

Review on Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education

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Abstract: This paper fully reviews Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education which is the latest comprehensive standards formulated by China to describe and evaluate the Chinese proficiency of foreign learners. After introducing and analyzing its motivations for formulation, core content, key features, innovations and significance, this paper outlines some important subsequent work worth doing related to its promotion and applications, like developing corresponding curriculum standards and textbooks, compiling a new dictionary based on “three levels and nine bands” and “four-dimension benchmarks”, developing a new version of Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) and a new type of HSK Speaking Test (HSKK).

Keywords: Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education, core content, key features, innovations, significance, applications

1. Introduction

Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education (GF0025-2021) (hereinafter referred to as *Grading Standards*) was officially issued jointly by China's Ministry of Education and State Language Work Committee, on March 31st, 2021, and is scheduled to be officially implemented on July 1st, 2021. This is the first-ever version of comprehensive standards formulated by China to describe and evaluate the Chinese proficiency of foreign learners.

The coexistence, sharing and exchange of multiple languages and cultures are playing an important role in the world. Some of the world's major languages, like English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, etc. are now widely used and learned internationally, and their mother tongue countries have correspondingly established language promotion agency(s) and formulated a series of policies as well as language proficiency grading standards. Like these countries, China, as the mother tongue country of Chinese language, takes the responsibility for formulating and promoting various standards for international Chinese language education.

2. Motivations for Formulating Grading Standards

Language is crucial to know and understand a country and its cultures, and standards are the key to language education. Since 1992, China has successively formulated a series of Chinese language-related standards, such as *Outline of the Graded Vocabulary for HSK* (1992), *Standards for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages* (2007, 2015), *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (2008), *The Graded Chinese Syllables, Characters and Words for the Application of Teaching Chinese to the Speakers of Other Languages* (2010), *Chinese Proficiency Test Syllabus* (levels 1-6 & Speaking, 2010). However, with the vigorous development of international Chinese language education, the existing standards need to be upgraded to build a high-quality international Chinese language education standards system.

At present, 75 countries in the world have incorporated Chinese into their national education system and over 4,000 foreign universities offer Chinese courses. According to statistics, 25 million foreigners are studying Chinese and an ever-increasing number of learners are taking various Chinese examinations. The majority of learners and teachers of Chinese hope that a set of standardized, inclusive, open and implementable standards can be formulated and issued to direct Chinese learning, teaching and testing. In this context, *Grading Standards* began to be developed in May, 2017, and was

approved by The State Language Work Committee in September, 2020, with an aim of further improving the standards system of Chinese language and providing strong support for the development of international Chinese language education.

3. The Core Content of *Grading Standards*

Structurally, *Grading standards* includes eight parts, i.e., Preface, Scope, Terms and Definitions, Level Description, Syllable Chart, List of Chinese Characters, Glossary and Grammar Level Outline. The following are the core content of *Grading Standards*.

“Three levels and nine bands”: In Level Description, foreign learners’ Chinese proficiency is classified into three levels, namely primary, intermediate and advanced, and each level is further classified into three bands.

“Four-dimension benchmarks”: The four basic language elements, i.e., syllable, Chinese character, vocabulary and grammar are used as the benchmarks to measure Chinese proficiency.

“Three evaluation dimensions”: verbal communication abilities, topics & tasks, and quantitative criteria. The first dimension means the abilities to communicate in Chinese by comprehensive use of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating on different topics in different occasions; the second one means the common topics involved in the use of Chinese in life, study and work, and the typical verbal communication tasks completed by the comprehensive use of multiple language skills in communication; the last means the content and quantity of syllables, Chinese characters, vocabulary and grammar that learners should master when they reach each Chinese band (see *Table 1*).

“Five language skills”: Taking Chinese listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating as the five language skills, the Chinese proficiency of learners can be accurately calibrated.

Table 1 Quantitative Criteria Summary of Grading Standards (unit: pcs)

Level	Band	Syllable	Chinese character	Vocabulary	Grammar
Primary	1	269	300	500	48
	2	199/468	300/600	772/1,272	81/129
	3	140/608	300/900	973/2,245	81/210
Intermediate	4	116/724	300/1,200	1,000/3,245	76/286
	5	98/822	300/1,500	1,071/4,316	71/357
	6	86/908	300/1,800	1,140/5,456	67/424
Advanced	7~9	202/1,110	1,200/3,000	5,356/11,092	148/572
Total		1,110	3,000	11,092	572

(Note: In the above table, the numbers before the mark “/” represent the addition over the previous band and those after represent the accumulated quantity. Quantitative criteria for advanced level are not subdivided into bands.)

“Syllable Chart”: The Syllable Chart is formulated according to the combination rules of initial consonant and simple/compound vowel of a Chinese syllable, the difficulty levels of syllables, the standardization of pronunciation, together with the actual situation of syllable teaching in recent years. For example, there are 608 elementary syllables, which can cover nearly 2,200 Chinese character pronunciations, i.e., by and large 70% of the Chinese character pronunciations in the *Grading Standards*.

“List of Chinese Characters”: The characters in the list are selected out according to the circulation degree, common use degree, formation ability, cultural connotation and other factors of Chinese characters. In the face of Chinese characters’ handwriting difficulty, *Grading Standards* proposes a new idea, i.e., the recognition and reading of Chinese characters should be moderately separated from handwriting, and the handwriting of Chinese characters should be orderly promoted from less to more.

“Glossary”: It is mainly based on level classification (including 11,092 words) shown in *Table 1*. The focus is on the classification of the first two levels into three bands respectively. The selection and grading of words in the Glossary both pay attention to homographs, polysemous words, part of speech tagging and spelling standard of phonetic alphabet. In addition, some words have been adjusted according to the national language standards to reflect the practicability, pertinence, flexibility and applicability of international Chinese language teaching.

“Grammar Level Outline”: It refers to such documents as *The Syllabus of Grammar for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (1995)*, *The Standards for Mandarin Chinese Proficiency and Outline of Chinese Grammar (1996)*, *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education (2014)*, together with the 70 years’ teaching experience of international Chinese language education and the research achievements of grammar for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. After considerable and careful comparison and selection, *Grammar Level Outline* has totally included 572 grammar points of 12 categories, which are distributed to primary, intermediate and advanced levels. Determining the specific grammatical items follows the principle of highlighting the pertinence of Chinese grammar teaching rather than detailed presentation of language ontology like morphemes, phrases, sentence constituents, sentence types, etc. What are specially emphasized in *Grammar Level Outline* are some word classes and language points which are difficult for foreign learners to understand and master, and the practicability of grammar learning as well as special Chinese expressions.

4. The Key Features of *Grading Standards*

Firstly, the most symbolic feature is that its aim is to build a new system of state-level Chinese proficiency grading standards. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language had been moving forward along the western language teaching standards for long. However, China has found a new way and formed its own ideas after more than 30 years of exploration, accumulation and innovation.

Secondly, it embodies the features of integration and inheritance, since it draws on the strengths of dozens of language proficiency standards and examination standards at home and abroad, and inherits Chinese teaching traditions as well as the development experience of international Chinese language education.

Thirdly, it embodies the features of comprehensiveness and systematicness, since it builds an inclusive, mixed and all-round Chinese proficiency grading standards system by referring to the achievements of multi-disciplinary studies, to meet the requirements of Chinese learning, teaching and testing.

Fourthly, it embodies the principle of combining qualitative description with quantitative analysis, since it offers not only a concise and recapitulative qualitative description of Chinese proficiency at all levels, but also a clear and quantifiable index system for precise measurement.

5. Innovations in *Grading Standards*

The development of *Grading Standards* is in the situation that the international Chinese language education is experiencing vigorous development and optimization. In this new reality, international Chinese language education must change the traditional single teaching perspective and standards, and solve various problems in Chinese teaching. In line with the long-term development goal of international Chinese language education, *Grading Standards* is committed to building new standards, new modes and new systems, making independent innovations and applying modern scientific and technological means. To be specific, the brand-new *Grading Standards* is new in that it keeps pace with the times.

Grading Standards pays attention to and grasps the following three major changes in international Chinese language education.

Firstly, the shift of development strategy: from “teaching Chinese to the speakers of other languages” to “all-round international Chinese language promotion”;

Secondly, the shift of work focus: from “invite foreigners in to learn Chinese” to “go abroad to teach Chinese”;

Thirdly, the shift of promotion philosophy: from “teaching Chinese for special purposes” to “massification, popularization and application-oriented teaching of Chinese”.

In addition, *Grading Standards* possesses several outstanding innovations as follows.

Firstly, it has a solid and reliable foundation, i.e., the main basis of its development includes several representative dynamic corpora with billions of Chinese characters, and a variety of targeted dictionaries, vocabulary lists and Chinese character lists.

Secondly, it considers the integrity, balance and future long-term development of level

classification and level testing. A Chinese proficiency evaluation system called “*three levels and nine bands*” has been formulated.

Thirdly, based on the characteristics of Chinese language, the new mode called “*four-dimension benchmarks*” involving Chinese syllables, characters, vocabulary and grammar is created.

Fourthly, the state-level standards of Chinese language are strictly implemented and the standard spoken and written Chinese language is taught to learners of Chinese as a second or foreign language.

Fifthly, it innovates the ideas and paths of international Chinese language education, and accelerates Chinese language’s going international, popular and normalized.

6. The Significance of *Grading Standards*

It is of great practical significance to formulate *Grading Standards* for the following reasons.

Firstly, it is of great value to cultivate high-level talents who are proficient in Chinese and have professional background knowledge as well. At present, many countries in the world are in need of various high-level talents who are proficient in Chinese, and the international students education in China highlights this trend. Great efforts are needed to cultivate the professional and academic Chinese competency of high-level talents. In this circumstance, what matters is to develop the Chinese competency standards necessary for foreign students to effectively learn professional knowledge and complete academic education in China.

Secondly, it may be cited as a reference for other countries in the world to incorporate Chinese into their national education system. The state-level standards of Chinese language formulated by China will provide important reference and basis for other countries to formulate Chinese language syllabus and curriculum standards, and carry out textbook compilation, testing evaluation, and even specific classroom teaching.

Thirdly, it is conducive to the formulation of various Chinese standards by other countries. *Grading Standards* has referred to the strengths of the existing Chinese language standards and frameworks of other countries. Meanwhile, when other countries are formulating or reforming relevant standards, they may make appropriate docking with *Grading Standards*.

In a word, the formulation and promulgation of *Grading Standards* is a new start for international Chinese language education in the new era.

7. What to Do Next?

What follow the formulation and promulgation of *Grading Standards* are its promotion and application. China’s Center for Language Education and Cooperation, together with other relevant institutions at home and abroad, will play a key role in promoting and applying *Grading Standards*.

7.1 Developing *Grading Standards*-based curriculum standards and textbooks

For the international Chinese language education in the new era, new courses, such as new listening and speaking course, applied grammar course, fast reading course, characteristic Chinese character course, etc., should be developed based on *Grading Standards* and subsequently new curriculum standards / syllabus should be formulated and matched textbooks compiled for them.

Since 1950, uniform Chinese textbooks have always been dominant in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. However, after thirty or forty years of development, uniform Chinese textbooks appear to be far from enough to meet the demands in different countries, and an ever-increasing number of local Chinese textbooks are therefore developed according to the situation of each country. It has been suggested that some of the most important and basic Chinese courses could have uniform textbooks based on *Grading Standards*. The uniform Chinese textbooks should be representative and exemplary, based on quality and universal applicability. Each foreign country or region may cooperate with China’s institutions to develop Chinese textbooks, or develop local ones on its own.

7.2 Compiling a new dictionary

In order to better promote and apply *Grading Standards*, the China’s Ministry of Education and

Center for Language Education and Cooperation, Chinese Testing International Co.,Ltd., together with relevant publication agencies are organizing the compilation of a Chinese language dictionary to serve a new age of international Chinese language education in terms of learning, teaching, and testing.

Firstly, such a dictionary should serve foreigners who are learning Chinese and help with the implementation of *Grading Standards*. It aims to provide strong support for people of all countries to learn Chinese and take Chinese proficiency tests.

Secondly, it should be based on “three levels and nine bands” and “four-dimension benchmarks” of *Grading Standards*, and must implement the standards related to the Chinese language standardization, highlighting the normative, targeted and applicable principles.

Thirdly, it should serve learners at different levels. In the early stage, its fascicules with the Chinese characters and words of different levels are advised to be compiled and published, in strict accordance with the different requirements of different levels/bands in *Grading Standards*.

Fourthly, such a dictionary should try to avoid and overcome the common tendencies and shortcomings of the existing dictionaries for learning Chinese as a foreign language, i.e., they attach much importance to and pursue the comprehensiveness of the collected and interpreted meanings, the profundity of the explained meanings, and moreover ignore the characteristics of the explained objects and usage examples and discrimination. It should be noted that only the common meanings of the word listed in the Glossary of *Grading Standards* in modern Mandarin Chinese should be collected and interpreted, and the interpretation terms should be as easy to understand, accurate and standard as possible.

7.3 Developing HSK 3.0 under the guidance of Grading Standards

The Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) is an international standardized language test, which focuses on the foreign learners' proficiency of Chinese as a second language in their life, study and work. After over 30 years of development, HSK has become an internationally renowned test brand and a globally recognized Chinese proficiency test tool. HSK has experienced the following three phases of development:

The first phase is the pioneering period, a time of HSK1.0, from 1984 to 2008. HSK1.0 was classified into three levels and eleven bands and was mainly used as the standard for foreign students to be enrolled in some departments of universities. In 1992, it officially became the national standardized proficiency test for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

The second phase is the transition period, a time of HSK2.0, from 2009 to 2020. HSK 2.0 was classified into six bands, aiming at the popularization of HSK. It serves Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom, to adapt to the development of international Chinese language promotion and communication.

The third stage is the systematization period, a time of HSK3.0, which is still under development from 2021. HSK 3.0 will optimize and upgrade HSK 2.0 under the guidance of *Grading Standards*, and refine and adjust the previous six bands into “three levels and nine bands” to meet the needs of globalization and diversification.

7.4 Developing a new HSKK under the guidance of Grading Standards

The existing HSK Speaking Test (HSKK) mainly assesses the test takers' oral Chinese abilities. HSKK consists of three levels, namely HSKK (Primary level), HSKK (Intermediate level) and HSKK (Advanced level).

Test takers who are able to pass HSKK (Primary level) can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and meet specific needs for communication; those who are able to pass the HSK Speaking Test (Intermediate Level) can understand intermediate Chinese and converse fluently with native Chinese speakers; those who are able to pass the HSK Speaking Test (Advanced Level) can understand spoken Chinese and fluently express their ideas in Chinese.

HSKK is conducted in the form of audio recording. It is mainly based on machine scoring, supplemented by manual scoring. There are some deficiencies with such form of scoring in terms of accuracy and speed. Under the guidance of *Grading Standards*, a state-level computer-aided oral Chinese proficiency automatic evaluation system, namely “multi-dimensional balanced language

materials and automatic evaluation system” are being developed.

8. Conclusion

Chinese is playing an increasingly important role in international cultural exchanges and economic and trade cooperation. More and more people are learning Chinese all over the world and many countries and regions have incorporated Chinese into their national education system.

The development and promulgation of *Grading Standards* will provide an important reference and basis for international Chinese language education, and become the cornerstone of boosting the development of Chinese language teaching in various countries. It is worth noting that the overseas application of *Grading Standards* may need to be adjusted to varying degrees according to the situation of different countries, and it may take a long or short adaptation process. In this adaptation process, exchanges and cooperation between overseas countries and China are particularly important. During the communication and cooperation in Chinese language teaching, China’s Center for Language Education and Cooperation, as an authoritative institution for formulating international Chinese language education standards and a teaching quality certification and evaluation institution as well, will play an increasingly important role in improving the level of international Chinese language education.

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