



What does Text Selection in the HKDSE Reading Comprehension Paper Say about the Exam?

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The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examination is a high-stakes matriculation system that determines the opportunity for higher education and social mobility for most local students. This means that content featured in the tests poses strong washback effects on classroom teaching and learning. Despite the fact that the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) recognizes the effects of washback and the necessity to use it in a positive way, certain aspects within the HKDSE English Language Reading Comprehension paper might have been overlooked. This paper looks at the genres, text sources and topics featured by the HKDSE examination since its inception in 2011. It finds that while there is an effort to diversify the topics featured and ensure their appropriacy to local candidates, the Authority falls short in utilizing a wide enough range of text genres in its examinations, possibly leading to narrowed English reading abilities in the population. Additionally, texts are also usually selected from sources that favor affluent, professional demographics, which has possible implications for the fairness of the test.

Keywords: assessment, reading comprehension, text selection, Hong Kong, Genre theory, washback effect, fairness in testing

Introduction

The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) is a standard-referenced testing system that is used to certify the completion of secondary education (Tong & Luo, 2020) and gatekeep students' entry to tertiary courses. Its annual results determine the social mobility of graduates and the relative rankings of schools, which translate into profound, often financially-related impact on candidates and educators alike. In the formal education system, schools are highly incentivized to modify their practices according to perceived formats and patterns of the examination – in essence, the materials used in examinations determine the curriculums of students, in terms of what to read and where to read from. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) seems aware of this, but does it use this influence in a manner that promotes its stated aims, as well as the overall benefits of students in the territory?

This paper focuses on selection of texts in the Reading Comprehension component of the HKDSE English Language paper, and discusses its choices from the perspective of genre, source types, and content area to evaluate how it might be directing teaching practices of the English curriculum in Hong Kong.

Literature Review

Stated Outcomes of the HKDSE English Subject

According to the EDB's Curriculum and Assessment Guide, the HKDSE English curriculum seeks to provide learners with the opportunities for "personal and intellectual development, further studies, pleasure and work in the English medium" (HKEAA, 2007, p. 2). The guide suggests strongly the need for variety, appropriacy to learner's age and roles in society, and bringing a multitude of experiences in particular by featuring a "broad range of activities and materials", including those based on creative and imaginative texts. In addition, the recommended texts list for the SBA component, which recommends English canon classics such as *Dracula*, *Emma*, and *Romeo and Juliet* for use in the classroom, again emphasizes that readings in the curriculum should be pleasurable for students, age-appropriate and "have some relevance to the life and experience of students" (HKEAA, 2009, p. 1).

The HKEAA acknowledges the role of washback in its designs, and states in its School-Based Assessment (SBA) handbook that an aim of the Authority is that "there is beneficial washback on teaching and learning" (HKEAA, 2020, p. 2). Thus, it can be surmised that the Authority does actively seek to improve the achievement of its stated learning outcomes through the designs of its exams.

Washback Effect in the Hong Kong context

The "washback" effect of high-stakes examinations has been the subject of more than two decade of studies illustrating its effects and implications (Hughes, 1989; Alderson & Wall, 1993). Davies (1985) in particular suggests that the more important a test is, the more intense this effect of washback. This has led to the belief that there is a responsibility for authors of tests to take this effect into consideration (Messick, 1996), and that 'a well-designed test should encourage good teaching' (Green, 2013, p. 41).

Hong Kong's education system has a history of being very susceptible to washback. Cheng (1997) found that when the previous public examination format was changed in 1994, up to 84% of teachers stated the changes would influence their classroom methodology. A majority of students (30%) also reflected that public examination was the major goal of their studies. This reflects the huge impact that the HKEAA indirectly has over practices in the classroom. In addition, Bailey (1999) discovered that washback in Hong Kong applied to textbook publishers as well, who at the time had started the production of audio materials to emulate the change of format in language testing.

The HKDSE is yet another sweeping curriculum change that was introduced in 2012. Despite a stated focus in being less reliant on high-stakes examinations, most evident through the expansion of the SBA components where assessment is done in the classroom, its washback effect has proven to be no less powerful than previous iterations. This is evident in the private education sector, populated by more than 1000 tutorial schools that practically brags about their exam-focused teaching strategies:

Through analysis of the answers in the marking schemes set by the examination body, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, tutors teach skills to answer questions and obtain the highest possible marks. In most cases, the main approach of tutorial schools is to hone their students' skills in doing the tasks required in the different papers of different subjects. (Eng, 2019, p. 82)

This approach of a high focus on exams, seemingly for exams' sake, in both the official and commercial sectors of education is in stark contrast to the referenced curriculum of the HKEAA that promises learning English for applications beyond itself. While topics such as the broader effects of an intense examination culture are beyond the scope of this paper, the phenomenon should at least show that it behooves the Authority to direct this influence towards its stated goals.

Related Perspectives from Genre Theory

As mentioned above, the test papers of the HKDSE face intense scrutiny by educators in both the private and public sectors. One significant design choice made in every iteration of the reading comprehension exam is the selection of text sources.

Although there are many elements that affect a text's viability as an exam passage, I would like to focus on the topic of genre in this paper. Genre theory (Duff, 2014; Chandler, 1997; Swales, 1990) observes that texts are communicative acts that take form of loose, but identifiably familiar patterns of features. Although the definitions of individual genres are in constant flux over time and the differentiation of media, they remain recognizable in their contemporary contexts of use as 'families' of structures.

These distinct structures support the coherence of the text as a whole (Kiray, 2015), and readers start the process of reading by recognizing that a text belongs to a certain text type (Huckin, 1997), which informs them on the type of reading practices (such as pace, linearity, or selectivity of information) that would be most helpful in navigating the information within the text (Paris & Stahl, 2005).

What is significant about genre in comprehension testing is that reading skills are fairly genre-specific (Duke & Roberts, 2010). Paris & Stahl (*ibid.* p. 98) also state that the genre of a text has a profound impact on the comprehension process, and note in particular that test scores are highly sensitive towards this impact. This notion is supported by Pearson & Hamm (2005)'s findings that school-age children in the U.S. consistently test stronger in their comprehension of narrative texts than informational texts, pointing to the non-transferable nature of reading skills between genres.

It is with these facts in mind that we must consider the influence of text selection in the HKDSE on teaching. Faced with practical limitations such as time, students' starting abilities and accessibility of materials, teachers are all but forced to allocate the most resources towards the teaching of genres that would allow their students to perform well in public exams. It would be sensible to suggest that in a way, the most popular genres to be featured in the HKDSE would also thus be the most highly-taught ones. From the perspective of the highest level of curriculum planners in the HKEAA, these text types should be carefully chosen to benefit candidates the most in their language learning.

Text Selection in the HKDSE

Genres Represented

The texts used in the HKDSE examination are published as part of the HKEAA's past papers collection. Although the HKEAA often makes changes to the texts, these are generally superficial modifications to the titles only, and are generally done to make the texts less reliant on references from outside the texts.

The genres named in this paper follows what is set out by Macken-Horarik (2001), which classifies texts according to their social purposes, location, and schematic structure. She lists in particular 8 key genres that are significant in the classroom context:

- Recount
- Information report
- Explanation
- Exposition
- Discussion
- Procedure
- Narrative
- News Story

This classification is sufficiently comprehensive to cover all of the texts selected for the HKDSE reading comprehension papers, although there are some distinctions between texts classed under the same genre, they do not contribute significantly to the analysis done in this paper.

The HKDSE featured a total of 47 text passages between the years 2012 and 2020. The number of texts included each year differs, but the three parts of the paper – Part A, Part B1 and Part B2 – all feature at least one text each. As Part A is compulsory and candidates only attempt either Part B1 or B2, each candidate thus has to read at least 2 texts as part of the examination.

In some years, one part of a paper may feature multiple texts, though they are always related either directly or thematically. In 2016, for example, two short articles on the topic of food trucks followed by three short letters to the editors are featured. In this paper, each of these count as distinct instances of texts.

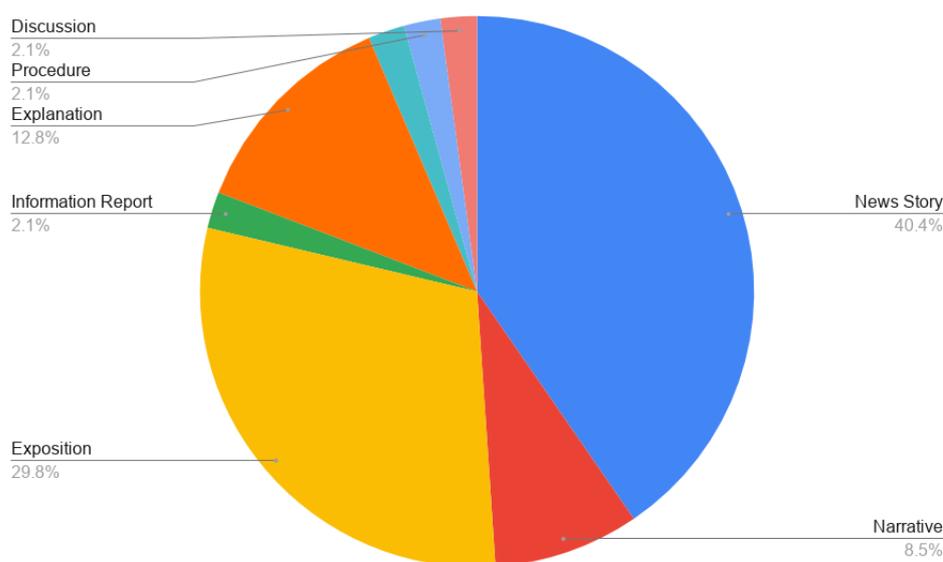


Figure 1. Genres of HKDSE Reading Comprehension texts (2012 – 2020).

As seen in Figure 1, of the 47 texts featured in the Reading Comprehension Paper of the HKDSE, 40.4% (19) consist of News Stories, which by far make up the largest proportion of genres in the exam. The second-most common genre is Expositions, making up 29.8% (14) of texts used. The other genres show up at a significantly lower percentage, with Explanations at 12.8% (6) and Narratives at 8.5% (4). Procedures, Recounts, Discussions and Information Reports all featured at a mere 2.1% (1) each.

Sources Used

The sources used in the HKDSE reading comprehension are made public by the HKEAA after each examination cycle. In most cases, these texts are available for online retrieval from their original publication sources. However, paywalled articles from subscription magazines do make up a significant portion of text sources.

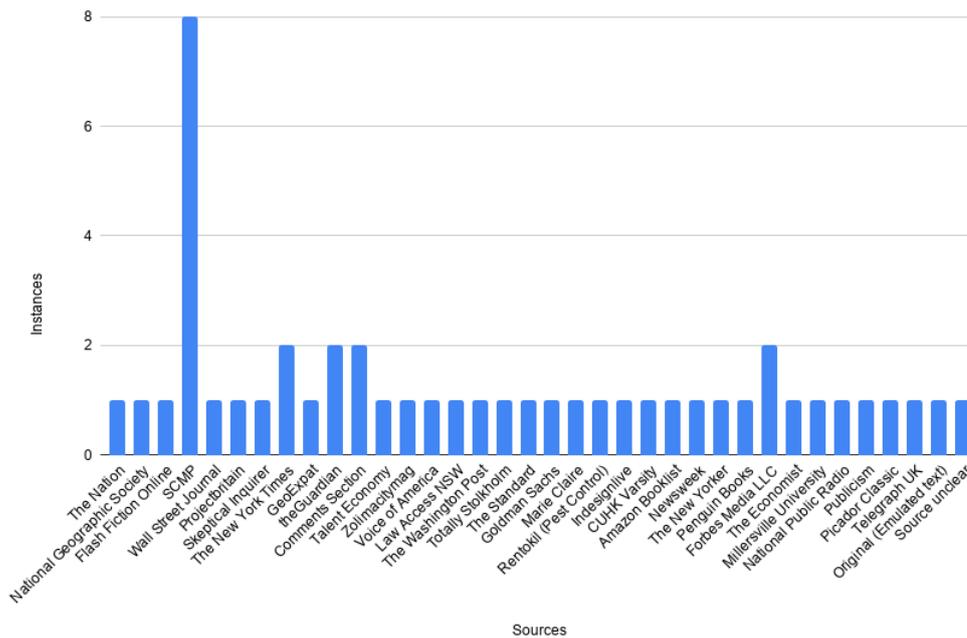


Figure 2. Names of sources used in the HKDSE Reading Comprehension Exam (2012 – 2020).

Figure 2 shows the names of all text sources used in the paper. There are 35 sources in total used across all the years that the HKDSE has been implemented, and in nearly all occasions these are authentic texts that are published to serve genuine communicative purposes. Only on 1 single occasion an original text was used in 2019 to emulate a public library’s activities schedule. There are however also 2 cases where texts seem to have been adapted from the online comments sections of the main text of the exam as supplementary material, and in these cases the original comments cannot be found. The source of 1 text from the exam year of 2020, a procedural guide on flying kites, remains unpublished at the time of writing.

Of note is that fact that though repeated use of text sources is rare, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) is featured quite frequently, with 8 uses over the years which amounts to 17% of the entire exam’s history. Although 3 of these uses occur in the same year in 2016, it still shows that the SCMP is a relatively common resource for examination purposes in Hong Kong. Other Hong Kong-based sources used consist of The Standard, an English newspaper, and CUHK Varsity, a publication of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Both have only been used once each.

International news outlets from the Anglosphere feature quite prominently. Sources of this category that have seen repeated use include The New York Times, the Guardian, and Forbes, which are all high-profile, internationally-renown English journalism outlets. Other widely recognized sources of similar reputation include the Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and The Economist.

TABLE 1

Types of Sources Used in the HKDSE Reading Comprehension Exam (2012 – 2020)

| Sources | Source Type | Frequency |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Blog | | 1 |
| Totally Stockholm | Blog | 1 |
| Business Report | | 1 |
| Talent Economy | Business Report | 1 |
| Comments Section | | 2 |
| Discussion Comments | Comments | 2 |
| Forum | | 1 |
| GeoExpat | Forum | 1 |
| Government | | 1 |
| Law Access NSW | Government | 1 |
| Journal | | 2 |
| Skeptical Inquirer | Journal | 1 |
| Millersville University | Journal | 1 |
| Magazine | | 9 |
| National Geographic Society | Magazine | 1 |
| Zolimacitymag | Magazine | 1 |
| Marie Claire | Magazine | 1 |
| Indesignlive | Magazine | 1 |
| CUHK Varsity | Magazine | 1 |
| Forbes Media LLC | Magazine | 2 |
| The Economist | Magazine | 1 |
| Telegraph UK | Magazine | 1 |
| Newspaper | | 20 |
| The Nation | Newspaper | 1 |
| SCMP | Newspaper | 8 |
| Wall Street Journal | Newspaper | 1 |
| The New York Times | Newspaper | 2 |
| theGuardian | Newspaper | 2 |
| Voice of America | Newspaper | 1 |
| The Washington Post | Newspaper | 1 |
| The Standard | Newspaper | 1 |
| Newsweek | Newspaper | 1 |
| The New Yorker | Newspaper | 1 |
| National Public Radio | Newspaper | 1 |
| Original | | 2 |
| Original (emulated text) | Original | 1 |
| Source unclear | Original | 1 |
| Presentation | | 1 |
| Goldman Sachs | Presentation | 1 |
| Publisher | | 3 |
| Penguin Books | Publisher | 1 |
| Publicism | Publisher | 1 |
| Picador Classic | Publisher | 1 |
| Website | | 4 |
| Flash Fiction Online | Website | 1 |
| Projectbritain | Website | 1 |
| Rentokil (Pest Control) | Website | 1 |
| Amazon Booklist | Website | 1 |

Table 1 shows the type of sources used by the HKDSE. It is very clear that the examination heavily favours newspapers, with 20 out of 46 (43%) texts selected from them. The next most popular source type is magazines, taking up 9 instances out of 46 (20%). These sources generally cover a similar scope of

current events and societal trends as newspapers, but often utilize a more narrative style and goes into more detail. They also are published less frequently, and therefore focus less on immediate “breaking news” types of articles for more analytical texts.

If the above two types of sources are viewed as a whole, it can be seen that journalistic articles comprise of 63% of all texts used in the HKDSE reading comprehension exams. It is worth mentioning here that many of these resources are gated behind “paywalls” or subscriptions, and are often unavailable to school-aged students unless the school or their parents purchase these subscriptions.

Other source types that make up noteworthy amounts include publishers such as Penguin Books and Publicism (3 out of 46, 7%), in the form of excerpts from print fiction or non-fiction books that are generally read for entertainment. Websites featured 4 times in total (9%). The content of these texts is quite disparate, ranging from a guide on insect bites to an Amazon Booklist book review. These texts, however, are ‘genuine’ in the sense that they are less commercially presented, and are more likely to be representative of readings that students might stumble upon as part of their daily online activities.

Topic of Texts

The topics covered in the reading comprehension exam can be broken into 12 broad categories, referring to the areas of interest of their content. As the topic and subject-matter of the texts affect the experiential constructs of the language used – for example, a text related to business and economics would feature more vocabulary items related to financial studies – this too affects what will eventually be taught by teachers in the classroom.

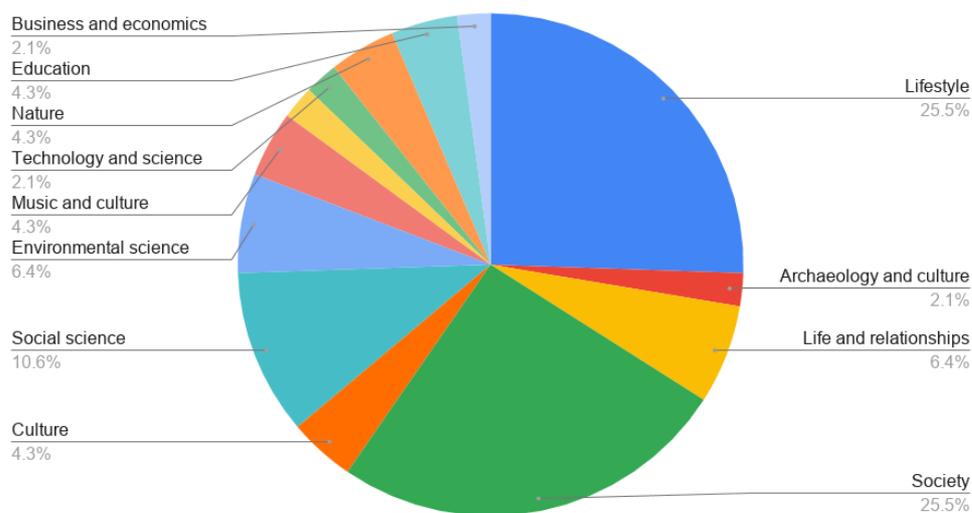


Figure 3. Topics of HKDSE Reading Comprehension Texts (2012 – 2020)

Figure 3 shows the topics that have been featured in the exam papers over the years. Of note are the topics of Lifestyle and Society, which each have been featured 12 times over the 47 texts selected over the years, making up a total of 51% of topics. Texts under the “Lifestyle” categorization mainly feature food, recreational activities and hobbies. Meanwhile, texts categorized as “Society” are about emerging social labels and trends such as “millenials” or “tiger mothers”.

The third biggest category on the figure is Social Science, which has been featured 5 out of 47 times (10.6%). Social science articles discuss issues such as the concept of “messiness”, the implications of a person’s social media updates, or the topic of “luck”. These usually feature the use of statistics and studies that are simplified for laypersons, as well as narrative and rhetorical devices to attract the reader’s attention.

Other categories featured include “Life and relationship” (6.4%), “Environmental science” (6.4%), “Nature” (4.3%), “Education” (4.3%), “Culture” (4.3%), “Music and culture” (4.3%), “Technology and science” (2.1%), “Archaeology and culture” (2.1%) and “Business and economics” (2.1%). Though most of these labels are self-evident of their content, it should be noted that “Culture” in particular refers to the discussion of cultures and customs that would be considered foreign to the average HKDSE candidate – such as the discussion of common superstitions in the United Kingdom.

Discussion

Though overall the HKDSE sees visible effort towards a diversification of materials, there are clear issues embedded within the text selection process. It is acknowledged that text selection for examinations require considerations to ensure validity, reliability and other qualities that maintain the integrity of the process. In addition, selected texts in even high stakes examinations do not necessarily directly translate into a de facto curriculum. However, due to the circumstances of Hong Kong – and indeed, many similarly exam-oriented cultures around the world – the following issues should nevertheless be taken into account as visible trends for these exams emerge.

An Unbalanced Focus of Genres

It is clear that preferences exist in the genres that are covered by the HKDSE. Of note is that News Stories and Expositions – two of the eight genres featured – take up 70% of all texts in the exam. These two genres, generally located in outlets of journalism, explore issues that are ‘news-worthy’ and relevant to society (Macken-Horarik, 2002). Though there are often good reasons to feature these them in the language classroom – such as their relevance to real-world events, relatively sophisticated level of vocabulary, and inexhaustible nature as resources – their inclusion to such an over-represented degree in a high-stakes public exam carries risks.

Firstly, students may lose interest due to its lack of relevance to the genres of texts they actually interact with in daily life. Literacy skills taught by teachers should aid students on their day-to-day reading needs, which have changed with the increased popularity of the internet and social media.

Additionally, although readying students for employment in Hong Kong’s role of an international business hub is a stated curriculum goal (HKEAA, 2007), and news stories and expositions can be seen as “advance” or “business” materials that contribute to helping students step outside of their comfort zones, the fact that they may contribute to any sort of post-secondary usefulness in the workplace cannot directly be assumed.

Sources Favor Middle-age, High-income Demographics

News outlets such as the SCMP, the New York Times, Forbes Media and the Economists are some of the most highly-used sources in the examination. Turning to these sources has the advantage of ensuring that texts are of a high quality in terms of content and language. However, the sheer amount of use they have seen over the years may cause schools to start favouring them in teaching as well, and they can hardly be considered appropriate materials to Hong Kong secondary students in many respects.

According to the SCMP’s readers demographics report (South China Morning Post, 2020), 68% of their readers are aged 30 or above. 49% of them hold qualifications of university level or higher, and 66% have an annual family income of HK\$792,000 and above, well above the city’s median of HK\$336,000. Forbes, another source featured in the exam, reports a similar demographic of readers (Forbes, 2016) that has an average age of 46.5 years and an average income of US\$93,434 (est. HK\$721,000). This can be seen with almost every news source used – which all have target audiences of predominantly highly educated, high net-worth individuals. In some cases, such as the Economist and the New Yorker, there is

a gender bias as well – the former has a 63% male readership, while the later has a 64% male one (Pew Research Centre, 2012).

Reading habits are strongly linked with education levels, social-economic status and highly prone to influence by family members (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Fernandez-Blanco, Prieto-Rodriguez, & Suarez-Pandiello, 2015; Le et al, 2019). Therefore, favoritism towards sources with such heavy economical targeting could be heavily disadvantageous to students from families where the reading of such sources is not routine. In addition to the obvious monetary barrier of paywalled magazines and journals that would keep financially poorer students from access, students from families which these commercial sources are intentionally marketed towards also have the advantage of increased exposure to these texts, and thus also increased familiarity with their writing conventions and styles. This could create a learning environment, both in school and in examinations, where candidates from lower income families are further disadvantaged in addition to the many challenges that they are already contending with.

Topics are Mostly Educational, Relatable and Appropriate

Despite the problems present in the aforementioned two categories of analysis, there is clear evidence of effort in the selection of texts to ensure that the topics they cover are relevant, and appropriate to the age-group of school-aged youths. “Lifestyle” is the most highly-represented subject-matter in the exam. A large number of sources are about the topic of food, which is easily relatable. Though it can potentially be mildly problematic, given that most school-aged children are not in control of their own diets. Other specific topics in the same category include activities like kite-flying or board games cafes, which though not especially relevant to the hobbies of youths, are niche enough that they are unlikely to significantly favor any group of candidates.

In 2016, the exam prominently featured articles about the topic of food trucks across both B1 and B2 sections – in essence making it an unavoidable topic for candidates to deal with. The introduction of licensed food trucks under a government-supported scheme had been a controversial issue in Hong Kong in 2015 – making it a topic that most candidates could have conceivably become familiar with through local news and other school subjects, especially in the compulsory Liberal Studies subject. This demonstrates that there is an attempt to feature topical ideas in society that students can relate existing knowledge to.

Many of the texts discuss social phenomena, and a clear attempt is seen in many years to select for those that are age-appropriate to most candidates, such as tiger-parenting in 2012, Young Adults fiction in 2013, and discussions about “millennials” as a social label in 2017. Texts classified as “social science” often feature issues that are pertinent to contemporary youths, such as social media updates in 2013, higher education in 2014, and music’s effects on attention in 2018. The topics of selected texts are generally appropriate for students. However, it should be noted that these discussions are often framed in a journalistic or academic tone, making them more like a professional analysis of content and limiting the instances where real-life happenings and issues are explored in a way that students would personally be able to relate to – such as through a narrative or a blog post.

Suggestions

This section covers some suggestions that can be taken into consideration to address the risks and issues highlighted above.

Selecting More Relevant Genres of Texts

An inclusion of texts that are more likely to be featured in students' L1 reading habits in the examination could encourage teaching of reading in the classroom that is more helpful to students. Wolk (2010) points out that adolescents in the information age read "e-mails, text messages, and endless websites", while a study conducted by Hong Kong Publishing Professionals Society (HKPPS) finds that posts on social media platforms (such as those on Instagram) are the most common items read by 40.5% of readers under age 18 in Hong Kong (HKPPS, 2017, pp. 11). These genres contribute heavily to the information-dense age that current students live in, and must not be ignored if the curriculum is to be helpful towards how learners actually may use the English Language.

For assisting students' adaptation to the use of English in the workplace, sample documents or email correspondence may prove to be more helpful than currently-featured items. Evans (2013) observes there is a heavy interplay of English, Cantonese and written Chinese in the professional lives of Hong Kongers, and while English reading is done often, it involves emails, circulars and bank documents – highly interdependent, context-heavy text types rather than ones like news stories and expositions which have a habit of providing ample subject orientation to the reader. Teachers must be encouraged to teach reading skills that allow students to navigate these text types.

Using More Accessible and Appropriate Sources

Access to resources must be considered even at the exam setting stage, as its effects are inevitably and eventually felt at the bottom of the curriculum chain. As mentioned above, overreliance on sources that are behind paywalls can cause disadvantage to poorer students, which is compounded once washback causes these sources to be incorporated into teaching. This is especially true for many Hong Kong schools where newspaper and magazine subscriptions for material are not included in the school fees and must be collected separately from parents. In these cases, their use as teaching material will be limited in districts or schools where families are unwilling or unable to pay due to financial hardship.

Effort should be made by exam setters to rely on free, open, or public domain sources wherever possible, which fortunately is quite a practical option with the proliferation of free-to-read media on the internet in current times.

Limiting Privileged Knowledge Content

Stobart (2005) discusses the risk of planning assessment content that inadvertently only perpetuates the experiences of those who have in turn been successful to date. Although it has been pointed out that the area of topics is one where there is evidence of judicious selection and diversity, certain problems can still be found.

Specifically, many topics and content used in the exam are covered by journals and sources that appeal to professionals and academic audiences. There are also many instances of lifestyle content such as music, or exploration of food culture that students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to have exposure to. While these should not be completely avoided, as they make up valid content that students of all background should become familiar with, their current dominance should be tempered somewhat.

Topics that are more in line with students' experiences, such as how-to articles or guides, or excerpt from books that are mostly read for pleasure, could be included more often. As mentioned before, transactional content such as those featured in emails or texts may also be helpful as a source of practical language use if it is encouraged to be taught in classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the issues that arise out of the selection of texts in the HKDSE English Language Reading Comprehension paper over the years that the format has been implemented in Hong Kong, between 2012 and 2020. The documentations of relevant government departments show an awareness of the effects of backwash, and from the perspective of looking at the subject-matter of selected text sources alone there is an effort to diversify the types of texts to ensure students are incentivized to be exposed to variety and appropriate learning content in their reading curriculums. However, analysis through genre theory, as well as an exploration of the sources of the texts expose some trends that might have been overlooked.

Over 80% of the reading texts in the exam comprise of only 3 text types. In addition, sources such as subscription magazines, newspapers and journals may exacerbate disadvantages faced by students due to factors such as their socio-economic status, or the profession of their family members. As such, several suggestions are provided on how to improve the problems that could be caused by this imbalance.

It is acknowledged that the scope of this paper accounts only for one of four parts of the HKDSE English Language exam. A further analysis may yet reveal that the weaknesses explored here are evened out by considerations that go into the setting of the other papers. However, given the immense effect that the examination has over the lives of its stakeholders – and students in particular – the authorities should ensure that every effort to instill positive backwash of teaching and learning, validity, and social fairness, is considered and taken.

The Author

Man-Chit Chak holds a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Hong Kong and an LTCL DipTESOL from Trinity College London. He teaches in Hong Kong, where he is the vice-chairperson of the English Department at a local secondary school and a lecturer for the Vocational Training Council. He is also a TESOL examiner for Trinity. His research interests are assessment, teacher development, and second-language curriculum.

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