

A Comparative Analysis on the Listening Test of HSK and IELTS

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Abstract: To promote the improvement of the HSK, this study compares the listening tests of HSK Levels 4 to 6 with the IELTS Academic in terms of question setting, speech input, and discourse. The findings revealed that the listening test of HSK has unbalanced question structure, limited question types and lacks authenticity in speech. Significant improvements are needed in the reliability, validity and authenticity of the test. To solve these problems, this study refers to the mature experience of IELTS and proposes that HSK should balance the ratio of monologue to conversation questions, increase the question types, adjust the speed of speech, standardize the listening lexicon, and broaden the topic genres.

Keywords: HSK, IELTS, Listening test.

1. Introduction

Language tests serve various purposes such as diagnosis, feedback, selection, and research (Liu & Han, 2000). As international language standardized tests, both HSK and IELTS are based on the theory of Communicative Language Test, focusing on examining the language ability of candidates. As the most scientific and widely used language test, IELTS is more mature in theory and practice.

Listening plays a very important role in second language acquisition. It is not only one of the basic skills for language learning but also the main type of language input. In language learning, listening always precedes speaking, and learners need to listen to what others say to learn to speak after them. From the perspective of language communication, the ability to listen is always greater than the ability to speak. If one does not understand what others are saying, one cannot respond, thus communication cannot take place. For second language acquisition (SLA), learners' exposure to "comprehensible input" is a sufficient condition for SLA (Wang, 2009), thus listening comprehension is also important for SLA.

Based on the importance of listening in language learning, language communication, and second language acquisition, this paper will focus on the listening tests of HSK Level 4-6 and IELTS Academic, make a comparative analysis from three perspectives: question setting, input speech and discourse text, explore the strengths and shortcomings of HSK in the listening section, and put forward suggestions for the improvement of HSK regarding the excellent experience of IELTS Listening, to push forward the development of international Chinese language education.

2. Method

Both HSK and IELTS are based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and their scores can be converted to CEFR levels. At the same time, both HSK and IELTS require students studying in the region to reach CEFR B2 level (HSK level 4 and above, IELTS 5.5) and above. Therefore, IELTS and HSK are comparable.

In this paper, the methods of literature research, comparative analysis, and statistical analysis were used to compare HSK Level 4-6 and IELTS 14-16.

Table 1: Correlation between HSK and IELTS score bands

HSK	IELTS	ICPS*	CEFR
Level 1	-	Level 1	A1
Level 2	< 4.0	Level 2	A2
Level 3	4.0-5.0	Level 3	B1
Level 4	5.5-6.5	Level 4	B2
Level 5	7.0-8.0	Level 5	C1
Level 6	8.5-9.0	Level 6	C2

* International Chinese Proficiency Standards

3. A Comparative Analysis on the Listening Test of HSK and IELTS

3.1 A Comparative Analysis on the Question Setting of HSK and IELTS Listening Test

Question setting involves designing the framework of a language test, which includes the structure of the test paper and the questions. The proposer designs the test according to the language teaching objectives and then fills the frame with appropriate test questions. Candidates' use of language in the test is also a dynamic process, i.e., defining the purpose, defining the planning process, defining the plan, executing the plan, and producing discourse. In this process, the test text will provide different contexts for the candidates, and the setting of the questions determines the candidates' communicative tasks in different contexts and guides them to choose the appropriate answer strategies.

3.1.1 Structure of test

The HSK Level 4-6 listening tests consist of 3 parts and last about 30 to 35 minutes. The listening material is played once and the questions are included in the recording and not shown on the paper.

The IELTS Academic Listening Test consists of four sections with a total of 40 questions and lasts approximately 40 minutes, and the listening material is also played once. The first 30 minutes are for the recording, during which the candidate has time to read, write, and check the questions. The

last 10 minutes are for transcribing the answers.

Table 2: Structure of HSK Level 4-6 Listening Tests

HSK	Parts	Contents	Number	Time
HSK 4	Part 1	Passage of Speech	10	About 30 minutes
	Part 2	Single-round dialogue	15	
	Part 3	Many rounds of Dialogue Short Passage	10	
HSK 5	Part 1	Single-round Dialogue	20	About 30 minutes
	Part 2	Many rounds of Dialogue Short Passage	10	
			15	
HSK 6	Part 1	Passage of Speech	15	About 35 minutes
	Part 2	Interview	15	
	Part 3	Short Passage	20	

3.1.2 Question format

Although HSK has a wider variety of question types compared to IELTS, IELTS can assess test takers' written communicative abilities more accurately. The HSK uses both objective and subjective questions to assess test takers' writing ability, but the results can be easily influenced by other factors. For example, when completing the article summary (HSK Level 6), test takers may be influenced by comprehension and memory, making it difficult to accurately assess their writing ability.

Table 3: Structure of IELTS Listening Tests

Parts	Contents	Number	Time
Part 1	Conversation	10	About 40 minutes
Part 2	Monologue with a Communicative Purpose	10	
Part 3	Discussion	10	
Part 4	Monologue in an Academic Setting	10	

For test question structure, there is not much difference between HSK and IELTS in terms of number of questions and the length of recording time, but the components and the distribution of questions in each part are different. HSK questions are categorized mainly according to the number of words and the amount of information in the discourse text, and they include discourse segments, dialogues, and short essays, with discourse segments < single rounds of dialogues < multiple rounds of dialogues and short essays. IELTS topics include dialogues and monologues (similar to short essays), which can be subdivided into four categories according to the speaking environment, including conversations, monologues with communicative purposes, discussions, and monologues in an academic setting.

Despite the appearance of having more content-rich test questions, the distribution of questions is uneven, as demonstrated by the Level 5 listening test, where pairs of topics take up two-thirds of the questions. Of these, nearly half are on the less challenging and informative single-round pair of questions. This results in a slightly monotonous test structure, and the lack of differentiation makes it difficult to assess the students' language competency. In contrast, the IELTS test questions are more evenly distributed, and the cross-talk between topic pairs and monologue questions can effectively avoid listening fatigue, help candidates focus their attention, and the difficulty gradient is more reasonably set. In this regard, HSK can learn from IELTS listening and adjust the structure of the test questions to avoid imbalances in the distribution of questions and to improve the differentiation of the test questions.

3.1.3 Question types

HSK questions are composed of objective questions. HSK Level 4 consists of judgment questions and four multiple-choice questions, of which judgment questions are essentially two multiple-choice questions. HSK Level 5 and Level 6 only have four multiple-choice questions. This type of question has a greater advantage in terms of reliability and validity, and candidates are able to answer the questions quickly, so the proposers can increase the number of questions and expand the coverage of knowledge points. However, the objective questions are unable to test the ability of expression and writing, and the choice and judgment have a 25% and 50% probability of guessing correctly, which is highly contingent and not conducive to the realization of the purpose of the test.

IELTS listening question types are more diverse, involving objective, subjective and semi-objective questions. Objective questions include multiple choice, matching and map marking questions, semi-objective questions include fill-in-the-blanks and table questions, and subjective questions include short answer questions. However, due to the change in question types, short answer questions no longer appear in the current exam, and some of them can only be found in the earlier version of the IELTS 4 to 7.

Various question types in IELTS listening do not appear in each part in a fixed order, but share a single piece of listening material and appear in a staggered manner, with multiple question types often appearing in each part. The frequency of these question types is not equal.

Table 4: Question type of IELTS 14-16

IELTS	Objective Question			Semi-objective Question	
	Multiple Choice	Matchin g	Map marking	Fill-in-the-b lank	Table questions
14	31	41	5	73	10
15	34	22	12	72	20
16	41	21	12	80	6
Total	106	84	29	225	36
	219 (45.6%)			261 (54.4%)	

From Table 4, we can see that the overall proportion of objective and semi-objective questions in IELTS listening is comparable, but there is a big difference in the number of specific types of questions. For example, as objective questions, the frequency of map marking questions is significantly smaller than that of multiple-choice and matching questions. The former tests candidates' knowledge of the language and their ability to identify, compare and analyze, and eliminate interference, while the latter tests candidates' ability to use grammar and vocabulary, as well as their writing skills. The use of semi-objective questions also makes the questions more flexible, while avoiding the subjectivity of grading to some extent.

Comparison of the question types of HSK and IELTS listening reveals that HSK questions are single and contingent. HSK puts forward different requirements for candidates' language communication skills, but the choice of errors or letters cannot fully reflect the candidates' linguistic and writing skills, and there is a mismatch between the ability goal and the test content. In contrast, IELTS listening questions are diverse, the test is the comprehensive use of language ability

of the candidates. At the same time, the types of questions used in each paper and the specific number of questions for each type vary. This is more truly reflective of the language level of the candidates and is conducive to playing the washback role of language test in teaching.

3.1.4 Question setting and task

Both HSK and IELTS belong to task-based tests, which are task-centered and assess the performance of candidates in accomplishing the tasks (Wang & Cui, 2012). Their listening materials give the context and information of the test, and their question setting present the task requirements to the candidates. And candidates are guided by the questions to accomplish the tasks by using certain linguistic and strategic abilities.

Table 5: Comparison of question setting and task in HSK and IELTS

		Summary	Details	Sentence relationship	opinion	
H S K	4	T1	8	26	5	6
		T2	9	28	5	3
		T3	10	26	4	5
		T4	15	17	2	11
	5	T1	7	22	8	8
		T2	5	30	4	6
		T3	7	29	4	5
		T4	6	30	4	5
	6	T1	11	30	3	6
		T2	12	30	4	4
		T3	14	26	4	6
		T4	11	25	4	10
	Total		115 20.5%	319 57%	51 9.1%	75 13.4%
I E L T S	14	T1	0	29	3	8
		T2	0	37	3	0
		T3	0	32	7	1
		T4	0	23	7	10
	15	T1	1	28	8	3
		T2	7	26	6	1
		T3	4	28	2	6
		T4	1	30	3	6
	16	T1	6	24	6	4
		T2	0	26	10	4
		T3	0	31	4	5
		T4	0	26	3	11
	Total		19 4%	340 70.8%	62 12.9%	59 12.3%

It can be seen that "details" is the most tested task in both HSK and IELTS listening tests, occupying more than half of the questions, while "summary" is second in HSK, but rarely occurs in IELTS, which makes the distribution tasks of HSK test seem more balanced. In terms of "details", both tests examine a lot of time, place, numbers, behavior, people and other details. However, IELTS in this regard not only has more questions, and is more difficult. There are more synonyms and interfering words in the material. What's more, it needs more textual reasoning, and on the test taker's spelling ability is more demanding. In contrast, most of the answers to the questions in the HSK are explicitly stated in the text, and the presentation of multiple-choice options makes the purpose of the test task clearer, making it less difficult overall. In terms of "summary", IELTS mostly through the details of the test so that candidates step by step to grasp the general idea of the article, and rarely directly on the main content of the test, and IELTS test often have more than one question to share a question stem, resulting in greater fluctuations in the

distribution of the test task for each paper, the emergence of the "summary". The HSK pays more attention to the overall perception of the material as well as the meaning and main idea of the passage to examines the candidates' comprehension and generalization ability. In addition, although the two "sentence relationship" accounted for a similar proportion of the specific examination of which there are differences, HSK pay more attention to the cause of the examination, followed by the purpose and effect, while IELTS often examined the relationship between the juxtaposition of sentences, choice, transit, through conjunctions such as "and", "or", "but" and so on to help candidates to locate the information, and less on the relationship between cause and effect.

3.2 A Comparative Analysis on the Speech Input of HSK and IELTS Listening Test

Both HSK and IELTS listening tests use acceptance as the input mode, with auditory as the discourse input channel, visual as the test question input channel, the candidates' target language as the test language, and the recording as the input medium.

3.2.1 Speed of Speech

In this paper, the speed of speech of HSK Level 4-6 and IELTS question papers was measured according to different contents (speech of the discourse material only, without questions), and the formula is: the total number of words or counts of the discourse material (without questions and punctuation) divided by the total time spent on reading aloud this material (minutes).

Table 6: Comparison of speed in HSK and IELTS

		Average minimum/maximum		Average
		monologue	dialogue	
H S K	4	177.54	184.01	181.59
		160/198.26	141.43/234.55	
	5	237.82	220.79	223.63
		225.82/250.38	195/270	
	6	268.18	288.32	270.7
		240/288.75	285.91/290.22	
I E L T S		126.07	135.61	145.42
		120.68/131.45	158.82/170.71	

The study finds the following three points:

Firstly, except for HSK Level 4, the average speeds of the other three tests are all within the range of normal speed. HSK Level 4 is at the stage of near-normal speed, Level 5 is at moderate-normal speed, and Level 6 is between moderate-normal speed and faster-normal speed, which is a gradual upward trend and is in line with the gradual difficulty of HSK levels. However, the speed of speech between Level 4 and Level 5 is too big, which is not in line with the requirement in the syllabus for Level 4 candidates to "communicate fluently with native Chinese speakers".

Secondly, in HSK Level 5 listening, the speed of conversation is lower than that of monologue, which is not in line with the general pattern of speed of speech in daily communication. The main reason for this phenomenon is the imbalance in the structure of the test questions, which is manifested in the high proportion of dialogues in HSK Level 5, and the single round

of dialogues occupies two-thirds of the positions in the dialogues.

Thirdly, the overall speed of IELTS listening is at a slower normal speed, with its minimum value slightly below the normal speed range. Specifically, the maximum value basically appeared in the first part of the “two-way communication conversation”, the minimum value basically appeared in the fourth part of the “academic environment monologue”, non-academic content speed is greater than the speed of academic content, the speed of the conversation is greater than the speed of the monologue.

3.2.2 Accent

The listening requirements for HSK Level 5 candidates in the General Curriculum for the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language (GCTC) include "being able to understand familiar Mandarin on topics with a slight accent", and for HSK Level 6 candidates "being able to understand familiar Mandarin on topics with some accent". However, the speech played during the HSK Level 5 and Level 6 listening tests belongs to standard Putonghua. At the same time, the voice cannot distinguish the different identities of the speakers, which makes it difficult to reflect the authenticity of the voice. For example, there is a difference in the age of the female classmates in one paragraph of the material with similar age and the age of the mothers in the other paragraph of the material, but the female accent in the two questions is the same, which cannot reflect the authenticity of the input voice.

In contrast to the HSK, the IELTS Listening Test is more international and authentic due to its variety of accents. As a more mature international language test, the IELTS Listening Test is dominated by British accents, which account for about 50% of the test, and also includes American, Australian, and Indian accents. In addition, the speakers in IELTS Listening are not all the same male or female voices as in HSK, and there are many differences in timbre, which can identify the age and even part of the personality traits, which is something that needs to be improved in HSK.

No background audio aids are used in the HSK listening process. Although the discourse content tries to mimic real-life communication situations, the recording, which is clearly characterized by studio sound, makes the input speech lack authenticity. For the obvious telephone communication content, the audio did not make a sound quality treatment, and for the discourse content with specific scenes, the audio did not give background sound effects such as crowd noises or clashing of cutlery.

IELTS Listening has basically done a sound quality treatment on the content of telephone communication. However, like HSK, IELTS listening also lacks the addition of background sound effects, for example, speech content often lacks background sound effects such as audience applause. Overall, IELTS Listening is more realistic than HSK when it comes to background sounds.

3.2.3 Background sound

Background sounds can be categorized into two kinds: one is

additional background sound effects, such as telephone ringing, crowd noise, etc.; the other is the sound quality processing of speech, such as lowering the volume, mimicking a conversation, etc. Both kinds of background sounds are for the service of the input content and assist in the construction of relevant communicative situations. Appropriate background sounds can help candidates understand the content of the discourse and increase the authenticity of the test.

3.3 A Comparative Analysis on the Discourse of HSK and IELTS Listening Test

Discourse texts are mainly concerned with the essential features of the language, i.e., length, content, language organization, and pragmatics. Length refers to the number of words or sentences composed by the test, which itself does not affect the language test. However, the longer the length of the text, the richer the propositional content. And the language organization and pragmatics it contains indirectly affect the language test. The content contains vocabulary, degree of contextualization, information distribution, information type, topic, and genre. This chapter focuses on the study and analysis of HSK Level 4-6 and IELTS listening discourse from vocabulary, topic and genre.

3.3.1 Vocabulary

The HSK syllabus shows that the vocabulary of the HSK are common Chinese words, which is an important basis for teachers to teach vocabulary, and also words that should be mastered within the ability of the candidates. Superlative words refer to words that are beyond the scope of the vocabulary outline for that level.

Table 7: Vocabulary in the syllabus in HSK 4 (%)

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	SW
HSK 4	10.65	10.4	19.08	34.68	2.89	0.41	25.19

In Table 7, only 75% of the syllabus vocabulary in HSK Level 4 is used. From the overall word frequency statistics of HSK Level 5-6, such vocabulary selection is too demanding for the candidates to make the validity of the test. This is not conducive to examining candidates' vocabulary mastery, nor is it conducive to the compilation of teaching materials and the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language.

IELTS does not have a clear official vocabulary syllabus, but it is possible to project the theoretical literacy ratio of students in IELTS listening discourse materials by calculating the coverage rate of the highest-frequency 1,000 word family (i.e., the top 1,000 words with the highest word frequency in the language), and the second-high-frequency 1,000 word family (i.e., words with a frequency of between 1,000 and 2,000 words) in the listening text. In this paper, we used the Vocabprofile tool to count the discourse of Test 1 in IELTS 14-16.

Table 8: IELTS High Frequency Word Coverage

IELTS	high-frequency	sub-high-frequency	academic	other	
14	P1	598 84.7%	29 4.11%	7 0.99%	72 10.2%
	P2	528 84.48%	36 5.76%	32 5.12%	29 4.64%
	P3	694 84.84%	41 5.01%	23 2.81%	60 7.33%

15	P4	532 74.51%	53 7.42%	67 9.38%	62 8.68%
	P1	552 80.47%	37 5.39%	27 3.94%	70 10.2%
	P2	589 82.38%	56 7.83%	14 1.96%	56 7.83%
	P3	697 83.27%	44 5.26%	32 3.82%	64 7.65%
16	P4	628 80.51%	51 6.54%	20 2.56%	81 10.38%
	P1	554 84.07%	39 5.92%	11 1.67%	55 8.35%
	P2	639 89.25%	18 2.51%	21 2.93%	38 5.31%
	P3	654 82.47%	22 2.77%	24 3.03%	93 11.73%
	P4	527 76.17%	36 5.11%	42 5.96%	90 12.77%

Table 8 shows that the proportion of both high-frequency 1000 word families and sub-high-frequency 1000 word families in IELTS listening discourse reached more than 80%, with an average of 87.56%, and some of the other vocabulary were names of people, places, or proper nouns that had been explained in the discourse. Therefore, the theoretical proportion of students' literacy in IELTS listening could reach more than 90%, which is close to the vocabulary threshold and is a reasonable vocabulary setting.

3.3.2 Topic

It was found that HSK topics were severely unequal in the proportion of distribution between daily and academic categories. The proportion of daily categories in HSK Level 4 and 5 exceeded 90%, and the proportion of academic categories in Level 6 exceeded 80%. The proportion of topics in IELTS is quite balanced, with 50% each of daily and academic categories. However, the content on traditional culture in HSK is notable. The content on traditional cultural knowledge, folklore, and ways of thinking is not only interesting but also authentic to a certain extent.

3.3.3 Genres

Due to the diversity of communicative purposes, there are many types of discourse genres, such as myths, stories, speeches, commercials, editorials, and so on. According to the requirements of candidates at different levels, the main communicative purposes and corresponding discourse genres for candidates at HSK and IELTS intermediate and advanced levels are social conversations, narration of events, explanations, speeches and reports, interviews with personalities, and thematic discussions.

Table 9: Comparison of genres in HSK and IELTS

	HSK			IELTS
	HSK 4	HSK 5	HSK 6	
conversations	106 66.25%	118 81.94%	—	12 25%
narration	8 5%	10 6.94%	10 10.42%	—
explanations	39 24.38%	14 9.72%	74 77.08%	12 25%
Speech	3 1.88%	—	—	11 22.92%
Interviews	2 1.25%	1 0.69%	12 12.5%	1 2.08%
Discussion	2 1.25%	1 0.69%	—	12 25%

Based on the categorization of genres, this paper compares the genres of HSK Level 4-6 with those of IELTS. It was found that in terms of genre richness, HSK level 4 was the richest, HSK level 5 and IELTS both involved five types of genres, and HSK level 6 had the fewest types of genres. In terms of the distribution ratio, IELTS is more balanced in terms of genre, basically equally distributed on the four categories of social conversation, explanation and interpretation, speech and report, and thematic discussion. In contrast, due to the over-representation of short- and medium-length contrastive questions in HSK Level 4 and Level 5, the social conversation genre was also most prominent, especially in Level 5. In HSK Level 6, conversations were replaced by shorter passage questions, and the illustrative genre was greatly increased. Longer interview questions were also added to ensure the number of character interview genres in the test.

4. Implications of IELTS for HSK

Although HSK has its advantages, it also suffers from problems such as unbalanced question structure and lack of authenticity. To promote the development of HSK, this chapter will draw on the mature experience of IELTS, combine Bachman's theory of Communicative Language Testing with the *Grade Standards for International Chinese Language Education (2021)* which is hereafter referred to as Grading Standards, and put forward suggestions for the HSK listening test.

4.1 Suggestions for HSK Question Setting

4.1.1 Classifying HSK test types into Academic and Work

IELTS offers multiple tests, including Academic, General Training, UK Visas and Immigration, to meet diverse purposes of candidates. HSK lacks the purpose of targeting different test purposes and can refer to IELTS to set up additional test types according to test purposes.

Taking IELTS as a model, HSK can also be further divided into Academic and Work according to the purpose of the test and the needs of the candidates. HSK Academic test can be used to fulfill the academic needs of the candidates, such as applying to Chinese universities, credit exchange, scholarship application, etc. The Work test can be used for immigration applications or applying for jobs. Both should reflect differences in question types, vocabulary, and topics to suit different purposes.

4.1.2 Balance the ratio of monologue questions to dialogue questions

In terms of test structure, HSK has the problem of over-representation of conversation. HSK can refer to IELTS to improve the question setting and distribution of questions.

Table 10: Suggestions for HSK question setting

HSK	Contents	Number of articles	Number of questions
HSK 4	Single-round dialogue in daily life (50-80 words)	15	15
	Passage of Speech in daily life (50-80 words)	15	15
	Many rounds of Dialogue	4	10

	in academic (100-120 words)		
	Short Passage in academic (100-120 words)	4	10
HSK 5	Many rounds of Dialogue in daily life (70-120 words)	10	10
	Passage of Speech in daily life (70-120 words)	10	10
	Many rounds of Dialogue in academic (180-230 words)	3	10
	Short Passage in academic (180-230 words)	2	10
HSK 6	Many rounds of Dialogue in daily life (100-150 words)	10	10
	Passage of Speech in daily life (100-150 words)	10	10
	Many rounds of Dialogue in academic (280-400 words)	2	10
	Short Passage in academic (280-400 words)	1	10

(a) Unify the structure of the test questions into daily contexts and academic contexts.

HSK can refer to IELTS, dividing the listening test into four parts, with dialogues and monologues, daily contexts, and academic contexts each taking up half of the test. In terms of question distribution, the two-two combination of dialogues and monologues not only ensures a balanced and stable structure but also helps candidates to focus their attention. And with the increase in the length of the test, the gradient of difficulty is more reasonable. From the perspective of context, this approach ensures a comprehensive coverage of candidates' daily communication skills and academic research skills in Chinese, making the test purpose more prominent.

(b) Increase the length of the test by equalizing the proportion of questions on topics and monologues.

HSK should equalize the number of questions on dialogue and monologue. From the point of view of differentiation, by balancing the ratio and reducing the number of phrases, the amount of information can be increased with the increase in the length of phrases, which improves the differentiation of the test and examines the candidates' ability to use Chinese as a whole. In terms of validity, the equal number of questions in the two types of tests avoided the problem of too great a difference in scores due to the different ways of thinking and the ability to excel of the test takers.

4.1.3 Reduce the number of multiple-choice questions and increase the number of semi-objective questions and other objective question types

There is only one type of question which is the multiple choice question in the listening test of HSK levels 4 to 6. Such a single question type has led to the following problems. First, objective questions lack flexibility, which is not conducive to testing candidates' comprehensive language use ability or to cultivating their thinking ability. Second, multiple-choice

questions have a greater degree of chance, which affects the credibility of the test. Third, other question types have been neglected, which is not conducive to the positive and reflexive role of language tests in teaching. In view of the above problems, HSK can make improvements with reference to IELTS question types.

Table 11: Suggestions for HSK question types

HSK	Question Type	
HSK 4	Objective questions	Multiple Choice Matching
	Semi-objective questions	Fill-in-the-blank
HSK 5	Objective questions	Multiple Choice Matching Marking
		Fill-in-the-blank
	Semi-objective questions	Fill-in-the-blanks or Table questions
		Multiple Select Marking
HSK 6	Objective questions	Fill-in-the-blank or Table questions
	Semi-objective questions	Table questions

(a) Adding semi-objective questions

To address the problem of a single question type in the HSK listening test, semi-objective questions such as fill-in-the-blank questions should be added to the test questions. This type of question not only has the advantage of clear and objective scoring but also can examine the candidates' comprehensive language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary and writing skills. Meanwhile, compared with multiple-choice questions, semi-objective questions are more in line with real communication scenarios, and the question types are more realistic.

(b) Enrichment of Objective Question

The multiple-choice questions in HSK, which are low in difficulty and high in chance, should be replaced with more difficult matching and graphical labeling questions. Matching and graphic labeling questions are also essentially modified multiple-choice questions, the difference being that multiple-choice questions correspond to multiple options for the same stem, while matching and graphic labeling questions correspond to multiple options for multiple stems, and the relationship between stems and options may be a differential correspondence, which tends to be cascading in correctness, i.e., a single error tends to lead to multiple errors, making it difficult to guess to get a higher score, which improves the reliability of the test.

(c) Flexible selection of various types of questions

In view of the lack of the current impact on washback, HSK should improve the randomness of the selection of question types while enriching the question types. The current test tends to fix one type of question for each part, but with the enrichment of HSK question types, the range of question types can be enlarged, more suitable question types can be selected according to the specific content of the discourse, and the types of questions selected and the specific number of each question type can be differentiated, which makes it difficult for the candidates to make predictions, and encourages them to improve their level to get the desired

results.

4.1.4 Reduced overlap of questions, options, and listening materials

The questions and options in HSK have a high degree of overlap with the listening material, and the overall difficulty is low, which is not conducive to the differentiation of abilities and also weakens the authenticity of the test task.

HSK can refer to IELTS's listening question setting and use synonym and antonym substitution to reduce the overlap between the questions and options and the listening material in HSK Level 5 to 6 and increase the interference in locating information. Meanwhile, in semi-objective questions, especially in the fill-in-the-blank and table question types, conjunctions and correlatives can be used to guide the candidates to use their language skills.

4.2 Suggestions for HSK Speech Input

HSK's speech input lacks authenticity, which is reflected in the excessive speed gap, the absence of accent and background sounds, and the mismatch with the topic content. Therefore, HSK can refer to the advantages of IELTS in speech input and improve both the speed and form of speech.

Table 12: Comparison of different speech speeds (words/minutes)

	Theoretical normal speed	Grade Standard		Current speed	Ideal speed
Slow	200~219	HSK 4	180~200	181.59	210~230
Normal	220~269	HSK 5	200~220	223.63	230~250
Fast	270~299	HSK 6	220~240	270.7	250~290

4.2.1 Adjusting the speed of speech

This paper compares the theoretical normal speed of speech, the prescribed speed of the *Grade Standard*, and the current average speed of speech at all levels of HSK 4 to 6 to derive the ideal range of speed of speech, and makes relevant suggestions accordingly.

(a) Revise the requirements for listening speed in the *Grade Standard*

The speed of speech in Grade Standard is generally lower than the theoretical normal speed of speech. To make the description of the speed of speech in the Grade Standard conform to the actual speed of speech, it is suggested that the range of the speed of speech for listening at Level 4 should be changed to 210~230 words/minute, that for listening at Level 5 should be changed to 230~250 words/minute and that for listening at Level 6 should be changed to 250~290 words/minute. At the same time, the adjustment of the *Grade Standard* should also lead to the adjustment of the speed of speech of the listening test promptly, to make it meet the requirements and solve the problem of the original imbalance of the speed of speech set at all levels.

(b) Harmonize the speed of speech with the content of the listening passage

HSK should be adjusted according to the content and speed of

speech. Academic content is more difficult than non-academic content, so the speed of non-academic content should be slightly faster than that of academic content, and the speed of communicative dialog should be faster than that of monologue. Adjusting the speed of speech can be done through pauses, exclamations, repetitions, corrections, etc., without changing the original speed of speech within the sentence, to make the speech more natural.

4.2.2 Increasing the use of accents and background sounds in input speech

In terms of accents, they can be divided into two categories, regional and social dialects. The social dialect should be used in the listening test, which can be simplified into young male/female voice, middle-aged male/female voice, etc. Specifically, it can be used to show different social identities through the tone of voice and vocabulary, and therefore there are certain requirements for the speaker's dubbing ability.

In terms of background sound, it can also be categorized into two means, i.e. background sound effects and sound quality processing. At present, the sound quality processing that needs to be used in HSK is the same as that of IELTS, mainly in telephone communication, which can be referred to IELTS by slightly lowering and blurring the volume of the party receiving the communication, but not affecting the candidate's ability to recognize the content of the voice.

4.3 Suggestions for Discourse Text

HSK still suffers from an imbalance of proportions within vocabulary, topics, and genres, which adversely affects the validity of the test and deviates from the purpose and use of the HSK test. Therefore, HSK can refer to the successful experience of IELTS and the *Grade Standard* to improve the content of discourse texts in vocabulary, topic, and genre.

4.3.1 Standardize vocabulary selection and update vocabulary syllabus

There is a wide gap between the vocabulary coverage of the HSK syllabus for HSK Level 4 to 6 and the percentage of literacy required for candidates to comprehend the text correctly. In this regard, HSK can standardize the choice of vocabulary and update the vocabulary outline.

Increase the use of syllabus vocabulary, appropriately reduce the number of superlatives, and add the necessary specialized vocabulary notes. Considering the difficulty of the test, the vocabulary coverage of the syllabus should be at least 85%. The proportion of superlatives should be controlled by reducing the number of abstract conceptual words and out-of-the-way words, as they cause difficulties for the candidates' text comprehension. As for the specialized academic words that cannot be avoided in the HSK academic category, annotations should be added to the listening discourse or the paper to help to understand.

Update the vocabulary syllabus and expand the number and scope of syllabus words. The vocabulary syllabus is an important basis for teachers to teach vocabulary and must be updated with the times. In addition, as the level increases,

specialized terms in different fields can be added to the syllabus.

4.3.2 Balance topic types and emphasize academic topics

HSK should not only test candidates' Chinese communicative activity on a daily basis, but also their ability to use Chinese for academic research. Therefore, HSK should set the types of topics according to the *Grade Standard*.

(a) Balance the ratio of daily and academic topics

HSK can fix the topics of each part by fixing the first and second parts as daily topics and the third and fourth parts as academic topics. Daily topics in HSK Level 4 can be personal life and professional work, and academic topics can be nature topics related to plants and animals. Topics in HSK Level 5 are expanded based on HSK Level 4, including academic topics on phenomena and problems. The daily topics of HSK Level 6 reinforce the purpose of communication, and the academic topics are mainly about phenomena, culture, and art. At the same time, topics on politics, theory, science, and technology are integrated into the topic choices at all levels as difficult points to increase the differentiation of the test, expanding and broadening the breadth and depth of the topics.

(b) Cultural topics should be advanced, communicative, and outward-looking

Cultural content should serve the purpose of the test, and the following principles should be observed when choosing relevant topics: 1. reflecting the characteristics of excellent traditional Chinese culture, meeting the requirements of the times, and not being controversial; 2. reflecting China's unique way of thinking and behavioral patterns, and generating a positive guiding significance for the test takers; and 3. meeting the needs of the actual life and communication of Chinese language learning abroad.

4.3.3 Broaden genres and clarify the discourse

Genre is determined by communicative purpose, and the main reason for the current solidification of genre selection in the HSK is that there is a single correspondence between topic and communicative purpose. However, in fact, the relationship between topics and genres is not one-to-one. Thus, HSK can broaden the genres by adjusting the communicative purpose of each topic.

In addition, HSK can refer to IELTS to give a brief introduction of the genre at the beginning of the listening test so that candidates can focus more on the discourse and the capture of key information.

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