

**Research Assessment Exercise 2020**  
**Impact Case Study**

**University: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University**  
**Unit of Assessment (UoA): 33 Linguistics & Language studies**

**Title of case study:** Improving Chinese Proficiency Levels of Hong Kong Students

**(1) Summary of the impact**

Research carried out at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) into the Chinese language proficiency of both Chinese speaking (CS) and non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students has led to direct impacts on the Putonghua curriculum and the development of a new course for NCS students. Around 3,000 teachers have benefited from the research through training delivered by the research team. The two lead researchers, Prof. SD Chan and Dr. Xinhua Zhu, also acted as consultants for a range of professional bodies, contributing to policy formulation in the field of learning and teaching Chinese both as a first and second language.

**(2) Underpinning research**

In recent years, the Hong Kong government has made the teaching of Chinese to non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students a strategic priority. Yet educational opportunities for the rapidly growing ethnic minority population of Hong Kong still lag far behind those for the mainstream population. [6] With this in mind, a team of academic staff at the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies (CBS) under the leadership of Prof. SD Chan (at PolyU since 1988) was invited by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) to provide research and professional input on various aspects of Chinese language education and assessment, particularly – but not exclusively - for students who speak Chinese as a second language (L2).

Between 2000 and 2019, the EDB commissioned over 30 professional service / R&D projects from Prof. Chan, with a cumulative consultancy fee of HK\$23,759,389. 12 of these projects were related to NCS Chinese learning, covering areas such as teacher training, curriculum evaluation, school-based support for Chinese L2 teaching, and supporting work for the development of a Chinese L2 curriculum for NCS students at different levels. The research was aimed at developing a progressive framework for Chinese language learning by NCS students, including frameworks for character and word learning and grammar, sets of learning materials and a collection of teaching strategies.

Between 1995 and 2003, the team (led by Prof. Chan since 1996) developed a Putonghua proficiency test, the Putonghua Shuiping Kaoshi (PSK), and carried out a comparative study between the PSK and a similar test for native speakers of Chinese together with three scholars from the State Language Commission. The PSK was offered to all PolyU students as a mandatory exit test from 2005 to 2012, and a modified version to primary and secondary school students from 2008 onwards. The large amount of test data generated was then analysed in a systematic study of students' Putonghua proficiency. Prof. Chan found that in the decade from 1999 to 2008, the Putonghua level of tertiary students showed a steady rise, with speaking as the best performed skill, followed by listening and Putonghua knowledge. The data collected between 2008 and 2010 showed that the Putonghua proficiency of many secondary students was comparable to that of tertiary students, and a large proportion of primary students spoke Putonghua at equally proficient level, although with a narrower range of vocabulary. [2, 4].

In 2003, the EDB commissioned Prof. Chan to develop a character and lexical list for HK primary education. The list was compiled based on a linguistic corpus from regional printed media, primary school textbooks and children's story books, reaching a total of 6,520,000

characters. Comparisons with the results of word frequency studies conducted in mainland China and Taiwan were also undertaken and stakeholders such as teachers consulted. The outcome was the *Character and Lexical List for Hong Kong Primary Education*, published by the Education Bureau in 2007. [1] [a]

In 2009, Prof. Chan was commissioned to develop a Chinese Learning Framework for senior secondary NCS students. The task was to develop and deliver 12 Chinese learning courses in workplace contexts pegged to the Qualifications Framework (QF) through a pilot scheme, covering listening and speaking Cantonese and Putonghua, reading, writing and integrative skills. All 12 courses were uploaded to the Qualifications Register by May 2012.[b]

Dr. Zhu Xinhua, who joined the team in 2007, conducted research into Assessment for Learning (AfL) and assessment of specific language skills, in particular reading skills. He was commissioned by the EDB to deliver 9 professional services, mostly as PI. His research led to the development of frameworks such as “Six Types of Reading Comprehension Processes”, the “Four Traits of Integrated Writing Competence” and the “Standards of Chinese Language Assessment in Reading, Writing and Integrated Skills”. [3][5]

### (3) References to the research

1. Chan, S.D., with Chinese Education Section of Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Bureau. (2007). *Character and Lexical List for Hong Kong Primary Education* (香港小學學習字詞表). Education Bureau, HKSAR. ISBN 962-8814-40-0, ISBN 978-962-8814-40-4
2. Chan, S.D., Zhu, X. et al. (2010). *A Study on Putonghua Proficiency Assessment for Primary Students* (小學普通話水平考試研究). Hong Kong: The Commercial Press. ISBN 978-962-07-1904-2
3. Zhu X. (2005). Further Development of the Model of Cognitive Abilities and Related Questions on Reading Test. *Journal of Chinese Language Education*, No. 2, pp.18-39, General No. 6.
4. Zhu, X., Chan, S.D., & Wen, H. (2012) “十年間香港大學生普通話水準的發展變化” (Development and Change of HK University Students’ Putonghua Proficiency in the Past Decade: An Analysis Based on a University’s Ten Years’ Test Results). *Applied Linguistics* (special issue). pp.58-66.
5. Zhu, X., Li, X., Yu, G., Cheong, C.M., & Liao, X. (2016). Exploring the Relationships between Independent Listening and Listening-Reading-Writing Tasks in Chinese Language Testing: Towards a Better Understanding of the Construct Underlying Integrated Writing Tasks. *Language Assessment Quarterly: An International Journal*, 13 (3), 167-185. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2016.1210609>.
6. Chan, S.D. (2019). From Oracy to Literacy: The Role of Cantonese in the Learning of Chinese Reading and Writing. In Wakefield, J (Ed.) *Cantonese as a Second Language: Issues, Experiences and Suggestions for Teaching and Learning*. Routledge, pp. 209-231.

### (4) Details of the impact

Owing to the close stakeholder relationship between CBS and EDB, the research described above has had a direct impact on curriculum changes for Hong Kong. [c] It has also impacted on CS and NCS students, teachers, and the publishers of textbooks. Both Prof. Chan and Dr. Zhu have provided professional advice and acted as consultants for a range of government and professional bodies, enabling them to contribute to policy formulation.

#### **Impact on the Putonghua and Chinese language curriculum:**

As a result of the expertise gained through her research, in 2013 Prof. Chan was invited by EDB to act as Chair of an ad hoc committee on revamping the Putonghua curriculum (P1-S3)

for the Hong Kong school sector (covering nearly 850 public sector primary and secondary schools with a total student population of 555,531). The revised curriculum was formally announced in May 2017 for implementation in 2019/20. Based on the findings of the Putonghua test offered to primary and secondary students, one major change of the revised curriculum was to put more emphasis on the cultivation of students' communicative competence in Putonghua, instead of devoting too much attention to the practice of Pinyin, which is proven to be in weak correlation with students' overall Putonghua ability. The position of the Pinyin system and the teaching approach has been amended accordingly. [d]

The Six Types of Reading Comprehension Processes based on Dr. Zhu's work, introduced into Chinese language curriculum and teaching in primary and secondary schools since 2006 and maintained throughout the assessment period, have facilitated a paradigm shift in reading education in Hong Kong, from traditional text-based reading comprehension instruction towards competence-oriented approaches. In 2015, this contributed to the excellence of HK students' performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). [e]

#### **Course development and roll-out:**

Prof. Chan's character and lexical lists became a major reference source for the school sector in lesson development and for publishers in textbook compilation even before the impact assessment period. In 2014, an Applied Learning (Chinese) course for NCS students studying at local schools based on the 12 Chinese learning course in workplace contexts was formally introduced by the EDB as an alternative for NCS students who have difficulty following the Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) Chinese curriculum. The course provides a more easily mastered upward ladder for these students, ultimately leading to better educational and occupational opportunities. 359 students took the course offered by two providers from 2015 to 2018. The first cohort completed the course in June 2017. 84% of the students attained a pass or above level. In contrast, the percentage of NCS students scoring level 3 or above in the DSE Chinese exam only ranged from 21.6% to 30.8% in the years from 2012 to 2017. [f]

#### **Teacher training and impact on teaching practice:**

Between November 2013 and 2018, Prof. Chan and two colleagues delivered 56 teacher training sessions based on their research, focusing on the teaching of Chinese to NCS students. Altogether, they were attended by around 1,500 school teachers, with feedback indicating that over 95% of participants rated the training as satisfactory or highly satisfactory.

Since October 2013 and September 2019, Dr. Zhu gave 19 keynote presentations on Chinese language assessment at seminars and workshops for teachers and teacher educators, hosted by universities, Hong Kong EDB and MOE of PRC. These provided practitioners with essential strategies to evaluate students' learning effectively and to provide timely and constructive feedback. Altogether, around 2,470 teachers attended these sessions. Dr Zhu's research team also conducted three professional development seminars on assessment for learning (AfL) with 245 participating teachers citywide between 2014 and 2019, and offered professional consultations to curriculum development officers from various local education authorities. Participants responded that they would improve their teaching based on the methods discussed in the seminars. EDB had therefore requested the re-run of some seminars.

#### **Consultancy, policy input and government awards:**

Based on her research expertise, Prof. Chan has become an important source of expert input and a close partner of the EDB. Between October 2013 and 2015, she provided professional advice on NCS Chinese learning to the Central Policy Unit as well as the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) where she served as a member from 2009-2015. SCOLAR provides the Government with advice on the overall policy on language education. Between 2013- 2019, Prof. Chan also served as a member of four other committees,

panels and working groups. These appointments enabled her to provide direct input into policy formation and participate in curriculum development work; e.g. the introduction of the Applied Learning (Chinese) curriculum in 2014 was based on her suggestion made during a meeting of the Central Policy Unit, although no written record of this was kept.

Dr. Zhu also acted as a consultant on a number of projects commissioned by the Hong Kong education authority between 2007 and 2019. He played a key role in local curriculum reform through his two students' language competence frameworks and the "Standards of Chinese Language Assessment in Reading, Writing and Integrated Skills". The two frameworks have been referred to or implemented in the Chinese language curriculum, public examination and school-based assessment in Hong Kong, mainland China and Singapore. Moreover, the prevailing HKDSE scoring rubrics for integrated writing assessment were built upon the Four Traits for secondary school students. The Standards have been implemented in Chinese language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Chinese-language standards-referenced assessment by Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, HKEAA.[g]

In July 2015, Prof. Chan was awarded the Medal of Honour by the HKSAR government for her valuable contribution to the HK education sector. [h]

**(5) Sources to corroborate the impact**

- a) Website of Character and Lexical List for Hong Kong Primary Education (香港小學學習字詞表): [https://www.edbchinese.hk/lexlist\\_ch/](https://www.edbchinese.hk/lexlist_ch/)
- b) The link to Qualifications Framework of EDB where the 12 courses of workplace Chinese are registered: <http://www.hkqr.gov.hk/HKQRPRD/web/hkqr-en/search/op-search/>  
The courses concerned can be found using the "Operator/Assessment Agencies Search" (Name of Operator: School of Professional Education and Executive Development, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University; QF Level 1,2,3; Area of Study and Training: A08 Languages and Related Studies). Comparison can be made with the curriculum of Applied Learning (Chinese) as captured in the attached documents.
- c) Lo Pui-Lam, Chief Curriculum Development Officer, Chinese Language Education, Education Bureau, Hong Kong. Tel: 2892 5868.
- d) Consultation document on the Putonghua curriculum review:  
[http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/tc/curriculum-development/kla/chi-edu/doc\\_PTH.pdf](http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/tc/curriculum-development/kla/chi-edu/doc_PTH.pdf)  
Information on Putonghua curriculum review consultation forum:  
<https://tcs.edb.gov.hk/tcs/admin/courses/previewCourse/forPortal.htm?courseId=CDI020151372&lang=zh>
- e) Lau, K.L. (2015). Implications from Hong Kong Students' Reading Performance in Programme for International Student Assessment on the Chinese Language Curriculum and Teaching. *Education Journal*, 43(1): 59-84. [http://hkier.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/journal/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EJ\\_V43N1\\_59-84.pdf](http://hkier.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/journal/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EJ_V43N1_59-84.pdf)
- f) HK Government Press Release: Learning of Chinese language by non-Chinese speaking students  
<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201801/17/P2018011700590.htm?fontSize=1>
- g) Webpage of HKDSE Core Subjects: Chinese Language - Level Descriptors related to the assessment standard [http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/tc/HKDSE/hkdse\\_subj.html?A1&1&1\\_4](http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/tc/HKDSE/hkdse_subj.html?A1&1&1_4)
- h) Prof. SD Chan awarded Medal of Honour in July 2015:  
<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201510/31/P201510280619.htm>  
[https://gia.info.gov.hk/general/201507/01/P201506301037\\_1037\\_148778.pdf](https://gia.info.gov.hk/general/201507/01/P201506301037_1037_148778.pdf)