

New Chinese Proficiency Standards and Its Impacts on Chinese Proficiency Test

ZHANG, George Xinsheng* LI, Linda Mingfang

Abstract

The newly adopted Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education is the third of its kind since the mid-1980s. This article examines its contents and backgrounds in comparison to the two previous versions, and discusses its potential implications on Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) and on the learning and teaching of Chinese worldwide, now often referred to in China as international Chinese language education, particularly in Confucius Institutes, the main platform for international Chinese language education.

Keywords: Chinese proficiency standards, Chinese proficiency test (HSK), Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), European Benchmarks for Chinese Language (EBCL), international Chinese language education

*ZHANG, George Xinsheng, The Centre for Modern Languages, Richmond, the American International University in London, UK. Email: zhangg@richmond.ac.uk. (corresponding author)

LI, Linda Mingfang, Formerly Regent's University London, UK. Email: highfar1994@gmail.com.

This article is based on G. Zhang's presentation on the same topic at the online National Chinese Language Conference, USA, 24-26 June 2020. <https://asiasociety.org/national-chinese-language-conference>

1 INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education (《国际中文教育中文水平等级标准》), hereafter referred to as the Standards 3.0) was first made public at the International Chinese Language Education Conference in China in December 2019, then in a Chinese academic journal (Liu et al., 2020), and more recently introduced at the online National Chinese Language Conference in June 2020 organised by the American College Board and Asia Society in the USA before its official launch in late March 2021. The Standards 3.0, commissioned by the Confucius Institute Headquarters at that time and the Chinese Testing International appears to represent a huge deviation from the current standards *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages*, first published in 2007 (hereafter referred to as the Standards 2.0), and will undoubtedly impact, now it has been officially published and adopted, on international Chinese language education and the present Chinese Proficiency Test (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*, HSK, hereafter as HSK 2.0) developed in line with the Standards 2.0 and widely used since its inception in 2009.

The Standards 3.0, as the term given suggests, is actually the third version of Chinese language proficiency standards developed by the Chinese language education authority for the learners of Chinese from overseas since the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language was first proposed in China in the 1980s to be an academic subject as well as a cause of national importance for the promotion of Chinese language and culture both at home and abroad. The two earlier versions are respectively the *Chinese Proficiency Standards and Syllabus* (《汉语水平等级标准和等级大纲》), hereafter as the Standards 1.0) published in 1988, and the above-mentioned *Scale* (《国际汉语能力标准》), the Standards 2.0. Both earlier versions of the standards provided the basis for the subsequent development of the two versions of Chinese language proficiency test HSK, with the first initiated in the mid-1980s and officially certified in 1990 (hereafter as HSK 1.0), and the second one in 2009 (HSK 2.0) as the replacement of HSK 1.0 (Zhang & Wang,

2010) and is still in use today. It is still unclear when HSK 3.0 will come out, but as the Standards 3.0 is made official, the potential impacts that the Standards 3.0 may have on the new HSK 3.0, and indeed on the learning and teaching of Chinese internationally, especially that in Confucius Institutes can be enormous and far reaching. Therefore, the Standards 3.0 deserves a close look so as to better understand its full ramifications.

2 THE NEW CHINESE PROFICIENCY STANDARDS (3.0)

The Standards 3.0 was claimed to have been developed as “the national standards with the aims to meet the needs of the new era of globalisation (of international Chinese education)” (Liu et al., 2020). Compared with the previous two versions, the Standards 3.0 has a number of distinctive features, two of which are particularly worth mentioning. One is the inclusion of competence in Chinese phonetic syllables as one of the four linguistic components; and the other is the numerical target requirements for each linguistic component in definite quantitative terms as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Quantitative indicators (combined) for 9 grades at 3 levels¹

Level	Band	Syllable	Character	Vocabulary	Grammar
Elementary	1	269	300	500	48
	2	199/468	300/600	772/1,272	81/129
	3	140/608	300/900	973/2,245	81/210
Intermediate	4	116/724	300/1,200	1,000/3,245	76/286
	5	98/822	300/1,500	1,173/4,316	71/357
	6	86/908	300/1,800	1,140/5,456	67/424
Advanced	7 to 9	202/1,110	1,200/3,000	5,636/11,092	148/572
Total		1,110	3,000	11,092	572

Note: The numbers before and after “/” indicates new addition and accumulative sum respectively. No separate numbers for the bands at the advanced level.

¹ Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (2021, pp. 1-2).

Liu et al. (2020) also mention that the proposed Standards 3.0 is a development from an early research output in terms of its basis and principles, *The Graded Chinese Syllables, Characters and Words for Application of Teaching Chinese to the Speakers of Other Languages* (《汉语国际教育用音节汉字词汇等级划分》, Liu & Ma, 2010), of which Professor Liu was the main co-author. Since the earlier research a decade ago already included phonetic knowledge and competency of syllables as part of Chinese L2 proficiency, the inclusion of syllable in the Standards 3.0 is perhaps not so much an innovation but an upgrade of the standards to reflect that research on and understanding of the special linguistic feature of the Chinese language required in Chinese L2 competence, and more importantly, of the perceived needs in the promotion of Chinese language education worldwide at the present time and in the times to come.

It is clear that in addition to the new requirement of phonetic syllables, the proposed Standards 3.0 has also exceeded the previous two versions, especially the current Standards 2.0, in terms of what is required in all other three linguistic components for each and every band and level. Since the numbers given are very specific, it would be useful to see how these specific numbers in each component are arrived at, what actually constitutes and differentiates competence for each band and level, and how cross/inter-cultural communicative competence² is embedded in communicative tasks under topics and themes in the Standards 3.0.

Another point to note about the Standards 3.0 is that it does not seem to have mapped itself on to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) with regards to its levels, even though its three levels appear to be more or less comparable to those in CEFR. However, the current HSK 2.0 does claim its six levels are comparable to those in CEFR, and apparently not convincingly to some³, especially at A and B levels, one also wonders what the Standards 3.0 would imply

2 While there is distinction in English between cross cultural communication and inter cultural communication, it seems that the Chinese 跨文化交际 is often used for both. The authors propose 通文化交际 to refer to the latter.

3 Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries issued a statement on this in 2010.

for HSK 2.0 presently still in use, and what HSK 3.0 will look like when it is developed after the official publication of the Standards 3.0.

3 POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON NEW CHINESE PROFICIENCY TEST (HSK 3.0)

As mentioned above, both the Standards 3.0 and HSK 3.0 will be the third version respectively when fully developed and adopted. The first two versions and modifications both reflect the change in the policy and perceived needs of Chinese language learning and teaching of the time, and have impacted on both the learning/teaching and assessment/test of Chinese L2, and it is no exception for the forthcoming third version.

3.1 The Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0

The quantitative linguistic requirements of the Standards 1.0 and the subsequent HSK 1.0 developed with some reference to the standards are summarised in Table 2. What is interesting is that while the Standards 1.0 divides the competence into 5 levels, it only gives 4 levels of linguistic requirements in terms of Chinese characters, vocabulary and grammar items. While HSK 1.0 was not completely developed on the basis of the Standards 1.0, it was quite amazing to see how the two were so synchronised with each other. Both the Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0 were developed during the time when there started a gradual but steady increase in the number of learners from abroad to study Chinese in China, and the initial effort in China to establish as an independent academic discipline the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. If one looks into the background and times against which the Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0 came about, one can see that they were based upon the experience of teaching Chinese to the increasing number of speakers of other languages in China at that time, and to meet the actual needs for accessing Chinese language competence of those Chinese language learners in China and perceived needs of the learners abroad. The fact that both the Standards

1.0 and HSK 1.0 primarily aimed at those who could study Chinese in an intensive fashion or in formal academic setting where learning hours could be guaranteed, is quite evident from the explanatory notes of HSK 1.0 with its suggested learning hours for taking the test at different levels⁴.

Table 2. Quantitative indicators for the Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0⁵

ST 1.0	Character	Vocab	Grammar	HSK 1.0 Level	Grade	Character	Vocab
L4	2,555	7,000	910	Advanced	9-11	2,905	8,821
L3	2,205	5,253	652	Elementary/ Intermediate	6-8	2,205	5,253
L2	1,604	3,051	252		3-5		
L1	800	1,033	129	Basic	1-3	1,604	3,051
Total	2,555	7,000	910	Total		2,905	8,821

With the change in the policy and the launch of the Confucius Institute initiative at the beginning of the century, and with the shift of the focus of Chinese teaching from in China to abroad, from an intensive mode for people who went to learn the language in China, usually full time, to a typical part-time mode for people who study or work and do not have much time to spare to study, it soon revealed that the bar set by the Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0 would take a lot longer for the new target learners to reach a certain level of competence, as even taking HSK 1.0 at the basic level required hundreds of hours of study. This was perceived as an obstacle to decision makers in their implementation of the new policy as they feared that learners could become frustrated rather than being encouraged

4 HSK 1.0 suggests that its basic level is for those who have learned between 100 and 800 hours of Chinese, while its elementary and intermediate level requires between 400 and 2000 hours of study.

5 Figures are quoted from the graded reading standards in *Chinese Proficiency Standards and Syllabus* (《汉语水平等级标准和等级大纲》试用, 1988), Beijing Language Institute Press; and character and vocabulary lists in *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (Basic) Dagang* (2009), the Commercial Press, and *Zhongguo Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi Dagang (Elementary/Intermediate)*, 2001, Xiandai Press, and *Zhongguo Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi Dagang (Advanced)*, 2002, Beijing Language and Culture University Press. The revised HSK 1.0 proposal by HSK Test Centre, BLCU in 2007 suggests a three levels model, Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced, with each consisting of three grades.

to learn the language during the process. It was in this context that HSK 2.0 was developed to replace its predecessor to serve the new policy initiative with an aim to incentivise “amateur” learners of Chinese, supposedly in line with the Standards 2.0, which had been developed pretty much for the same purpose, after abandoning the initial effort to modify and revise HSK 1.0 (Zhang et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2010).

3.2 Standards 2.0 and HSK 2.0

Since the Standards 2.0 and HSK 2.0 were developed to meet the emerging needs in the promotion of Chinese language learning and teaching and to make learning and assessment easily accessible and attractive to the great many new target learners abroad, they both are radically different from their previous versions (Zhang & Li, 2019) in terms of their understanding of what language competence is about, and in their linguistic requirements in Chinese for the relevant competence levels.

The Standards 2.0 was in fact one of the three key documents published by Hanban (Office for Chinese Language Teaching International, also Confucius Institute Headquarters till 2019), with the other two being *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (《国际汉语教学通用课程大纲》2008, hereafter as the International Curriculum) and *Standards for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages* (《国际汉语教师标准》2007). All three documents started with the term 国际汉语 (International Chinese) in their Chinese title, and all three came out one after another within a period of less than two years, a clear indication of the above-mentioned shift in the policy focus of teaching Chinese to the speakers of other languages from in China to abroad as part of the new effort to promote the learning and teaching of Chinese internationally.

The Standards 2.0 hardly mentioned its relation to the Standards 1.0, nor did it give any specific required numbers on characters, vocabulary or grammar items for any of its levels stipulated. Instead, it claimed that it adopted a more communicative approach to describe linguistic competences for both spoken

and written communications, with the learners of Chinese at the centre. The International Curriculum as part of the policy documents sets out clear and achievable objectives of some 800 Chinese characters and 1,500 words for the learning and teaching of Chinese by the new target group who may not need to learn the language to a very high level, and the main platform for the delivery is the newly founded Confucius Institutes/Classrooms, which now stand at over 1,500 today in total, and in almost every corner of the world after 15 years development.

Since HSK 2.0 was subsequently developed and launched in 2009 mainly as an instrument to promote the learning and teaching in this context to assist with the policy and practice shift in learning and teaching Chinese, rather than what a proficiency test is supposed to do, the relationship of HSK 2.0 with the Standard 2.0 is far less obvious than with the International Curriculum. This is quite evident that the linguistic requirements, especially in vocabulary the HSK 2.0 were substantially lowered for each of the six levels as can be seen in Table 3. Subsequently, the Youth Chinese Test (YCT) and Business Chinese Test (BCT) were also modified and simplified in the similar way.

Table 3. Quantitative indicators for HSK 2.0 and its relation to CEFR⁶

HSK 2.0 Level	Vocabulary	Standards 2.0 (CLPS)	CEFR
HSK L6	5,000 & above	Level 5	C2
HSK L5	2,500		C1
HSK L4	1,200	Level 4	B2
HSK L3	600	Level 3	B1
HSK L2	300	Level 2	A2
HSK L1	150	Level 1	A1

As one can notice, HSK 2.0 indicates clearly that each of its six level is neatly mapped on to CEFR, a widely used language level descriptor framework

⁶ HSK: http://english.hanban.org/node_8002.htm

internationally. However, as the vocabulary requirement is so low, particularly in the first five levels, it immediately became quite controversial shortly after this comparability was published, so much so that the Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries (FaCh) issued a statement on how HSK levels could map to CEFR levels in this regard according to their professional experience in the teaching of Chinese language⁷ over the years.

3.3 The European Benchmarks for Chinese Languages (EBCL)

The EBCL project (2010-2012) filled in the gap between Chinese and some European languages in terms of a CEFR based framework of standards for Chinese (Zhang, 2014). Although it only completed up to A2 level, short of what it had aimed to achieve and what was expected of it, it was still highly significant in that it was the first and only EU funded non-European language framework of standards so far. It also provides a contrastive comparison to HSK 2.0 at the two levels where it is available in terms of how they are linked to and reflect the CEFR in terms of their linguistic requirements concerning the number of Chinese characters and words needed for A1 and A2 as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Number of recommended words and characters for A1 and A2 in EBCL⁸

Level	Oral & Reception	Written & Production
A1	590 words (some of which can be in <i>pinyin</i>)	320 characters (430 words made of these characters: 73% of the words in reception (character/word ratio: 1:1.34)
A2	1,245 words	630 characters (940 words made of these characters, 75% of the words in reception (character/word ratio: 1:1.49)

7 Statement of the Fachverband Chinesisch e.V. (Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries) on the new HSK Chinese Proficiency Test 2010. https://www.fachverband-chinesisch.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Chinesisch_als_Fremdsprache/Sprachpruefungen/HSK/FaCh2010_ErklaerungHSK_en.pdf

8 The project website (www.ebcl.eu) has become inaccessible recently, probably due to absence of the site maintenance. If interested in the details of the project, please contact G Zhang or other members of the project team or refer to the articles they have written on the project.

The EBCL was a collaborative project with reference not only to the completed European language standards based upon the CEFR, but also to the relevant Chinese standards and tests (Zhang, 2011, 2016). A most important contribution is that it took into consideration special features of the modern Chinese language, *Putonghua* and simplified Chinese characters (Guder, 2014), incorporating fundamental but critical elements such as *pinyin* and phonemic competence, unique to Chinese if compared with European languages. As one may notice from the above Table 4, the ratio between characters and words are both over 1:1 in the EBCL, while in HSK 2.0, it is below 1:1 at the first two levels. The low ratio not only affects efficiency in terms of learning and teaching Chinese, particularly in courses specially designed for HSK at these levels, but also reflects an overlook of the important relationship between characters and words in the Chinese language.

3.4 Comparison of HSK 2.0, EBCL and the Standards 3.0 at A1 and A2 Levels

While the Standards 3.0 do not explicitly link itself to CEFR in terms of the level compatibility, its 3 level framework seems to roughly match those in CEFR. This is particularly obvious if comparison is made between its first two band in the first level (Elementary) and A1 and A2 in the CEFR-based EBCL with regards to the specified linguistic requirements such as number of Chinese characters and words, as in Table 5.

As stated in an article on the comparison between the EBCL and HSK 2.0 that standards and proficiency tests of different kinds might converge and move more in line with one another over the time (Zhang & Li, 2019), it is perhaps (not) surprising to see this close proximity between EBCL and the Standards 3.0 at these two initial bands, in spite of still huge disparities or gaps between the Standards 3.0, EBCL and HSK 2.0 still in use in many other aspects.

Table 5. HSK 2.0, EBCL and Standards 3.0 at CEFR A1 and A2 levels

CEFR		Character	Vocabulary	Grammar	Syllable
A2	HSK 2.0	N/A	300	N/A	N/A
	EBCL	630	1,245	N/A	N/A
	ST 3.0	600	1,272	129	468
A1	HSK 2.0	N/A	150	N/A	N/A
	EBCL	320	590	N/A	N/A
	ST 3.0	300	500	48	269

Questions such as how the required numbers of words were produced for HSK 2.0 and more importantly, the real impacts that HSK 2.0 has had on the learning and teaching of Chinese worldwide (international Chinese education) remain to be researched and answered, as compromise on standards and tests could be counter-productive in the long run. However, it is undeniable that HSK 2.0 has attracted many more test takers than the previous version⁹, and in a way could have helped sustain the interest and motivation of many learners of Chinese at the initial levels, just as what it was designed for – as a tool to promote the learning and teaching of Chinese for the masses, even though it is also supposed to be an authentic and authoritative proficiency test. With the publication of the Standards 3.0, it can be anticipated that it will not be too long before HSK 3.0 is developed. Many learners and teachers alike are waiting anxiously to see how different it will be from HSK 2.0 and what form it may take as compared to the current test.

3.5 Impacts on and considerations for HSK 3.0

Judging by the linguistic requirements specified in the Standards 3.0, it can be envisaged that HSK 3.0 will revert to being a real Chinese language proficiency test when fully developed. Since there is an enormous gap in terms of the linguistic

⁹ A presentation by Chinese Testing International at a recent online international conference (<http://hr.chinesetest.cn/hr/messDetail.html?id=8a21bb24e2494b78964b676cf51947c1>) shows that between 2008 and 2019, HSK test centres increased from 155 to 1,229, and test takers of all kinds rose from some 232,000 to close to 780,000.

requirements between the current HSK 2.0 and the forthcoming HSK 3.0 which is a priority once the Standards 3.0 is adopted (Liu et al., 2020), it is easy to understand the concerns and worries that many teachers and learners of Chinese have about the new test. There will also be questions such as, when the test will be ready to start? will it be too difficult to take, even at the very first level? and what form it may take as compared to the current HSK 2.0?

These questions would need to be taken into consideration when developing HSK 3.0, which also depends on a number of factors. It is certain that the development and the application will not and cannot happen overnight. Firstly, the Standards 3.0 itself may need some further work before it is ready to be fully implemented; secondly, it will take time to build up the bank of test items and questions, as both the content and level ranges of HSK 3.0 will greatly exceed the present test; and thirdly, as a true proficiency test, it will also need to go through a period of reliability and validity pilot and check before it can be fully put into action. Lastly, it is perhaps an extremely important factor to bear in mind that such a test will need to weigh carefully the potential impacts it may have, not only just on the test itself, but also on the learning and teaching of Chinese now and in the time to come, as both the new standards and test will be developed, as all others, with underlining concepts and principles to meet perceived and real needs and serve particular purposes.

HSK 3.0 will need to take into account the needs and the reality of both Chinese language use and language learning and teaching now, and where they are expected to be in the future. Proficiency test sets standards, but it has to reflect appropriately how the language is actually used, what is required for that use, and the level of learning and teaching of the language. It is particularly important that HSK 3.0 gives ample attention to how it can be consistent with HSK 2.0 at the lower levels but also allows for a smooth transition from HSK 2.0 since the overall gap between them can be really considerable.

It is very much hoped that HSK 3.0 would continue to function, if possible,

as a catalyst for learning and teaching of Chinese as HSK 2.0 has been for beginner learners, as well as a true proficiency test. Therefore, it is for this reason that due consideration is needed for a number of important factors when developing HSK 3.0.

With the nine bands specified in the Standards 3.0, it can also be anticipated that HSK 3.0 may well have similar bands and levels, and certainly more than the current six in HSK 2.0. So it is probable that it may consider reverting back to HSK 1.0 with the mixed level format instead of the single level test as in HSK 2.0, one for each of the three levels, with the actual band within the level to be determined by the scores achieved. In view of the diverse user needs and the reality of Chinese language learning and teaching, it may also consider the possibility of having proficiency tests for separate skills at certain levels, particularly with regards to the fact that syllable knowledge and competences are now also included in the standards. While communicative competence seems to still remain at the heart of the standards 3.0, there is little reference to the cross/inter-cultural competence, and its assessment will also be a challenge. Lastly, there is also the question of how the standards 3.0 may affect other proficiency tests such as the current BCT and YCT, which are also correlated to HSK 2.0, in form or/and in spirit.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL CHINESE EDUCATION

The Standards 3.0 was developed to meet the needs of international Chinese education in the new era as a result of its development over the last decade or so (Liu et al., 2020). So it is also useful to have a close look at both the Standards 3.0 and international Chinese education that it aims to serve.

4.1 The Standards 3.0

The general framework of the Standards 3.0 is very clear, with its new framework of 9 bands and 3 levels, and its principles of measuring competence

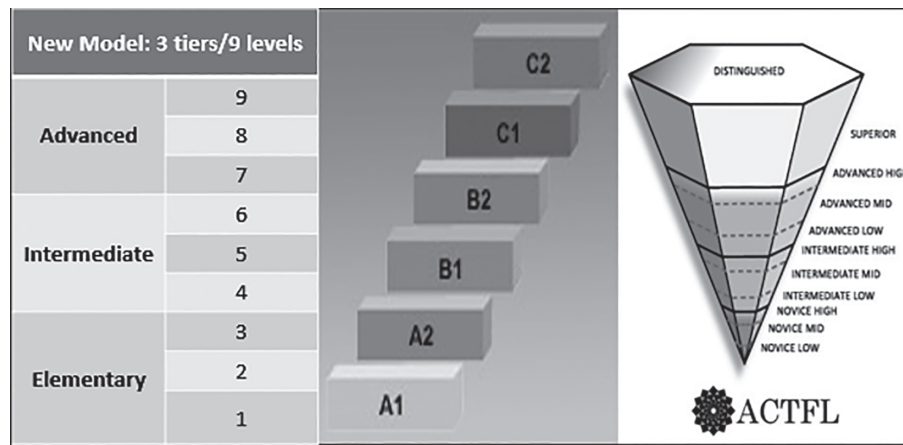
in listening, speaking, reading, writing and interpreting/translating at each band and level through the demonstration in three key aspects of language use: linguistic communicative competence, tasks and scope of topics, and quantitative linguistic requirements in four areas: syllables, characters, words and grammar. What is really ground-breaking are its open recognition of the constraint of the traditional approach to insist that one should be able to understand upon hearing, to recognise, to read and to write all at once when learning Chinese characters, and its suggestion to divide them into two parts, those one can understand passively and those one can write and use actively, roughly a third of the whole repertoire.

It is undoubtedly useful for uses to have clear quantitative linguistic requirements, but without detailed can-do statements, a typical CEFR approach to describe various language competence at different band and levels, an indication of a range rather than the actual number of characters and words for relevant bands and levels would be probably more appropriate. Apart from the fact that it is not easy to figure out how the exact numbers are arrived at in the first place, as it is also commonplace any framework of standards is dynamic rather than static, detailed competence descriptors with an indicative range in terms of the relevant linguistic requirements will help the standards accommodate change much more readily.

It is also interesting to place the Standards 3.0 side by side with the other two major frameworks of competence CEFR and that by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) as in Table 6. The Standards 3.0 has not given any indication about the level comparability with CEFR or other frameworks of standards. While it is clear that each standard may have its own linguistic requirements for Chinese language due to the context in which each is developed and the specific purposes each serves, such association and indication will definitely help understand how the Standards 3.0 is compared with the other two internationally accepted standards in terms of its levels and competences associated with them, and thus make it more likely to be readily and widely

accepted and adopted like HSK 2.0. This was perhaps why HSK 2.0 made such claim and comparison with regards to CEFR in the first place.

Table 6. The Standards 3.0, CEFR and ACTFL levels



4.2 International Chinese education till now

International Chinese language education is relatively a new term with several versions in Chinese so far, such as 国际汉语教育, 汉语国际教育 and more recently 国际中文教育. However there is very little discussion about what it actually is and particularly how it is different from teaching Chinese to the speakers of other languages in China, often referred to as 对外汉语教学 in Chinese whose English was rendered as teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language, a clear misnomer (Li, 2012). There is a view that the term refers to both the learning and teaching of Chinese as an independent academic discipline and practice that started in the 1980s, and its later activity worldwide that is often associated with the inception and development of Confucius Institutes since the early 2000s. However, the first two versions of the Chinese language standards and HSK seem to indicate that they were each developed to meet the needs and serve the policies of different times and places during this period over the last forty years or so.

As said above, both the Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0 were developed between the mid-1980s and 1990s when the number was on the rise of the learners who

came from abroad to study Chinese in China, mostly in universities and usually in an intensive manner with an average of 20 hours tuition a week. HSK 1.0 in many ways reflected the needs and reality then and there, so very language focused and context dependent and quite hard for anyone who did not have the similar learning experience. As the number of people who could go and study in China or learn in an intensive manner was limited, it resulted in the limited and relatively slow growth in the number of HSK 1.0 takers since its official launch in the early 1990s.

The initiative of Confucius Institutes at the beginning of this century came as the result of the Chinese government policy to make learning and teaching of Chinese more accessible worldwide. With its quite innovative approach of collaboration and substantial resources input, the initiative has developed rapidly since its inception in 2004, now in about 160 countries and regions in the world. However, while most Confucius Institutes have teamed up with universities abroad, their main designated target learners are not students who study Chinese as their major, but those who would like to learn Chinese but typically only have a few hours to spare each week. The situation for Confucius Classrooms which are usually school based is not that dissimilar, as most of the schools would already have full curriculum so much of the Chinese teaching is extra-curricular activities, or if it is timetabled, it would have either gone through an intense competition, usually with other foreign languages, or been supported from local authorities or policies.

It soon became clear that Standards 1.0 and HSK 1.0 were out of sync with the new change, as the teaching in the newly designated institutes could hardly deliver the results in a similar rapid fashion as the increase in the number of institutes, hence the need for the Standards 2.0 and HSK 2.0. Unlike its processor, the Standards 2.0 defined language competence more comprehensively, and focused more on communicative competence, a term popular internationally, but it did not give any specific linguistic requirements for the relevant level. This might be intentional, or just due to lack of time to do so. HSK 2.0 also aimed to

stay in line with internationally recognised framework, but, due to the institutional expectations that international Chinese education should also be able to deliver the results quickly, not only the linguistic levels of the test were arbitrarily lowered substantially to reflect the new testing policy needs that the test was just a means to promote learning and teaching of Chinese, there were also efforts to develop tailor-made syllabus, textbooks and courses specifically dedicated to the test and offered in almost all Confucius Institutes. Coupled with the generous incentive measures such as scholarships for those who could pass the test at different levels, the number of the new test takers has been increasing steadily soon after the inception of the test and quickly surpassed the previous test. While it is undoubtedly true that the new test has played its role in encouraging many to learn Chinese and to sit in the test, it is doubtful that those who have passed the test at various levels have actually achieved the language competence specified in the can-do descriptors for such levels. This has not only caused confusion, but also undermined the authority of the test as a national language proficiency test. Developments of similar frameworks of competence such as EBCL and of similar proficiency test such as Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language (TOCFL)¹⁰, and above all, in the new era of international Chinese language education itself as well as a result of the experience and result over the last thirty years (Liu et al., 2020) have all contributed to the coming change and needs to rectify the deficiency in the current test.

4.3 International Chinese education in the time to come

The Standards 3.0 signifies in many ways change of emphasis in international Chinese language education in the time to come with the adjustment being made in the organisation of Confucius Institutes. It can also be expected that it will soon lead to the upgrade of HSK into its 3.0 version. While this will definitely help to restore the authority of the test as a truly national language proficiency test, since the gap between the Standards 3.0 and HSK 2.0 is so vast as discussed above, one can also

10 Formerly known as TOP, https://www.sc-top.org.tw/english/eng_index.php

predict that both the new standards and HSK will have enormous impacts on the learning and teaching in various establishment of international Chinese language education now and in the time to come, but one would also hope that there is a smooth transition to ensure there is a consistency and continuity.

It has been long discussed that international Chinese language education would shift its focus from quantitative growth to qualitative enhancement following the fast growth of the number of Confucius Institutes. As a matter of fact, there is little evidence or empirical studies on how the learning and teaching of Chinese has changed or improved in terms of, for instance, fewer drop-outs in these establishments. The use of the current HSK and the dedicated courses for passing the test have helped the increase in the number of test takers, but also in a way exacerbated the trend with the focus on mere quantitative number increase rather than its quality enhancement. The Standards 3.0 could be a real wake-up call, but at the same time, the standards it sets for international Chinese language education could be perceived to be very challenging by both learners and teachers in international Chinese language education establishments such as Confucius Institutes who are used to working towards the current standards and test.

Another challenge is the role of Confucius Institutes and changes in their courses in the time to come. Confucius Institutes were primarily conceived as a platform to deliver mass Chinese language teaching abroad, thus international, to a set level linked to HSK 2.0. The change in the standards and test will also lead to a rethink of their role and a re-alignment in many of their courses, probably with hugely increased number of hours in learning and teaching required for every single level as specified in the Standards 3.0, with its additional linguistic requirements in syllables and grammar. This is no small endeavour and would require a lot of time and resources if done properly, including curriculum and course design, teaching material development and teacher training, and so on.

The development of the Standards 3.0 and HSK 3.0 poses an enormous challenge for international Chinese language education in terms of how it can

maintain a balance between quantity and quality in its future development, particularly in the learning and teaching in Confucius Institutes, and in other organisations that it collaborates with. Improved quality of Chinese language learning and teaching cannot be achieved without a lot of empirical studies done on learners, on how they learn and what influences their learning. This is still seriously lacking even today, and it is one of the main reasons that holds back the qualitative progress of Chinese language learning and teaching in international Chinese language education. Again, this will take time and needs a lot of resources.

Finally, it is hoped that the change in HSK 3.0 would not be so dramatic that it loses the strength of HSK 2.0 in making Chinese language learning accessible and friendly to anyone interested while still remaining a real proficiency test. One way to achieve this in HSK 3.0, for instance, in an initial transitional period, is perhaps for it to retain and change some of the lower levels in HSK 2.0 into a pre-proficiency test with certificate and continue to use measures to incentivise beginner learners of Chinese from all backgrounds and all over the world to continue to learn Chinese, thus keeping the momentum of international Chinese language education going global.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The development of the Standards 3.0 and its subsequent publication and application are highly significant for international Chinese language education, as it is clearly not only an effort to meet the emerging needs in international Chinese language education, but also to set the direction where international Chinese language education is heading in the time to come. All language standards reflect the understanding of linguistic competence as well as the relevant policy of the time. The new standards will definitely help get it more in line with similar international standards, and re-establish HSK 3.0 when it is fully developed, as a genuine national language proficiency test. What remains challenging is how to ensure a smooth transition from the current practice and test to the expected future

ones in a coherent manner characteristic of an organic development.

This is particularly true in the case of the development of HSK 3.0 in terms of how its levels are structured, what form it takes, and when it comes to replace the current one. In other words, the introduction of HSK 3.0 will need to balance a dual function, as a true proficiency test and as an instrument to promote the learning and teaching of Chinese, at least in the initial stage. It is clear that international Chinese language education in the new era expects to maintain and consolidate its current development while shifting its focus from mere quantity to both quality and quantity development. For this, empirical research and theoretical reflections on the learning and teaching of Chinese internationally are highly necessary, as it is envisaged that it will be really difficult for international Chinese language education to achieve its expected sustainable development as a cause or policy drive without due development in, and fundamental support of, teaching Chinese as a second language as a discipline. In a way, these two are mutually inter-dependent.

REFERENCES

- Centre for Language Education and Cooperation. (2021). *Chinese proficiency grading standards for international Chinese language education* (《国际中文教育中文水平等级标准》). Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/the-common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching-assessment-cefr>
- Cui, X., & Guo, S. (2003). Review and future of China's hanyu shuiping kaoshi (中国汉语水平考试 (HSK) 的回顾与展望). In M. Hu (Ed.), *Proceedings of the symposium on Chinese (Putonghua) teaching and testing* (《汉语(普通话)教学与测试研讨会论文集》). Macau Polytechnic Institute.
- European Benchmarking Chinese Language Project (EBCL). (2010-2012). <http://ebcl.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/EBCL-A1-A2+-Can-do-Statements-Oct-2012.pdf>
- Guder, A. (2014). Reading competence and graphemic competence: Impacts of the Chinese writing system on designing competence descriptors for the "European benchmarks for the Chinese language" (EBCL) project. *Chinesisch Unterrichts. Chun*, 29, 5-29.
- Hanban. (2007). *Chinese language proficiency scales for speakers of other languages* (《国际汉语能力标准》). Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Hanban. (2008). *International curriculum for Chinese language education* (《国际汉语教学通用课程大纲》). Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, L. M. (2012). Teaching Chinese as an international language and university Chinese language teaching in UK. In H. Li (Ed.), *Chinese language teaching in universities abroad in a context of globalisation* (pp. 21-39). Shanghai Xuelin Publisher.
- Liu, Y., Li, P., & Li, Y. (2020). A path to the globalization of Chinese proficiency standards in international Chinese education (汉语国际教育汉语水平等级标准全球化之路). *Teaching Chinese in the World* (《世界汉语教学》), 34(02), 147-157.
- Liu, Y., & Ma, J. (2010). *The graded Chinese syllables, characters and words for application of teaching Chinese to the speakers of other languages* (《汉语国际教育用音节汉字词汇等级划分》). Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
- Research Group on Chinese Proficiency Standards, All China's Association for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. (1988). *Chinese proficiency standards and syllabus* (《汉语水平等级标准和等级大纲》试用). Beijing Language Institute Press.
- Zhang, G. X. (2011). Common European framework of reference and research on European benchmarking of Chinese as a foreign language (欧洲语言共同参考框架和欧洲汉语外语能力标准研究). *International Chinese Education* (《国际汉语教育动态与研究》), (1), 42-46.
- Zhang, G. X. (2016). Some further thoughts on European benchmarks for the Chinese language (欧洲汉语能力标准再探). *Journal of International Chinese Teaching* (《国际汉语教学研究》), (3), 50-59.
- Zhang, G. X., & Li, L. M. (2019). A preliminary comparative study of frameworks of competence for Chinese language (汉语能力标准比较初探). *Journal of International Chinese Teaching* (《国际汉语教学研究》), (1), 31-47.
- Zhang, G. X. (2014). A discussion on European benchmarking Chinese language (欧洲汉语能力标准探讨). In L. Hong (Ed.), *Chinese teaching in different linguistic, cultural and policy contexts* (《不同语言文化和政策环境下的汉语教学》) (pp. 3-33). Xuelin Publishing Press.
- Zhang, J., Qiu, N., & Zhang, J. (2009). The report of the linking research between HSK and Chinese language proficiency scales for speakers of other language (HSK与《国际汉语能力标准》挂钩研究报告). *Chinese Examination* (《中国考试》), 4, 18-24.

- Zhang, J., Xie, N., Wang, S., Li, Y., & Zhang, T. (2010). The report of researching and producing the new HSK (新汉语水平考试 (HSK) 研制报告). *Chinese Examination* (《中国考试》), 9, 38-43.
- Zhang, W., & Wang, J. (2010). *Research on China hanyu shuiping kaoshi* (《中国汉语水平考试 HSK (改进版) 研究》). Beijing Language and Culture Press.

新中文等级标准及对汉语水平考试之影响

张新生* 李明芳

摘要

新公布实施的《国际中文教育中文水平等级标准》，是自上世纪八十年代以来的第三代标准。本文旨在就新标准的内容和产生背景，与前两代标准做一简要对比分析，并就其对汉语水平考试和以孔子学院为主要平台的国际汉语教学（也称国际中文教育）之影响进行初步的探究。

关键词：汉语能力标准 汉语水平考试 欧洲共同语言参考框架 欧洲汉语能力标准 国际中文教育

* 张新生，英国理启蒙大学现代语言中心。（本文通讯作者）
李明芳，原英国伦敦摄政大学。