

## Students' attitudes, reported behaviours, and learning opportunities linked to choosing which difficulty level to take for a high-stakes test: What are the explanations?

### What this study was about and why it is important

This study examined Hong Kong secondary students' perceptions and reported behaviours in relation to an under-researched, high-stakes test: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education English Language Examination (HKDSE-English). This test is used to select students for tertiary education in Hong Kong. In 2012, HKDSE-English adopted a graded approach, allowing test-takers to choose between easier and more difficult test sections for both reading and listening-integrated skills. According to the test developer, test-takers' free selection of examination sections that best match their ability allows for efficiently testing of candidates at different ability levels. This study examines what learners feel has changed in their behaviour, attitudes, and the nature of their learning and instruction as a result of this graded approach and why.

### What the researchers did

The researchers collected qualitative data from focus groups and quantitative data from questionnaires to learn more about the repercussions of using the graded approach and what motivated the factors that students identified.

- *Focus groups.* We ran three audio-recorded focus group sessions with 12 Hong Kong secondary six students using a bilingual English-Chinese discussion guide. We obtained learners' perceptions of the graded approach, any learning practices that they attributed to the approach, and why they felt these practices were carried out. Probes were designed to elicit learners' feelings, experience, behaviour, opinion, and values.
- *Washback on Students' Learning (WSL) bilingual questionnaire.* Building on focus group results, we administered the WSL questionnaire to 150 students, with items on students' attitudes, motivation and behaviour in relation to the graded approach and potential influences.
- *Inductive coding, Factor Analysis, Multiple Regressions.* We analysed the focus group data iteratively to identify emerging themes. These were used for statistical analyses to identify how and why the test-takers responded to the test and particularly to factors related to the graded approach in particular

### What the researchers found

- The main practices associated with HKDSE-English's graded approach were grouped into four main categories: informal training for the preferred-HKDSE-English section outside the classroom, selective attention in English language learning, intensive drills relate to the preferred HKDSE-English section, and enrolment in private tutorial classes targeting the preferred HKDSE-English section.
- Variables explaining how test-takers might react differently to dictates of the test include their language proficiency, exam knowledge, teachers' evaluations, experience at private tutorial schools, peer influence, influence of personal contacts, and socio-educational factors. Overall, exam knowledge, language proficiency, teachers' evaluations, and peer influence seemed to play the strongest role.
- The differential effects across learners suggests the pivotal role they play in determining the influence of each mediating factor.
- Stakeholders and forces in the context (e.g., teachers, examination-oriented culture) have the power to influence language learning.

### Things to consider

- HKDSE-English's graded approach inherently streams learners' language proficiency assessment into two distinct pre-defined sections within one examination. Test-takers' learning is geared toward a particular test section test, resulting in narrowing of the curriculum (e.g., test-takers solely paying attention to section-relevant content). This is concerning due to the limited empirical basis to support curriculum sequencing and test section difficulty.
- Although allowing test-takers to select which level they take would seem to give them choice, this can actually be disempowering. For example, academically stronger schools could pressure students into taking the more difficult section as this is better for the school, without taking into account what would be most beneficial for students based on their individual capabilities. This could reinforce the power imbalance of Hong Kong's educational system, potentially perpetuating social inequalities and limiting opportunities for young people.
- We recommend the adoption of fairer, more scientific ways to inform test-takers' decision-making that take into account individual differences and seek to empower (not subjugate) test-takers' voices.

**Material, data, open access article:** Materials available at <https://www.iris-database.org/>

**How to cite this summary:** Tsang, C. L., & Isaacs, T. (2021). Students' attitudes, reported behaviours, and learning opportunities linked to choosing which difficulty level to take for a high-stakes test: What are the explanations? *OASIS Summary* of Tsang & Isaacs (2021) in *Language Testing*. <https://oasis-database.org>

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