

New HSK Level 4 Listening Question Type Analysis --An example of a real HSK Level 4 listening test in 2013

Shanshan Wang

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing

202120200678@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract. This article introduces the basic information of the new HSK Level 4 listening test and divides the Level 4 listening into three sections based on the real HSK Level 4 listening test in 2013. This paper analyzes the features of the new HSK Level 4 Listening section, the content categories and the focus of the examination, and proposes study and tutorial strategies.

Keywords: New HSK Level 4 exam; Listening exam; Question analysis

1. Introduction

The New Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (hereafter referred to as the New HSK) is an international standardised Chinese proficiency test introduced by the Hanban Organisation(now referred as Center for Language Education and Cooperation) in 2009. Compared with the old HSK test, the new HSK test fully examines the characteristics of different learners, absorbs the advantages of the old HSK test and draws on the advanced achievements of international language tests.

The new HSK examination structure consists of a written examination and an oral examination. The written examination is divided into six levels, from low to high, HSK Level 1, HSK Level 2, HSK Level 3, HSK Level 4, HSK Level 5 and HSK Level 6; the oral examination consists of three levels, from low to high, HSK Elementary, HSK Intermediate and HSK Advanced. The written examination consists of a paper-and-pencil test and an online examination, while the oral examination is in the form of a recording.

HSK Level 4 requires a vocabulary of 1200 words, benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) of B2 level. According to the requirements of the exam, candidates who have passed HSK Level 4 are already capable of talking about a wide range of topics in Chinese and are fluent when communicating with native speakers.

The HSK Level 4 exam consists of three sections, listening, reading and writing. There are a total of 100 questions, of which the listening section has 45 questions, accounting for 45% of the total number of questions, and is the most voluminous of the three sections. The test takes a total of 100 minutes, of which listening takes about 30 minutes, or 30% of the test length, making it the longest section apart from reading. As the first part of the HSK exam, how well a candidate performs in the listening section will also affect his or her state of mind.

2. Introduction and analysis of each question type in the new HSK Level 4 Listening test

2.1 Basic information about the new HSK Level 4 Listening Test

The HSK Level 4 Listening test is divided into three parts. In the first part, candidates determine the right and wrong based on a single sentence they hear; in the second part, candidates select the correct answer based on two sentences of dialogue and a question that they hear; in the third part, candidates select the correct answer based on four or more sentences of dialogue or a passage that they hear.

Table 1 Distribution of questions in the New HSK Level 4 Listening test

Part	Volume of questions	Question Type	Listening materials	Location of test questions
Part I	10	Judging right from wrong	One sentence.	Questions 1- 10
Part II	15	Choose the answer based on what you hear	One round of conversation between two people (two sentences)	Questions 11- 25
Part III	20	Choose the answer based on what you hear	2-3 rounds of conversations between two people (4-5 sentences)	Questions 26- 45

2.2 Part I Single-sentence judgements

2.2.1 Introduction to the question type

The first part of the new HSK listening test (Single Sentence Judgement) consists of 10 questions. The listening material is a single sentence and after the recording has been played once, candidates are required to judge whether the content of the question matches the content of the recording they have heard.

Part 1 lasts approximately 7 minutes, with a 10-second pause after each question to allow students to complete the current question and look ahead to the next question. The vocabulary used in Part 1 is within the scope of the new HSK Level 4 syllabus and the material in each question is generally one sentence long with an average word count of 26 words.

In order to better analyze the characteristics of the questions in the new HSK Grade 4 listening questions, we hereby list the following examples of Grade 4 listening questions:

Listening materials: Protecting the environment can start with small things. For example, using fewer plastic bags to put rubbish in the rubbish bin, turning up the air conditioning in summer, etc. These are things that we can all do.

Question materials: Environmental protection starts with the little things around you.

(Question H41328, Question 7) The correct answer is √

The listening material listed above is long, but the questions correspond to the first sentence of the listening material, and the second sentence of the listening material is a supplement to the first sentence. Therefore, it is important for candidates to listen clearly to the first sentence and to be aware of the synonymy of "protect the environment" and "environmental protection" so that it is easy to judge the question as a tick. However, if candidates did not concentrate at the beginning of the listening session and missed the key sentences, it was easy to get confused by the long sentences. At this point, using this real question as an example, candidates could also use common sense to determine the correct answer.

2.2.2 Investigation of single-sentence judgments

A detailed analysis of a total of 20 single-sentence judgement questions from the 2 exams for HSK Level 4 in FY13 reveals the competencies examined in the single-sentence judgement questions, as shown in the table below.

Table 2 Distribution of ability in single-sentence judgement questions

Examining competence	Volume of questions	Proportion
Get specific information	12	60%
Overview of the main content	4	20%
Synonymous content conversion	4	20%

As can be seen from the table above, the highest proportion of single- sentence judgement questions examined the ability to obtain specific information, accounting for 60% of the questions (12 questions). The number of questions examining the ability to convert synonyms and the number of questions examining the main content each accounted for 20% (4 questions). The synonym conversion test mainly examined whether candidates fully understood the meaning of a single sentence and used other statements with the same meaning to paraphrase it; the main content test mainly examined whether candidates could quickly make a summary judgement based on available information. The single-sentence judgement questions were short in length, so it was appropriate to examine whether candidates understood the information accurately through the judgement format.

2.3 Two-sentence pairs of topics

2.3.1 Introduction to two-sentence dialogue questions

The second part of the new HSK listening test (two-sentence dialogue) has 15 questions. The listening material is a round of dialogue between two people, often in two sentences. After the dialogue is finished, the recording will have a third person asking questions. Candidates are asked to choose their answers from the four options on the paper.

Part 2 lasts approximately 9 minutes, with a 10-second pause after each question to allow students to complete the current question and look ahead to the next question. The vocabulary used in Part 2 is within the scope of the new HSK Level 4 syllabus and the material in each question is generally two sentences long, with an average word count of 37 words. The same examples are given in Part 2, with examples as follows.

M: Miss Wang, when are we going to visit the Great Wall?

F: We will leave tomorrow at 8am and meet you in front of the hotel on time.

Q: What is the female most likely to be doing?

Options: A. Tourist guide B. Police officer C. Actor D. Hairdresser

(Question H41328, Question 11) The correct answer is A

The differences between the content of the examples listed above and the single sentences in Part 1 are already apparent. In the dialogue scenario there is background information shared by both parties to the conversation. Candidates needed to quickly determine the identity of the two parties and the purpose of the conversation through a round of dialogue between the two. This question required candidates to identify key information such as 'visiting the Great Wall' and 'at the entrance to the hotel' and to realize that key information belonged to the work scenario of the profession of 'tour guide'.

2.3.2 Investigation of two-sentence dialogue question types

A detailed analysis of a total of 30 two-sentence dialogue questions from 2 exams of HSK Level 4 in FY13 reveals the competencies examined in the two- sentence dialogue questions, as shown in the table below.

Table 3 Distribution of the ability to examine topics in two-sentence pairs

Examining competence	Volume of questions	Percentage of
Get specific information	16	53.3%
Overview of the main contents	12	40%
Synonymous content conversion	2	6.67%

From the above table, the proportion of double-sentence pairs of topics testing the ability to obtain specific information remains high, with 16 out of 30 questions (53.3%). The number of questions examining the main content has increased significantly compared to the single-sentence

judgement questions, which may be directly related to the characteristics of the form of dialogue and the context provided by it. The number of questions on synonymic content conversion was only 2, or 6.67%. It can be seen that the two-sentence dialogue questions were more concerned with candidates' ability to identify and summarize inferred dialogue information, with less attention paid to the conversion of synonymous expressions.

2.4 Multi-sentence pairs of topics

2.4.1 Introduction to multi-sentence dialogue questions

The third part of the new HSK Listening Test (Multi-sentence Conversation) consists of 20 questions. The listening material is 4-5 sentences that form a dialogue. After the dialogue is finished, the recording will have a third person asking questions. Candidates are asked to choose their answer from 4 options on the paper. Part 3 lasts approximately 14 minutes and after each question is recorded, there is a 10-second pause to allow students to complete the current question and look ahead to the next question.

The vocabulary that appears in Part 3 is within the scope of the new HSK Level 4 syllabus, and the average word count for material in each question is 80 words. Example questions are as follows.

M: I can't believe you graduated with a PhD at such a young age.

F: I went to school early and did my PhD straight after my Masters. M: What did you do for your PhD?

F: I studied medicine. Mainly studied pediatric medicine.

Q: What can I know about women?

Options: A. She is tall. B. She is a professor. C. She has a doctorate. D. She has just returned from studying abroad.

(Question H41328, Question 29) The correct answer is C

There are four sentences in the listening material listed above. For candidates, options B, C and D are relevant, so it is important to hear the recording play the question all the way through before deciding on C. Before hearing the question, candidates should focus on the key message of the conversation. Although the multi-sentence conversations are long, the key information still appears very frequently in the first sentence.

2.4.2 Investigation of multi-sentence dialogue question types

A detailed analysis of a total of 40 single-sentence judgement questions from the 2 exams for HSK Level 4 in 2013 reveals the competencies examined in the single-sentence judgement questions, as shown in the table below.

Table 4 Distribution of competency in multi-sentence examination of topics

Examining competence	Volume of questions	Percentage of
Get specific information	22	55%
Overview of the main content	14	35%
Synonymous content conversion	4	10%

As can be seen from the table above, the ability to obtain specific information is still a key item in the listening section, with 22 out of 60 questions examining whether candidates can grasp specific information (55%). At the same time, the proportion of synonymy conversion content remained relatively low. It is worth noting that in the multi-sentence dialogue questions, the answers appear very frequently in the first sentence, so the multi-sentence dialogue questions require a higher level of concentration and memory than the single-sentence judgement and double-sentence dialogue questions.

3. New HSK Level 4 Listening test content categories and focus

3.1 Content categories

The content categories covered in the 90 questions are listed below.

Table 5 Distribution of content categories for the New HSK Level 4 Listening test questions

Type of content	Volume	Proportion	Exam questions cover
Work and Study	17	18.8%	Mostly occurs in the workplace, often in conversations between supervisors and subordinates
Shopping	10	11.1%	Mostly occurs in shopping malls, often with salesmen and customers
Itinerary	15	16.6%	Most often occurs between two people preparing to meet, often to determine the time and place of the meeting
Asking for directions, looking for things	8	8.8%	The context of these conversations is often a person who is unable to find their way or find something and asks for help from those around them
Interpersonal relations	8	8.8%	The scenario is often the exchange of pleasantries when you meet someone you know, or relaying to others what others have been up to
Perspectives	15	16.6%	are passages that contain positive subjects, such as moving forward to find direction, etc.
Personal experience	10	11.1%	There are two types of personal experience, one is ongoing, such as practicing piano or learning to drive, and the other is past experience, such as studying abroad
Food	3	3.3%	Often it is a recommendation for a good restaurant, or between two people one person makes the food (dumplings) and invites the other person to try it
Humorous stories	4	4.4%	Storytelling topics with a touch of humour

According to the table above, the highest proportion of topics was in the category of work and study (18.8%), the same proportion was in the category of itinerary and expression of opinion (16.6%), shopping and personal experience (11.1%), and the remaining topics were related to food, humorous stories, interpersonal relationships and finding things. This proportional arrangement is in line with what HSK level 4 is intended to achieve; the HSK test tests candidates' Chinese language proficiency and also provides schools and companies with reference information for recruitment and employment. Therefore, the number of work and study related topics is the highest, the itinerary is also related to work and socializing, expression of opinions and personal experiences are all part of self-expression, and things like buying, eating, finding things and talking about stories fall under the category of everyday activities. It can be said that the setting of HSK exam topics is linked to the practicality and importance of language use, and this linkage is bound to contribute positively to teaching and learning.

3.2 Focus of the examination

3.2.1 Key point 1 Detailed information

There is a lot of detail in a passage, including information about the main character of the story, and when, where and what happened. Most of the options in the test are not about individual details, but about "people", "time", "place", "events", etc. Most of them are "people", "time", "place", "events", etc., combined together to form options or distractors. When listening to the recording, candidates should pay attention to the details that appear in the options and make notes. Examples are as follows.

M: Who was the girl who greeted you in the restaurant earlier?

F: Xiao Dai, the new nurse. The two of us performed together at the New Year's Eve party.

M: I remembered, it was her.

F: Next time you have the chance to meet someone, we will introduce you to them.

Q: Who they're talking about.

Options: A Neighbour B Dr Tai C New nurse D Restaurant waiter

(Question H41328, Question 31) The correct answer is C

Firstly, students should quickly glance at the four options and guess where the question will lead based on the content of the options. When candidates hear the words 'new nurse', they should be able to realize that these five words correspond exactly to option C. When they hear the question, they can answer directly. Although the information is given directly, the option setting is also of interest. In the text, the key words "restaurant", "Xiaodai" and "nurse" appear. Option A does not communicate with the keywords, while option B is confusing because of the surname and the related occupation, and option D is confusing because of the location. Therefore, candidates need to be able to focus on the listening test and be able to eliminate the confusing items.

3.2.2 Key point 2 Synonymous substitution

Most of the questions used a 'tautological content shift' approach while testing candidates' ability to grasp detailed information. The correct option does not reproduce the recording in its original form, but uses 'tautological content switching', which means that the same meaning is expressed in different words.

Listening materials: Studies have found that eating sweet things can make people feel good. So if you're feeling down, have some cake or chocolate, as these sweet things may bring you a good mood.

Question materials: Eating sweet things can make you feel better.

(Question H41328, Question 10) The correct answer is √

This sentence appears in the last position in the single sentence judgement question type. The sentence is quite long and the student's ability that is tested is not to obtain direct information but to express the same meaning in different ways. Although the sentence was long, there were two cues in the sentence: 'Eating sweet things can make you feel good' and 'These sweet things might put you in a good mood'. Therefore, candidates need to be able to use different forms of expression for one meaning and have the ability to substitute synonyms.

3.2.3 Key point 3 Summarizing and reasoning

Summarizing and reasoning is a high proportion of the dialogue, especially in double-sentence dialogue. This is because summary reasoning questions often do not give entirely specific linguistic information directly, but require candidates to determine the context of the conversation at hand. Information about the identity of the two parties to the conversation, the scene, etc. is summarized from the details of the conversation.

M: How's it going? Feeling better?

F: It's not as uncomfortable after the injection.

M: That's good, go home and take your medication regularly and come back in a week for a check-up.

F: Yes Doctor, thank you.

Q: What happened to the women?

Options: A cried B didn't eat enough C got sick D didn't wake up

(Question H41329, Question 36) The correct answer is C

This question is a typical summary reasoning question, where the answer "sick" does not appear in the text, but the words "injection", "medicine" and "examination" are used. "examination", "doctor" and "how is it? Do you feel better?" and the imperative "Take your medication at home and come back in a week for a check-up" all imply that the scene is a hospital, and it is easy to infer that the speaker has come to the hospital because he or she is sick. Whereas the first two tests focused on the grasp and extraction of a key piece of information, this type of question is about drawing out key information throughout the text. Candidates need to have better summarising and reasoning skills.

Based on data from two sets of questions from the new HSK Level 4 listening test, this paper introduces the purpose and structure of the new HSK Level 4 listening test setting, distinguishes three types of questions in the listening test, including single sentence judgement, double sentence dialogue and multi- sentence dialogue, and classifies the number of the three types of questions according to the different abilities examined. The selection of topics in the two sets of listening questions is also summarized, and it is found that the frequency of topic occurrence is related to the importance and usefulness of the topic in real life, in line with the objective of the HSK test setting, which is to provide a reference for employers and admissions. However, the amount of data relied on in this paper is insufficient, and subsequent research with more data support is expected to yield more precise and fitting test patterns, thus better serving teaching and learning.

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