

Comparative Analysis of Independent Propositional Test and Chinese Proficiency Test in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Peng An Qi*, Wang Li Xia

College of Chinese International Education and Exchange, Hebei University, Hebei Province, Baoding 071000, China

Article Information

Received 23 May 2014
Received in revised form 17 August 2014
Accepted 19 August 2014

Abstract

Doing research on the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language is an important part of professional evaluation and personal assessment in order to obtain feedback and promote Chinese language and culture. As one of the efforts, this paper therefore reports on the use of Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) developed by Chinese educators in a technical-based Malaysian university by comparing it to the Independent Propositional Tests developed by local language educators. The HSK is commonly used in Hebei Province, China in an international context, and examining its use outside China is essential. Participants were students who enrolled in Mandarin course for beginners, who were also non-Chinese speakers. The objective of the study was to analyze the final test of HSK aiming at examining the questions and its content by examining its effects on students' foreign language learning. After comparing the independent propositional tests with the actual Chinese Proficiency Certificate (HSK) Level 1, it can be drawn that the difficulty level of the final test is greater than the HSK Level 1. Independent propositional final test demands a higher ability of grasping a larger vocabulary and understanding concepts of words that could be reflected on the writing skills. Development of the tests should therefore focus more on making it scientific, standardized and institutionalized.

© 2014 Penerbit Universiti Malaysia Pahang

Keywords: Assessment, Chinese as a foreign language; Independent propositional test

INTRODUCTION

According to the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the Malaysian government demands Malaysian educational institutions to treat Mandarin as one of the essential second/foreign language courses. To fulfill this demand, a Malaysian technical-based university and the Hebei University of China have collaborated with the aim of enhancing Malaysian undergraduates with the appropriate proficiency of the language. This collaboration also aims to promote Chinese history and culture through language learning.

The Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) also states that "...languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Arabic and other foreign languages will be offered to undergraduates to encourage them to master various languages in order to compete in the global market" (p. 270). This indicates an important initiative by the Malaysian government to highlight foreign language courses, where colleges and universities need to prepare language course such as Mandarin for all students to benefit from. Mandarin

* Corresponding author: Tel.: +86-138-3301-8601; Fax: +86-031-2502-2648.
E-mail addresses: peng_anqi@163.com [Peng, A.Q.]; wanglixia@hbu.edu.cn [Wang, L.X.].

is emphasized due to the advancement of Chinese economy in the global market, and the extensive use of Mandarin language in Malaysia where the second largest population in Malaysia is the Malaysian Chinese.

As a consequence of this, as part of the collaboration initiatives, the Chinese universities have been sending Chinese volunteer teachers every year in order to provide a strong support in teaching Chinese language courses and organizing Chinese cultural activities at the Malaysian university. Mandarin teachers from China were brought to the university in order to ensure that students are able to experience Mandarin language learning and teaching with native speakers. These teachers, who worked on volunteer basis, brought with them syllabi, modules and assessments developed by the Chinese educators in order to be implemented in the Malaysian university. This paper therefore reports the effectiveness of the modules and assessments which were used by the volunteer teachers from China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Importance of Language Test

A test is a common way to measure the effects of language learning on student performance and achievement and to verify whether teaching objectives have been achieved in classroom instruction. Language test is a tool used to assess learners' language acquisition. Through language test, teachers can improve their teaching and reflect whether students have mastered effective learning and gained appropriate knowledge and skills. Zhang (2002) stated that more information can be gained from language tests in order to improve teaching materials and teaching methods.

Language tests can be categorized into different types, which include Academic Aptitude Test (AAT), self-achievement tests, proficiency tests and diagnostic tests. Among these, the achievement test is used to measure learners' mastery of the prescribed contents of the curriculum and teaching materials at a certain phase in the learning process (Liu & Han, 1999; Zhang, 2002). Propositional language tests of a language course can be classified as self-achievement test. Regardless of which test used by educators, the quality of the assessment has a crucial role in helping both teachers and students improve their teaching and learning.

2.2 A Review of Chinese Language Testing

In the last twenty years, in the context of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) in China, the development process of Chinese language testing and evaluation has been carefully monitored and researched by the China ministry and educators. In 2003, Ke and Shen introduced and evaluated America's Chinese Teaching from eight different aspects covering a span of twenty years. In 2006, Jia discussed the testing system of Chinese language in Japan, and in the same year, Lei (2006) introduced an evaluation system of Chinese teaching at the Human Resource Department of Samsung. It can be noted from all these studies that so far research on testing and evaluation of teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language is still relatively fragmented and not systematic. There should be more researches that look at the issues of testing and evaluation of the Chinese language.

Chinese Proficiency Test, or *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK), is a standardized international Chinese proficiency test and was established for testing non-native Chinese speakers (including foreigners, overseas Chinese and Chinese minority candidates), focusing on the skills of using Chinese to communicate in daily lives, and for studying and working (Hanban, 2011). HSK was developed and designed by the Beijing Language and Culture University, HSK Chinese Proficiency Test Center. The test contains 6 levels: HSK Level 1, HSK Level 2, HSK Level 3, HSK Level 4, HSK Level 5 and HSK Level 6. Every year, HSK is held regularly in China and overseas. Anyone who reaches the required standard can receive the appropriate level of Chinese Proficiency Certificate. The Chinese Ministry of Education established a national HSK committee, which solely leads the Chinese Proficiency Test, and awards the Chinese Proficiency Certificate (Cai, 2010; Wu, 2010; Xu 2007).

THE PRESENT STUDY

In order to constantly improve the quality of foreign Chinese teaching and evaluation, complete the system of foreign Chinese education and promote the development of foreign language education in relation to the use of HSK, it is important to test the effectiveness of HSK in foreign universities. This paper reports one of the initiatives of the Special Topic of Language of the Department of Education in Hebei Province – a project on Preparatory Education and Evaluation System of International Students in Hebei Province. This research not only has important theoretical significance, but also will produce practical applications to further promote the establishment of preparatory training base in Hebei Province and drive Hebei Foreign language teaching projects. We are guided by our experiences from students' preparatory courses, both conducted locally in China as well as internationally. We applied the comparative analysis approach to actively explore the development and specific measures of foreign Chinese education. This is guided by previous researches which applied similar research approach in analyzing the HSK. Previous studies on HSK include 《Han Yu Zou Xiang Shi Jie de Li Xing Si Kao》 and 《Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Cai Zhong Zai Chuang Xin Yu Shi Yong》 by Wang Yuexin (2008a, 2008b), and 《Qian Tan Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Xue Zhong de Wen Hua Jiao Xue》 by Wu Wenjie (2010), which were all conducted at Hebei University.

METHODOLOGY

The comparative analysis approach was used to compare the objective aspects in order to better understand the nature of the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) and make the right evaluation of its effectiveness. Comparative analysis typically compares the indicator data where two data are interlinked so that the data can display and describe the scale size, level, pace and coordination relationships of the findings. In comparative analysis, selecting the appropriate comparison standard is a very crucial step. Only the right choice is able to make an objective evaluation or the evaluation of inappropriate selection might draw the wrong conclusions.

4.1 Participants

Participants were 228 students who enrolled in Mandarin for Beginners course, who were also non-Chinese speakers.

4.2 Research Materials

4.2.1 *The Chinese Proficiency Test*

Since the study was conducted in a beginner course, the HSK level 1 was used. HSK level 1 tests students' skills of using Chinese in daily communication and for studying purposes, which corresponds with the beginner level of the International Chinese Ability Standard (Liu, 2000). Those who passed HSK level 1 are able to understand and use some simple Chinese words and sentences as to meet the specific interaction needs, and have the ability to further study in Chinese. HSK Level 1 is mainly for learners who study 2-3 academic hours weekly for a semester and master 150 most commonly used words and related grammar knowledge. The testing of HSK Level 1 is made up of speaking test, writing paper and a final test. The final test places emphasis on the ability to listen and read, including comprehensive reading and listening comprehension. In summary, a simple understanding of the HSK and independent propositional final test of Mandarin for beginners indicates that the objects and targets of both tests are quite equal so that it can be analyzed.

4.2.2 Independent Propositional Test

This study selected a course entitled Mandarin for Beginners as its background. It is a one-credit course offered to first year undergraduate students with the total academic contact hour of 32. The overall performance evaluation of this course looks at the four basic language skills, and the evaluation consists of three parts: 1) listening, speaking, reading and writing tests and quizzes, 2) Chinese practical arts, and 3) the final test. The listening test, the Chinese character test, writing and the final test mainly require learners to write Pinyin, which is not Chinese character. Second, the speaking test is divided into two small parts, presentations and read-and-answer test. Finally, students need to pass the Chinese practical arts by singing Chinese song and write Chinese calligraphy.

4.3 Comparative Analysis

4.3.1 Comparative analysis of the types of questions

The main paper of HSK level 1 includes two parts, listening and reading comprehension, and there are 40 questions in total. Details of the content and structure of the paper is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of HSK level 1.

	Components	Types of Questions	Number of Questions	Percentage (%)	Time Allocated
HSK [Level 1]	Listening	First Part (A truth-value judgment)	5	12.5	15 mins
		Second Part (Elect pictures)	5	12.5	
		Third Part (Elect pictures)	5	12.5	
		Forth Part (Choose answers)	5	12.5	
	Reading Comprehension	First Part (A truth-value judgment)	5	12.5	25 mins
		Second Part (Elect pictures)	5	12.5	
		Third Part (Match Q&A)	5	12.5	
		Forth Part (Fill in the blanks)	5	12.5	
Total	2	/	40	100	40 mins

Listening comprehension mainly assesses the candidates' ability to understand spoken Chinese, while reading comprehension mainly tests the quality of mastering and using vocabulary, grammar and understanding of Chinese writing materials.

On the other hand, the independent propositional final test used for the Mandarin for Beginners course does not include listening part. It consists of reading comprehension and writing section with a total of 38 questions. Details of the contents and structure of the paper is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Description of the independent propositional final test.

	Components	Types of Questions	Number of Questions	Marks	Percentage (%)	Time Allocated	
Final Test	Reading	First Part: Fill in the blanks	5	5	8	10 mins	
		Second Part: Elect pictures	7	7	11		
	Writing (<i>Pinyin</i>)	First Part: Reading comprehension		8	15	25	20 mins
		Second Part : Translate phrases		3	3	5	
		Third Part: Restructure words)		5	10	17	
		Forth Part: Complete dialogues		5	10	17	
		Fifth Part: Create sentences		5	10	17	
	Total	2	/	38	60	100	60

The reading comprehension mainly tests the candidates' ability to understand basic words, sentences and grammar. Writing (only *Pinyin*) mainly inspects the candidates' capability in composition, vocabulary application and simple translation.

By comparing the two tables, we can see that the final test excludes listening part while HSK Level 1 excludes the writing section which will appear in HSK Level 3. Although the requirement of writing in the final test is simply on pinyin, the standard is at a lower level, it does not require students to write exactly the right tones, this section has a high percentage, which is more than 80%. In addition, there are various types of questions such as reading comprehension, phrasal translation, words restructuring, dialogues completion and sentences development, which greatly increase the difficulty of the paper. Therefore, for learners who study Mandarin only for one semester, the writing rate of the final test should be appropriately reduced meanwhile listening must be added in order to complete the overall study of the students' ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing according to the standard set by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

4.3.2 Comparative analysis of the content

The first part of the reading section in the final test is fill-in-the-blank. This section assesses the basic reading skills which include the lexical collocations, understanding of contexts and mastery of word order. It is generally similar with the fourth reading part of HSK level 1 in which all sentences are selected from the original text dialogues on the assumption that it is suitable for beginner learners of Chinese proficiency.

The second part of the reading section in the final test is to select pictures on the basis of understanding each sentence. The test provides one sentence for each question with a few pictures, where the students are required to choose a corresponding picture according to the contents. This is substantially similar to the second reading part of the HSK level 1. All vocabulary questions are from the primary teaching materials with appropriate level of difficulty. The purpose of this part is to assess learners' memory of the contents and comprehension of questions.

As previously stated, the writing section of the test does not appear in HSK level 1, but HSK Level 3 demands learners to write the corresponding number of Chinese characters to vocabulary. By comparison, the third part of the final writing resembles the first part of HSK Level 3, with a few different requirements: 1) the final test only asks candidates to write Pinyin while the HSK level 3 requires the candidates to write Chinese characters correctly; 2) the form of fifth of the final test is the same with the first of HSK Level 4, but the difficulty is not alike that final test is relatively simple which just creates sentences based on a key phrases.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the independent propositional final test collected from 228 students in eight Mandarin for Beginner classes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: 21 highest mispronounced Mandarin syllables based on the pre-test results.

Score	Weak 1-29	30-35	36-47	48-53	54-59	Excellent 60
No. of students	27	29	88	49	31	4
Percentage (%)	11.8	12.7	38.6	21.5	13.6	1.8

The table shows that nearly 80 percent of the students were able to meet and exceed the pass mark (i.e. 36), more than 40% of the students were able to achieve a good level and a few were able to obtain full score. From the performance point of view, students' learning performance in Mandarin class for beginners is satisfying.

The findings present a number of challenges that need to be resolved with regards to the test used. First, due to heavy reliance on the original contents where contents were copied from textbooks and exercises, some questions decrease the difficulty level of the final test. For example, the third and fourth parts of the writing paper were selected from the original sentences in the textbook:

péngyǒu shì de Húxīn wǒ 。
朋友 是 的 胡新 我 。

This is an example of a question from the writing part of the final test where students need to rearrange the words into a grammatically correct sentence. The correct answer is “我的朋友是胡新”. This is an original sentence taken from the textbook from Lesson 1: Introduction of the Mandarin for Beginners.

chī zǎocān zǎo shang tā qīdiǎn měitiān 。
吃 早餐 早 上 他 七 点 每 天 。

This is another example taken from the writing part of the final test where students need to rearrange the words into a grammatically correct sentence. The correct answer is “他每天早上七点吃早餐”. This is an original sentence in the textbook from Lesson 4: Time Expression of the Mandarin for Beginners.

The second factor is that most of the students who were able to achieve full scores attended local Chinese primary or middle schools, thus laying the foundation for a certain level of Chinese. Generally, most of the students, whose first contact with Chinese language and culture were when they enrolled for the course, obtained scores between 30-53 points. It basically reflects the level of the student beginners whose academic hours were around 40 hours and relatively mirrors their learning process.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that independent propositional final test used to assess the Mandarin for Beginner students demands a higher ability of grasping a larger vocabulary, precise word concepts and providing written feedback. Evidently, the difficulty level is greater than the HSK Level 1, beyond one-semester-learning junior's capabilities. Therefore, the levels of textbooks and tests did not match. We

should either improve the difficulty of the textbook in order to help students learn more knowledge on Mandarin language, or decrease the difficulty of the final test.

There are some suggestions: HSK is a standardized international Chinese proficiency test created by many professional Chinese teachers, and it is a successful model of a Chinese test that student of Chinese as a foreign language should learn from. Using the independent propositional tests in teaching Chinese as second language should follow the right way and make it more local according to the situation in any Mandarin courses. For example, independent propositional tests need to add just a small listening part in it, decrease the large percent of the writing part and delete the parts which only appear in HSK level 3 and 4.

For language educators, designing tests should be done with the purpose of making it scientific in order to actually test students' ability and proficiency. The development of tests should pay more attention on making it scientific, standardized and institutionalized. Only in this way, teachers are capable of focusing on teaching points, reducing blindness and improving the quality of teaching.

REFERENCES

- Cai, Y.L. (2010). *Dui Jian Li "Dui Wai Han Yu Ge Ke Xing Ti Xing Ku" De Si Kao*. Beijing: Chinese International Education College.
- Hanban. (2011). *The Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK)*. Retrieved from http://www.hanban.edu.cn/tests/node_7486.htm
- Jia, X.H. (2006). Ri Ben Guo Nei de Han Yu Neng Li Kao Shi Ji Qi Jie Jian Yi Yi. *Beijing: Applied Linguistics*, S2, 155-158.
- Ke, C.R. & Shen, H.L. (2003). Hui Gu Yu Zhan Wang: Mei Guo Han Yu Jiao Xue Li Lun Yan Jiu Ping Shu. *Beijing: Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*, 3, 1-17.
- Lei, L. (2006). Han Guo San Xing Ji Tuan de Han Yu Jiao Xue. *Beijing: The International Society for Chinese Language Teaching*, 1(75), 122-126.
- Liu, R.Q. & Han, B.C. (1999). *Yu Yan Ce Shi He Ta De Fang Fa*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Society.
- Liu, X. (2000). *Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Yu Xue Yin Lun*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
- Wang, Y.X. (2008a). Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Cai Zhong Zai Chuang Xin Yu Shi Yong. *Beijing: Publishing Research*, 7, 57-59.
- Wang, Y.X. (2008b). Han Yu Zou Xiang Shi Jie de Li Xing Si Kao. *Baoding: Journal of Hebei University*, 4, 138-141.
- Wu, W.J. (2010). Qian Tan Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Xue Zhong de Wen Hua Jiao Xue. *Baoding: Journal of Adult Education College in Hebei University*, 2, 90-91.
- Xu, L. (2007). Han Yu Guo Ji Tui Guang de Xing Shi he Ren Wu. *Beijing: Chinese Teaching in the World*, 106-110.
- Yang, Y. (2008). Dui Wai Han Yu Jiao Xue Ce Shi Yu Ping Gu de Li Shi Yan Bian Yu Fa Zhan Qu Sh. *Beijing: Chinese Tests*, 45-50.
- Zhang, K. (2002). *Yu Yan Ce Shi Li Lun Yu Shi Jian*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.

