explicit and fixed standards of performance. A set of descriptors is written for the overall subject of Chinese Language and each paper to describe what a candidate performing at a given level is typically able to do. They describe the achievements that candidates are able to demonstrate in positive terms and avoid describing what candidates cannot achieve. By their nature, these descriptors represent 'on-average' statements, and may not precisely describe the actual performance of individual candidates.

Candidates' performance is reported on the HKDSE certificate at five levels (1–5), with 5 being the highest. The highest-achieving level 5 candidates are awarded level 5\*\*; the next highest-achieving level 5 candidates are awarded level 5\* and the

remaining level 5 candidates receive simply level 5. Performance below the level 1 standard for a subject is designated as 'Unclassified'. In addition to the overall subject level, candidates' performance in individual components (e.g. Speaking) is also reported.

The level descriptors of the speaking paper are the basis of the rating scale (shown in Table 6) and are quoted as follow:

Table 7: The HKDSE Chinese Language Speaking Level Descriptors

Level 5	Expresses an impressive range of well-developed and complex ideas that is relevant to the topic. Expands and elaborates with impressive detail. Consistently responds effectively to others. Initiates and maintains interaction skillfully. Uses varied and highly accurate language patterns. Speaks fluently and naturally. Speaks positively, politely and with self-confidence.
Level 4	Expresses some well-developed relevant ideas clearly. Expands and elaborates in detail. Consistently responds effectively to others, sustaining and extending conversational exchanges. Uses varied and accurate language patterns. Speaks fluently and naturally. Speaks positively and politely.
Level 3	Expresses some relevant ideas clearly. Organizes, clarifies or supplements the content of the discussion. Responds appropriately to others, sustaining and extending conversational exchanges politely. Makes generally appropriate use of vocabulary. Speaks fluently and naturally.
Level 2	Attempts to express relevant ideas. Attempts to sort out, clarify or supplement the ideas. Makes some brief responses to others and participates in discussions politely.
Level 1	Occasionally produces brief ideas relevant to the topic. The ideas are not clear and rough. Does not respond to others, or often dominates the group interaction.

#### 4. Meaning of language proficiency in HKDSE Chinese Language

According to *the Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 to 6) for Chinese Language*, the content of Chinese language education can be summarized as reading, writing, listening and speaking, Chinese culture and literature, morality, thinking and language self-learning abilities. "Learning, teaching and assessment" is a complete cycle of curriculum implementation. The design of the HKDSE Chinese Language should also be closely aligned with the curriculum framework.

The curriculum and assessment developers of the HKDSE Chinese Language proposed that the ability to express opinions and interact with others on serious topics effectively is not an innate ability even if students are native Chinese speakers and always communicate with friends and relatives in Chinese. The HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination was designed and launched in 2012 on the basis of this belief.

What is being assessed in the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam? The answer is language ability and cultural literacy.

#### **4.1 Language ability**

The framework of language ability proposed by Bachman comprises of two components: language competence, also called language knowledge, and strategic competence, which is a set of metacognitive strategies that provides a management function in language use. Language knowledge includes two further categories: organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Strategic competence is operated in three general areas: goal setting, appraising and planning. Though the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam does not focus on assessing the full range of areas of language ability, most areas of candidates' language ability are assessed.

“Language”, “response” and “attitude” are the assessment domains of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam. According to the Level Descriptors, high achievers can make accurate use of an impressive range of vocabulary and use varied and highly accurate language patterns to express complex ideas. They can consistently respond effectively to others, and initiate and maintain interaction skillfully. Candidates need to produce accurate sentences to interact with other candidates in the exam group. Grammatical knowledge such as the knowledge of syntax, vocabulary and semantic is involved. The ways in which candidates manage the conversation, such as turn-taking and pre-sequence are assessed.

Pragmatic knowledge enables the creation and interpretation of discourse by relating sentences to the communicative goals of the language user and to the feature of language use setting. The language use setting in the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam is a group interaction based on a given topic. The communicative goal of the candidates is to fulfil the given task, for example making suggestions, giving advice, and arguing for and/or against a position. Two areas of pragmatic knowledge, i.e. functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge are involved and assessed.

In the language use setting of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam, candidates need to set communicative goals such as expressing opinion, convincing others or drawing conclusions. Strategies of appraising and planning need to be used to utilize language knowledge to complete the task successfully. Strategic competence is also assessed.

Language knowledge is a common aspect that first and second language proficiency tests intend to assess. Comparing the HKDSE Chinese Language with other large-scale Chinese Language examinations in Chinese speaking regions, the speaking component is included in HKDSE only. This may be implied that language knowledge for candidates' first language can be sufficiently assessed by reading and writing tests. As speaking tests are usually adopted in second language proficiency tests aiming at assessing test takers' ability to use the language practically, it may be concluded that a main concern of the HKDSE Chinese Language is for the speaking exam to reflect the functional aspect of language.



## 4.2 Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy is an essential part of language proficiency tests (Ng, 2001). Cultural literacy in Chinese language tests involves knowledge in Chinese culture and literature, morality, and higher-order thinking.

Group interaction based on given topics is the assessment task in the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam. Topics are drawn from campus life, popular issues, Chinese culture, social phenomena, value reflection, etc. For example, “Which stories of filial piety (Xiao) is more worth learning for children?” was one of the topics in 2017 exam. Knowledge in Chinese culture and morality is involved in expressing well-developed ideas that is relevant to the topic. The candidate should comment on the stories of filial piety (Xiao) on the basis of Confucian moral and ethics as well as modern social values. Another example is “what can symbolize friendship?” The “Five Relationships”, the core value of Neo-Confucianism, is one of the relevant concepts of the question.

According to the Level Descriptors, a high achiever can express an impressive range of well-developed complex ideas that is relevant to the topic. They can expand and elaborate with impressive detail. The depth and breadth of the speaking content is a core marking criterion of the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking exam. And the content is related to Chinese culture, literature, moral and ethics.

The HKDSE Chinese Language is closely aligned with the curriculum framework. As a first language test, assessing the candidates’ language knowledge and knowledge in Chinese culture, moral and ethics are its core objectives. While the speaking paper performs this function, are there any other elements included in the speaking examination? What does language proficiency in HKDSE Chinese Language really mean? The answers of the two questions lie in the functional aspect of Chinese Language.

## 5. Using HKDSE Chinese Language Speaking Examination in decision making

The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examination is a large-scale, high-stakes, standards-referenced tests administered annually in Hong Kong to about 50000 local senior secondary students in their final year of study. The results of the HKDSE can be used for screening and selection. The HKDSE qualification provides useful information to the following parties:

- Provides feedback to students on their performance and to teachers and schools on the quality of the teaching provided.
- Communicates to parents, tertiary institutions, employers and the public about what it is that students know and are able to do.
- Facilitates fair selection decisions.

The HKDSE Chinese Language is used to collect information for making decisions. In addition to the overall subject level, candidates' performance in the speaking paper is also reported. Decisions about individuals and programs in educational and societal settings will be made on the basis of the HKDSE Chinese Language.

## **5.1 Feedback to students, teachers and school**

In the HKDSE Chinese Language, Standards-referenced Reporting (SRR) is adopted to report candidates' assessment results. Candidates' levels of performance are reported with reference to a set of standards of performance. A set of descriptors is written for the overall subject of Chinese Language and for each paper to describe what a candidate performing at a given level is typically able to do. Samples of student work are also provided for each year of examination. These samples, when used together with the level descriptors, are used to illustrate the standards expected at the various levels of performance. They are important reference sources to help students, teachers and schools to situate their efforts, thus ensuring alignment in the teaching, learning and assessment of Chinese Language.

HKEAA has been expanding the range of post-examination information it provides to candidates, schools and teachers. The following kinds of post-examination information are provided to stakeholders:

- Question Papers booklets, with marking schemes and comments on candidates' performance, available to the general public.
- Post-examination briefing sessions for teachers.
- Reports on the examination performance of particular schools, produced on request and for a fee (School Statistical Report).

The above information is presented in both subject and paper levels. In the Question Papers booklets of Chinese Language, candidates' speaking performance are commented in the four assessment domains. School Statistical Report are customised for individual schools and include a comparison of the school's statistics on general performance against all day schools, specific item analysis etc. Specific strengths and weaknesses are indicated using qualitative and quantitative methods. Using this information, decisions will be made by students, teachers and schools. One kind of teacher decision will involve the modification of teaching methods and materials so as to make them more appropriate for the needs of their next co-hort. Schools may decide to allocate more or less resources in the subject in the next academic year. Students' decisions based on their prospects will also be made, as it is reflected by their examination results.

## **5.2 Communicates to parents, tertiary institutions, employers and the public**

The purpose and use of HKDSE Chinese Language are often to inform educational institutions, employers and the public of the proficiency levels of the test-takers so that admission decisions can be made accordingly. For example, in order to apply for undergraduate programs offered by the eight University Grants Committee-funded institutions, students are required to attain Level 3. Students can use the results for application in other study programs and employment. Admission officers are able to make admission offers to applicants based on the examination results. Government officials are able to provide multiple pathways for students based on the examination results.

The HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination is one of the components of the whole subject. The language ability in speaking and culture literacy are assessed. Therefore, the attained level of a candidate in the speaking paper reflects

their general communication skills. It facilitates tertiary institutions and employers to make multiple decisions. However, it is necessary for them to conduct target-oriented tests in order to collect further information for making decisions in specific areas.

As the HKDSE Chinese Language is a high-stakes test, the speaking paper is likely to impose significant washback effects on Hong Kong students' first Language learning. The speaking component in the HKDSE Chinese Language influences Hong Kong students' learning outcome both positively and negatively. Students are found to prefer and participate more actively in learning activities that resembled the assessment task types in the communication-oriented examination such as group discussion. On the other hand, narrow test preparation strategies are found. Teachers and students often intend to teach and learn many formulaic expressions instead of pragmatic knowledge and strategies in facilitating communication. They put less effort on other elements of Chinese language education such as Chinese culture and literature, morality, thinking and language self-learning abilities. The enrollment of students in test-focused tutorial classes is another washback effect.

There are some constraints of the speaking exam that should be also addressed. Almost all the candidates are native speakers and reach certain level of proficiency in Chinese Language. The mark range of the speaking paper is narrow. Besides, candidates' performance may be affected by other candidates in the group discussion. These constraints have negative impacts on the validity and reliability of the exam. Curriculum and assessment developers should consider these washback effects and constraints when they make decisions on the enhancement of Chinese Language curriculum and assessment.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the HKDSE Chinese Language speaking examination is a first language speaking test. As a summative assessment, the purpose of the exam is to assess candidates' Chinese Language ability in cultural and functional aspects. It provides certain information for stakeholders to make decisions.

A rough review of the speaking examination has been done in this paper. Some may ask whether the speaking examination should be retained, which is the question that Chinese Language teachers and other stakeholders are asking in Hong Kong now. The Curriculum Development Council and the HKEAA will also conduct a review to address the following key challenges in the Chinese Language subject:

- Having to cater for learner diversity;
- Managing time to cover the full breadth and depth of the new curriculum;
- Bearing heavy workload for teachers, as well as for students.

After consideration of the feedback from stakeholders on the development of curriculum and assessment, measures will be taken to address the concerns mentioned above. For example, the number of examination paper will be reduced with corresponding streamlining in the whole subject exam. However, the overall standards and curriculum aims for Chinese Language will be maintained. Further qualitative and quantitative research in the HKDSE Chinese Language should be done in order to provide more information for decision making.

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