

# Research on Limitations of HSK and the Solution for International Academic Students

Hongmei Zhao, Zhibing Cheng

School of Literature and Journalism, Shandong University of Technology, Jinan, China

## Abstract

As a general Chinese proficiency test, which focuses on Chinese communicative competence, HSK is incapable of selecting qualified international students to enter professional study which calls for higher level of academic Chinese. It has gradually become a consensus in academic circles that academic Chinese proficiency tests should be part of the language proficiency assessment of international students.

## Keywords

Academic Chinese; Learning Ability in Chinese; General Chinese; Limitations of HSK.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, China has become the largest destination country for international students in Asia with more and more overseas students coming. The quality of study abroad education in China, especially those for academic degree, has aroused lot of concern in the society. Is HSK reliable in selecting candidates with academic qualifications to enter high-level professional studies? Does passing HSK Level 4 or 5 mean that their Chinese is proficient enough to finish the high-level learning successfully in Chinese universities? Facts tell us NO. i.e. HSK is incapable of checking the learning ability in Chinese because of its limitations. In order to improve the quality of Professional International Students Education in China, the paper suggests that academic Chinese proficiency test is urgently needed when they get the general Chinese proficiency test.

## 2. Limitations of HSK

### 2.1. Insufficiency in Selection for International Student

#### 2.1.1. Lower Grade

The position of HSK is to popularize Chinese and stimulate interest of learners rather than to be an admission test to select undergraduate talents, with focusing on the Chinese communicative ability. This orientation determines that it is hardly to function as academic language test. According to market feedback, even the highest level of the new HSK6 can no longer fully meet the current demand for high-level Chinese proficiency assessment, especially for those who are about to engage in academic research or advanced studies in China. But current situation is that candidates could be accepted in most universities if they pass HSK4. Let us review the competency standard of HSK4: You can use Chinese to discuss some topics in a wider range of fields, and communicate with native Chinese speakers relatively fluently. This actually is not completely compatible with academic Chinese. Research by Li Ping and Deng Jun shows that only 28.5% of international students are satisfied with the new HSK admission criteria for their colleges and universities, and up to 96.7%-88% of the students suggested that at least the new HSK level 5 or 6 should be adopted as the undergraduate admission criteria [1]. In order to further illustrate this opinion, we compared the vocabulary amount of the and "Chinese Proficiency Test Outline of HSK" (hereinafter referred to as "Grading criterion")

International Chinese Language Level Standards for Chinese Education (hereinafter referred to as "national standard") promulgated in March 2021. See the number following:

**Table 1.** Vocabulary amount comparing

Grading criterion	Basic		Intermediate		Advanced		
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	
amount	150	300	600	1200	2500	Above 5000	
National standard	Basic			Intermediate			Advanced
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-9
amount	500	772	973	1000	1071	1140	5636

It can be seen from the above table that although the "Grading criterion" has a total of 9,750 words, which is only 1342 less than the 11092 of the "national standard", if you look at the first three levels, both the total number and the individual levels number, the vocabulary amount of "national standard" are much higher than the "Grading criterion". If calculated by the 4th level, the former is even 1,000 less than the latter. In addition, it is difficult to catch the target of level 3 stipulated in the "Grading criterion" which described as that You can use Chinese to complete basic communication tasks such as study, work, and life, and can cope with most of the communication encountered when traveling in China, with just a little more than 1000 vocabulary. Therefore, the HSK should be appropriately improved to guarantee that the different levels of the test can be scientifically corresponded to the group of candidates of the corresponding level, and HSK could do well in the selection of international students with academic qualifications. It shows that the higher the level of colleges and universities in China, the higher the requirements for admission to Chinese proficiency, and it has been a trend of increasing in recent years.

### 2.1.2. Monotonous Questions Types in HSK

All of the questions from the reading part (actually in all the test) which are mainly sentences and short essay in new HSK level 4 and 5 are objective multiple-choice (Only the new HSK level 6 reading includes 3 essays with 700 to 860 words). While the reading part in some famous foreign language tests focuses on inferential comprehension (Infer the implicit meaning of words and segments, author's intentions and opinions, etc.), evaluation and appreciative comprehension assessment. The assessment target meets the needs of the university's actual reading ability such as the generalization and summary ability, especially the reasoning and evaluation ability. It is normal to find reading comprehension includes academic charts (graphs, charts, curves, lists, etc.) and text complementary comparison. Candidates must combine the two to make effective understanding and inferences. Taking IELTS as example, the reading part of IELTS is composed of three essays or academic texts, with a total of 40 questions, which are unevenly distributed behind the three essays, and are required to be finished within 60 minutes. The biggest feature of this part is the variety of question types, such as title correspondence questions, abstract fill-in-the-blank questions, matching questions, flow chart fill-in-the-blank questions, chart fill-in-the-blank questions, graph questions, etc. [2].

### 2.1.3. Narrow Scope of Assessment in HSK

The ability required by HSK Level 4 is "to use Chinese to discuss topics in a wide field, and to communicate with native Chinese speakers relatively fluently". Frankly, the description is rather vague, and its content lacks of thematic limitation, it is generally understood easily as about daily life in Chinese, without a speculative expression on the academic level. Even HSK

Level 5 only stipulates that “you can read newspapers and magazines, enjoy Chinese film and television programs, and give a complete speech in Chinese”. It tells us that the HSK always focuses on the understanding and expression of daily Chinese, which is obviously not sufficient for foreign students to study in major. While the reading materials in IELTS test are more biased towards serious topics such as teaching and technology.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is internationally recognized a set of objective and scientific standards for evaluating students’ language ability, with 6 levels. In terms of the admission criteria for undergraduate international students, the first-class universities in the world such as in Japan, Germany and the United States, usually benchmark CEFR C1. However, the admission standard of most universities and even some top universities in China is targeted as the new HSK4. Similar as the B2 level in CEFR, the assessment standards are different and the actual level is far from being reached. According to the basic requirements of CEFR B2, “He is able to understand the concrete and abstract themes of complex passages, including skillfully discussing one's own specialized fields, and be able to interact with native speakers of the language naturally and fluently. He can speak clearly and in detail on a wide range of topics, can explain and analyze from pros and cons angles or express various thoughts for a topic.” It can be seen that it puts forward very high requirements for the understanding and expression of abstract and complex issues. By comparison, the HSK is totally insufficient in assessing the complicated contents of Chinese.

#### **2.1.4. The Improper Motivation Caused by HSK**

Research by Wang Shuhua and Huangyi found that the negative effect of HSK as a selection test for international students is that motivation for preparatory students to learn Chinese are mainly from external instead of internal, which lies in that most of them could study in China if they pass the HSK. In other words, their motivation for learning Chinese is just for passing the test and get the opportunity. Therefore, the learning pressure even fear is generally greater, statistics showing that it is quite difficult for more than 1/3 of them to pass HSK5. They choose to pay more attention to answering skills instead of capacity when preparing for the test as a result [3].

## **2.2. Oversight of Chinese Academic Ability**

According to the using field, Chinese can be divided into general Chinese and special purpose Chinese. The former one refers to the Chinese used in daily life and work and the latter refers to that related to a certain occupation, subject, and purpose [4]. Because HSK mainly examines daily Chinese proficiency, there has deficiencies in the measurement of academic Chinese ability, such as listening to courses, seminars, experiments, as well as writing academic papers, survey reports and other research activities in Chinese. In addition, the majors selected by international students in China are mainly concentrated in the fields of science and engineering, medicine, economics management, and liberal arts, Chinese level as an academic language is bound to be increased.

The International Chinese Language Proficiency Level 4 established by the “International Chinese Language Proficiency Standards” published in 2007, in which the communicative skills, comprehension skills, and expression skills are set for general social occasions, daily life, learning and socializing activity, there is no requirement for international students to use Chinese to generalize and analyze Mandarin materials in various fields (including professional fields). There is only one clear requirements as a graduation level in the International Chinese Proficiency Standards, which proposed that Chinese ability is embodied in multiple occasions and fields (including professional fields).

It is for sure that these foreign students with a weak foundation in Chinese will definitely have difficulty in their professional studies. Investigations and studies have shown that the Chinese language test for undergraduate international students is lack of academic environment.

Research by Li Ping and Deng Jun found that 80% of international students believe that academic Chinese has a great influence on their professional learning, mainly on majors studying and a series of basic academic activities, the ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing is extremely inadequate, among which reading and speaking problems are prominent. The biggest obstacle in the professional learning for international students is language, especially the lack of professional academic Chinese. 98% of the international students who participated in the interview confirmed that the biggest problem for undergraduate learning is to be accustomed to language, not just ordinary Chinese or new HSK, but professional Chinese [1]. It can be concluded that the current entrance exam of language, i.e, new HSK 4-5 for international undergraduate students, can't help the actual Chinese especially the academic Chinese needed in university.

According to the requirements of the International Chinese Proficiency Standards, for students who choose subjects with Chinese as the professional language of instruction, must reach at least International Chinese Proficiency Level 4 at the time of admission and level 5 at graduation, but the problem of the Standards published in 2007, is to focus only on the assessment of both oral and writing. It has to be improved by testing the Chinese proficiency of academic Chinese from the five dimensions of listening, speaking, reading, and translation according to the latest International Chinese Education Chinese Proficiency Standards. We are looking forward to a nationwide specialized language test that suit our needs.

### 3. Solution

From the analysis above, it is obvious that to strengthen the academic Chinese in entrance exam for the international professional candidates is the only solution to the problem rooted from HSK.

#### 3.1. What is the Academic Chinese?

The so-called academic Chinese mainly refers to the Chinese used in professional learning and academic research. Academic Chinese is Chinese for special purposes. According to the difference of professional level, academic Chinese can be divided into general academic Chinese and specific academic Chinese [5]. Proficiency in academic Chinese is one of the language skills that international students who come to China to study for a degree must grasp. Different from common Chinese, one of the characteristics of academic Chinese is professionalism. For overseas students with academic qualifications, a large number of and intensive professional terminology is a great challenge when reading literature or listening in class. Therefore, the document "Quality Standards for Higher Education for International Students in China (Trial)" issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 proposes to attach great importance to the connotative development of higher education for international students in China, and proposes clear "Academic level" and "language ability" requirements. Under the premise that China is the destination country for international students, we declare that the two requirements of "academic level" and "language ability" are actually the requirements for the level of "academic Chinese". That is to say, it's not enough to pass HSK 4 or 5 as the entrance threshold for academic students and it is essential to have a certain academic Chinese ability.

#### 3.2. The Importance of Academic Chinese

There is an increasing demand for specialized talents in specific majors who are proficient in Chinese (no longer just "general" understanding of Chinese) in countries all over the world, and popularized Chinese teaching is far from being able to satisfy the demand for high-level or even high-end professional talents training requirements [6]. So we have to raise the threshold of Chinese proficiency for those international students who want to get the professional education in China by testing their academic Chinese.

### 3.2.1. Help Students Improve the Learning Efficiency

Related studies have found that international students in China who are studying for master's and doctoral degree programs struggle in conducting academic study and research in Chinese due to their relatively low Chinese academic language proficiency which challenge them a lot [7]. If they experienced the training and test about academic language, they will definitely learn better and feel better.

### 3.2.2. Help Chinese Construct International Academic Discourse Power

To educate students who come to China for a degree using Chinese as teaching language can demonstrate our academic and cultural confidence, also can enhance the international influence of Chinese. We should and could take advantage of the opportunity that international students receive academic education in China to promote and strengthen the academic discourse power of Chinese. After all we have to admit that academic discourse power is a real academic innovation and an issue recognized by the academic community in the world.

## 4. Summary

This article analyzes the limitations of HSK in assessing the language ability of international students with academic qualifications firstly. It points out that lack of the investigation of academic Chinese, which is not conducive to the professional learning of students with academic qualifications, rooted in HSK's functional position as a test of the communicative Chinese. Then, the paper claims that the only solution to make up HSK and improve the education quality of international students is to provide academic Chinese training and test.

## Acknowledgments

This work was financially supported by Special Project for Studying Abroad in China fund from School of International Education, Shandong University of Technology. Project Named by A Study on the Strategy of Improving the Language Ability of International Students in Our University from the Perspective of Combination of Test and Teaching.

## References

- [1] Li Ping, Deng Jun. Research in the Testing Target of International Chinese Proficiency of Undergraduate Overseas Students in Chinese Universities. Education and Examination. Volume 76 (2019). No. 4.p.37-44.
- [2] A comparative study between New HSK and IELTS. Master's Degree Thesis. Central China Normal University, China.2012. P.25-26.
- [3] Wang Shuhua, Huang Yi. A Study on the Backwash Effect of the New HSK on Preparatory Course Learners. Journal of Language and Literature Studies. Volume 41 (2021), No.4.p.113-120.
- [4] Zhang Cheng, Li Jiapan, Shen Shengxia. A Study on the Lexical usage characteristics of Academic Chinese. Language Teaching and Research Volume 206 (2020). No.6. P.19-27.
- [5] Ji Chuanbo. Exploration of Usage by Korean Students of the Classical Chinese Structures in Academic Paper. Chinese Language Learning. Volume 216 (2016). No. 6. p.77-85.
- [6] Cai Zongmo, Yang Kangkai, Zhang Haiasheng, Wu Chaoping, Tan Rong What is the Quality of International Students Studying in China--An In-depth Depiction of Students along the B&R Initiative Countries Studying in C University. Tsinghua University Education Research. Volume 40 (2019). No. 4. P.104-112.
- [7] Gao Zengxia. A Need Analysis of the Skills of International Postgraduates' Academic Writing in Chinese. Journal of Yunnan Normal University(Teaching and Research of Chinese as a Foreign Language Edition). Volume 18 (2019). No.6. p. 68-75.