# English Language Proficiency Assessment for English Language Teachers in Hong Kong: Development and Dilemmas

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## 1. Background: HK Government Responding to Business Concerns

In December 1995, The Hong Kong Education Commission published Report No. 6 (ECR6). In the Report, the Education Commission addressed the concerns expressed to the Hong Kong Government by business corporations about the "declining standards of language skills" among school graduates in Hong Kong. The Education Commission acknowledged the need for high level language skills among the workforce in Hong Kong as it moves away from a manufacturing to a service and high-tech industries and highlighted a number of areas for action. On the issue of standards of language ability of teachers about which there were concerns, two recommendations were made:

ECR6 C1: The concept of "benchmark" qualifications for all teachers should be explored by the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (ACTEQ) with a view to making proposals to the Government as early as possible in 1996.

*ECR6 C2: Minimum language proficiency standards should be specified, which all teachers (not just teachers of language subjects) should meet before they obtain their initial professional qualification. The standards should be designed to ensure that new teachers are competent to teach through the chosen medium of instruction.*

This is an ambitious attempt to step up the language requirements of all teachers, not just language teachers. However, work has progressed in the past decade (since 1996) mainly on developing and implementing the language benchmarks for language teachers. This paper focuses on the development of the English benchmark standards for English language teachers in Hong Kong. Some dilemmas in

implementation will be discussed and future directions for research will also be proposed.

## 2. Early Developments: 1996-2006

In response to the tasks assigned by ECR No. 6, ACTEQ appointed a team of English assessment consultants headed by Peter Falvey and David Coniam to develop the English benchmark tests for English language teachers. The team started work in 1996 and developed and piloted the first English benchmark test in Hong Kong (Falvey and Coniam, 1999; Coniam and Falvey, 2000). The discussion in the following sections are mainly based on the two internal research reports by Peter Falvey and David Coniam (*ibid.*).

In July 1996, the consultants (Coniam and Falvey, 2000, p. 8) recommended to ACTEQ that a benchmark test of the English language ability of teachers should consist of:

1. Formal tests:
   - assessed by means of criterion-referenced scales – Writing, Speaking
   - assessed by means of an analytic marking scheme – Reading Listening

2. Direct Classroom Language Assessment (CLA) – assessed by lesson observation, using criterion-referenced scales

### Methodological principles and design

The preferred mode for language benchmarks is one which allows for the same set of generic descriptors to be used across all grade levels for English teachers even though task types may need to be altered for primary and secondary school teachers (e.g., the poem used in the Speaking Test and the expository writing task in the Writing Test would be different for Primary and Secondary teachers) (Coniam and Falvey, 2000).

Assessment instruments were developed and piloted with samples from the target teacher populations. The fist official syllabus document on the English benchmark test for English language teachers was released in November 2000, and consists of 5 papers (more details below).

## 3. Stepping Up Language Teacher Credential Requirements

In the official document released by EMB in 2004, it was announced that starting from the 2004/05 school year, all new English teachers in primary and secondary should have

the following credentials to be qualified to teach English in Hong Kong:

(1) Relevant Degree – at least a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree majoring in the relevant language subject, or both a first/ higher degree majoring in the relevant language subject

(2) Relevant teacher training - a recognized teacher training qualification majoring in the relevant language subject.

(3) Language Proficiency Requirement (LPR)

Figure 1 shows the different ways a person can get credentialed to teach English language in schools in Hong Kong.

**Fig. 1 Credential Flowchart Constructed Based On EMB (2004)**
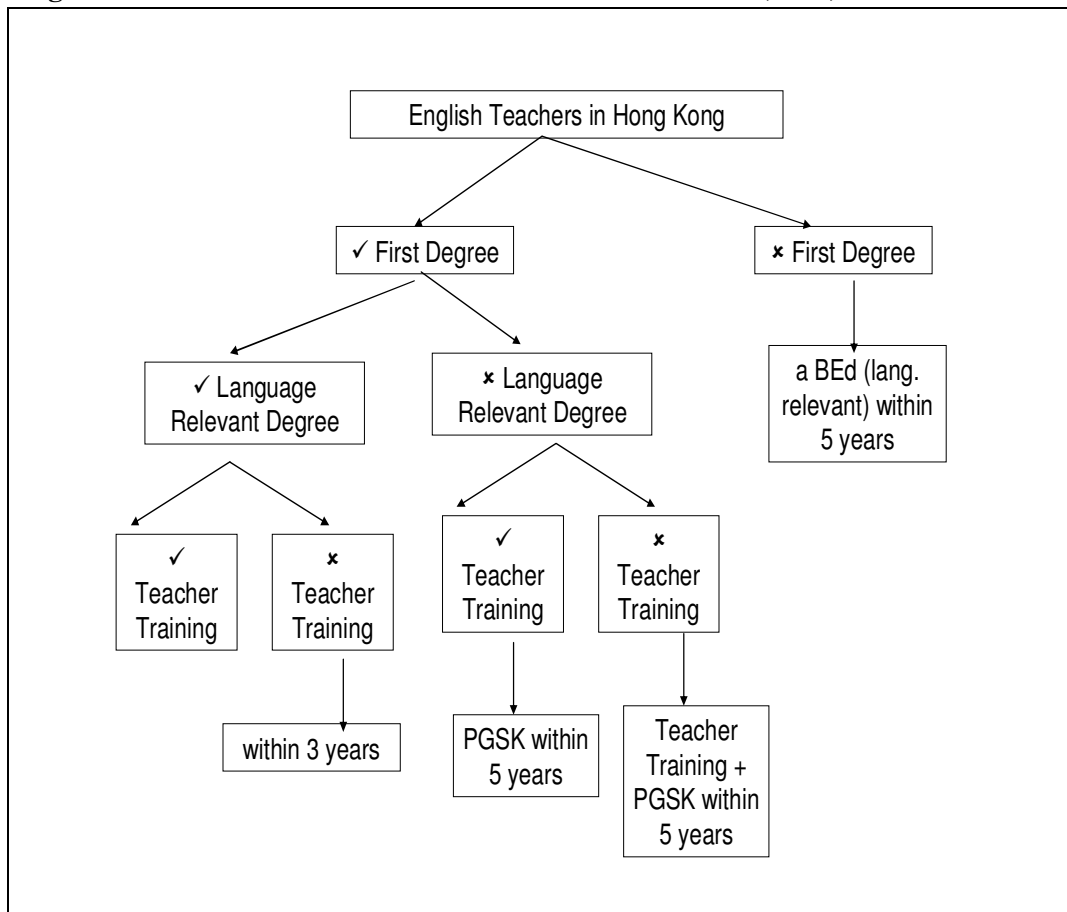


The credentialing process can be summarized as follows:

(a) New language teachers holding a first degree in the relevant language subject should complete a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PCEd) programme majoring in that language subject within three years of taking up the employment;

(b) New language teachers holding a first degree in a subject not relevant to the language they teach should complete a PGDE or PCEd programme majoring in the relevant language subject and a postgraduate programme focusing on the subject knowledge (PGSK) of that particular language within five years of taking up the employment. These new language teachers may, however, opt to pursue a first/higher degree majoring in the relevant language subject instead of a PGSK, or:

(c) New language teachers without a first degree should complete a BEd programme majoring in the relevant language subject within five years of taking up the employment

(d) New language teachers who have not received any initial teacher training should attend a Preparatory Course in the relevant language subject before or shortly after assuming teaching duties.

(e) Serving language teachers without the recommended qualifications are encouraged to acquire the relevant qualifications as soon as possible.

It can be seen from above that apart from the specified credentials, language teachers must also fulfil the Language Proficiency Requirement (LPR). To fulfil the LPR, anyone who has obtained 5 passes (including English Language) in the HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, equivalent to the "O" Level) can attend the LPAT assessment. However, only teachers can sit for the CLA sub-paper while the other 4 papers are open to the public. Table 1 below summarizes the policy initiatives over the past decade regarding the English benchmark requirement of English language teachers in Hong Kong

**Table 1: Policy Initiatives from 1996-2006 Regarding English Benchmark Requirement**

| Development of LPAT |
|---|
| • 1996 |
|     – The Education Commission (EC) Report No. 6 (Education Commission, 1996) laid out specific recommendations for enhancing language proficiency: benchmark qualifications for all language teachers |
| • 2000 |
|     – In-services English teachers must meet the LPAT requirement before the 2006/2007 academic year (EDB, 2000a)<br>    – English teachers joining the profession after 2001 must fulfill the requirement in two years (EDB, 2000b) |

| · 2005 |
|---|
| – All in-service English teachers must meet the LPAT requirement before the end of August, 2006. (EDB, 2000b) |

**Purpose**

The purpose of the LPAT is to assess whether the English proficiency of the candidate is sufficient to teaching English in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. The objective of the LPATE is to provide an objective reference against which the language proficiency of primary/secondary English teachers can be gauged.

**Format of the assessment**

The English LPAT consists of 5 papers:
1   Reading
    1.1   Part 1 Multiple-choice Cloze
    1.2   Part 2 Reading Comprehension
2   Writing
    2.1   Part 1 Expository Writing
    2.2   Part 2 (A) Detection and correction of errors
    2.3   Part 2 (B) Explanation of errors / problems
3   Listening: one or more segments of spoken discourse of 30 minutes in total length. Possible text types include discussions, debates, interviews, and documentaries which discuss matters broadly related to education and language teaching. Task: completing 20 questions of various types, including open-ended short questions, table or diagram completion tasks, multiple-choice items, post-listening written responses at or above sentence level.
4   Speaking
    4.1   Part 1 (A) Reading Aloud a Prose Passage
    4.2   Part 1 (B) Reading Aloud a Poem
    4.3   Part 1 (C) Telling a story / Recounting an experience / Presenting argument
    4.4   Part 2 Group Interaction (Discussing errors in a student text)
5   Classroom Language Assessment (CLA)
    5.1   Language of Instruction: Eliciting, Responding, Providing Feedback
    5.2   Language of Interaction: Presenting, Giving Instructions, Signalling
The reader can see samples of the examination papers in Appendix I.

**Table 2: Minimal Scores for Credentialing English Teachers** (HKSAR: 2000, p. 2)

| Paper | Language Proficiency Requirement (Scale: 1-5) |
|---|---|
|  |  |

| | |
|---|---|
| Reading | An overall 3 or above |
| Writing | At least a 2.5 or above on any one scale and a 3 or above on all other scales |
| Listening | An overall 3 or above |
| Speaking | At least a 2.5 or above on any one scale and a 3 or above on all other scales |
| Classroom Language Assessment | At least a 2.5 or above on any one scale and a 3 or above on all other scales |

## 4. Dilemmas and Difficulties

Table 3 shows the results of candidates taking LPAT on different papers from 2001 to 2007.   It can be seen that the results on the Speaking and Writing papers are the weakest, while results on the Classroom Language Assessment paper are the highest. It is apparent that the candidates demonstrated much better receptive proficiency (Listening and Reading) than productive proficiency (Speaking and Writing) among the 4 language skills.   However, since for the 4 papers on the 4 skills, the released percentage of English teacher candidates were lumped with those non-teacher candidates, it is difficult to ascertain the proportion of English teacher candidates who did not pass the papers[1].

**Table 3: The results of LPAT (2001-2007)**

| | % of Candidates attaining Level 3 or above (% in brackets indicate proportion of candidates who claimed to be English teachers) | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 June | 2003 Sep | 2004 Mar | 2004 Sep | 2005 Mar | 2005 Sep | 2006 Mar | 2007 Feb |
| Reading | 86% | 55% | 63% (62%) | 68% (63%) | 71% (63%) | 66% (61%) | 71% (60%) | 59% (55%) | 86% (74%) | 79% |
| Writing | 33% | 29% | 40% (44%) | 32% (32%) | 40% (37%) | 28% (29%) | 41% (35%) | 51% (28%) | 46% (38%) | 38% |
| Listening | 69% | 39% | 71% (72%) | 63% (55%) | 49% (37%) | 71% (64%) | 62% (44%) | 64% (59%) | 74% (60%) | 80% |

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[1] It might well be for political reasons that the HKEAA did not release the exact figures of English teacher candidates failing the LPAT papers, as the figures might arouse public and parents' concerns.

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Speaking | 51% | 58% | 45% (50%) | 46% (48%) | 47% (45%) | 43% (43%) | 44% (41%) | 39% (38%) | 37% (30%) | 48% |
| CLA* | (89%) | (91%) | (69%) | (85%) | (88%) | (90%) | (89%) | (92%) | (93%) | (93%) |

*Only in-service English teachers can take Classroom Language Assessment (CLA).
(Data is complied from figures in press releases from HKEAA from 2001-2007)

What are the difficulties experienced by the weak candidates? Table 4 shows the linguistic areas in the 4 skills papers in which weak candidates were found to make frequent errors.

**Table 4: Areas in which Frequent Errors were Made by Weak LPAT Candidates**

- Writing
  - grammatical accuracy:
    - E.g. tenses, articles, prepositions, topicalization in sentences (repetition of the topic), subject/verb agreement, adverbs, cohesive devices, concord, lexical choice, relative clauses, redundancy problems, wrong pronoun references, over-reliance on connectives, poor sentence structure,, overuse of clichés and dangling modifiers
  - misunderstood the task / task completion
  - paragraphing
- Error correction
  - failed to give the underlying grammatical rules
  - used inaccurate grammatical terminology
  - wrong identification of errors
  - failed to detect the problem
  - ambiguous answers
  - incomplete explanations
  - explanations that are full of language errors and spelling mistakes
  - gave the correction without explaining the nature of the error
- Speaking
  - Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation
  - Reading Aloud with Meaning
  - Grammatical Accuracy
  - Talking about irrelevant matters during group interaction
- Listening

| |
|---|
| – inferring the stance of the speaker from his tone or attitude |
| – identifying numbers |

| • Reading |
|---|
| – grammatical mistakes in answers |
| – guessing the meaning of words from the context |
| – questions concerning writer's attitudes and interpretation of the writer's point of view |

(Data complied from Assessment Report by HKEAA from 2001-2007)

It can be seen from Table 4 that apart from the basic sentence-level aspects (e.g., sentence grammar, tense marking, subject-verb agreement, etc.), the weak candidates are experiencing difficulties in the more advanced aspects of the English language, especially at the discourse level: appropriate use of cohesive devices at the discourse level, inferential reading and listening comprehension strategies, social interactional and conversational skills, maintaining topic cohesion, and using appropriate meta-linguistic language to explain and discuss students' language errors.   Analysis of the candidates' errors indicates that the weaker candidates lack both English proficiency and English subject knowledge (e.g., meta-linguistic terminology and knowledge, including grammar terminology).

The weak performance of the candidates (especially in the Writing and Speaking Papers) coupled with lots of complaints by school teachers about the difficulties of the LPAT papers and the intensification of their school workload have created much political pressure on the Government to cautiously proceed with the LPAT.   The sensational news reports accompanying recent teacher suicides allegedly due to heavy workload and probably LPAT induced stress have apparently led the government to work on changing the format of the LPAT in the direction of making it less difficult for the candidates (Ming Pao, 15 Oct 2007).

**5. Change of the Format of LPAT Papers**
The Government has thus recently announced a new format of the LPAT papers. The most challenging papers, Writing and Speaking, are undergoing heavy revision. Table 5 summarizes the major revisions made to the LPAT papers.

**Table 5: Major Changes in the LPAT Papers from 2008 Onwards**

| ● Writing |
|---|
| ■ From writing the complete explanations of errors to gap-filling |

| | |
|---|---|
| (multiple-choice options provided), with errors already identified for the candidate | |

*Item 11: to feel very frightened*

The problem is with the (a) _____ "to feel".  It should be replaced by "feeling" because the writer wishes to describe (b) _____, rather than an intended action.

(Example taken from HKEAA, 2007)

- Speaking
  - ■ 'Reading Aloud a Poem' cancelled
- Reading
  - ■ MC questions with more than one answers cancelled
- Listening
  - ■ Broken down into 3 to 4 sections with different themes

The most difficult Speaking and Writing Papers have been made much easier by taking away the poem-reading part (in Speaking), and the grammar explanation writing task has been replaced by multiple-choice questions: candidates just need to choose an option which contains a meta-linguistic description of the nature of the error.

## 6. Exemption from LPAT

Apart from making the LPAT Papers easier to pass, there are also ways of making oneself exempt from taking the LPAT by taking postgraduate courses. The document on exemption (EDB, 2007b) states:

"English teachers with relevant degrees plus relevant professional training will be fully exempted from the Language Proficiency Requirement (LPR), and will be deemed to have attained Level 3 proficiency and satisfied the LPR." …

"Relevant degree' means a recognized degree or higher degree with substantial components on the study of English and its use. In the main, this includes degrees specifically in the study of the English language (including English studies, English literature, and linguistics), degrees in education with specialization in English, degrees in the communicative use of English and

degrees in translation with English as one of the principal languages studied.  Holders of a non-relevant degree who subsequently completed the Post-graduate Programmes in Subject Knowledge in English will be considered as having a relevant degree in English for exemption."

"Relevant teacher training' means recognised initial teacher training with specialism in English and supervised practicum in English teaching. Initial teacher training obtained before September 2000 is recognized for exemption regardless of the subject of specialism whilst initial teacher training obtained in or after September 2000 must be one with specialism in English."

Apart from reducing the difficulty level of LPAT, and making exemption possible through multiple channels (e.g., taking professional development courses), the former EMB Director, Dr. Arthur Li announced nine support measures to reduce the stress of school teachers in February 2006, :

1. To implement specialized teaching in all primary schools and adopt the class-to-teacher (permanent establishment) ratio of 1:1.5 (involving 1,120 permanent teaching posts, including 660 new posts)
2. Turning the five-year post of Primary School Curriculum Leader to permanent establishment (involving some 620 teaching posts)
3. Improving the student guidance personnel (SGP)-to-class ratio from 1:24 to 1:18
4. Gradually providing additional teachers at junior levels of the secondary schools which have admitted Band Three and bottom 10% students (involving 1,050 permanent posts, including 730 new posts)
5. Making the basic Capacity Enhancement Grant a permanent provision
6. Simplifying the process of School-based Assessment for Chinese and English in Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination 2007 and finalising the detailed arrangements by mid-April
7. Reviewing the arrangements for Territory-wide System Assessment
8. Further improving the arrangements for External School Review
9. Opening the Quality Education Fund to applications throughout the year.

(http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200602/27/P200602270230.htm)

## 7. Coda: Directions for Future Research

It can be seen that in the past decade the Hong Kong Government has made a series of serious efforts to step up the English standards and credentials of English language

teachers.    However, the policy initiatives which the Government has adopted as a response to business interests have proved difficult to implement smoothly without lots of pain and stress induced to many serving teachers who for one reason or another have fallen short of the required Standards.    However, if we take a look at Table 6, which shows how many English teachers have met the LPAT requirement in the past 6 years, we can conclude that the Government has, after all, done a relatively fine job in stepping up the English standards of teachers.

**Table 6: English teachers in Hong Kong meeting the LPAT requirement (2002-2006)**

| | Number of English Teachers in Hong Kong | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 June | 2003 Sep | 2004 Mar | 2004 Sep | 2005 Mar | 2005 Sep | 2006 Mar | 2007 Feb |
| Total No. | / | 15,000 | 15,000 | 14,800 | 14,820 | 14,907 | / | 12,695 | 12,382 | / |
| No. of teachers who have fully or partially met the LPAT requirement | / | 3,300 | 5,000 | 8,662 | Fully: 6,559  Partially: 5,020 | 8,473 | 9.832 | 10,081 | 10,838 | / |

/: figures not available

(Data is complied from Press Releases from HKEAA from 2001-2007)

However, under increasing populist political pressure the Hong Kong Government has not been able to push forward the benchmark standards but has been seen to retreat and regress in its decade-long attempt to step up the language standards of teachers. It looks like that future research might need to proceed in directions a bit different from those embarked on a decade ago.    Below I outline some directions for possible future research in this area:

1.  Strengthening the Proficiency Components in Teacher Education Programmes: What are existing teacher education programmes (both pre- and in-service) doing to brush up the English proficiency of teacher-trainees?    What are the exit proficiency requirements of these programmes? Programme evaluation research on existing programmes can provide us with findings to inform us on how to strengthen the existing language education programmes to graduate teachers with the required English standards.
2.  What Counts as Subject Knowledge for English Teachers:

No systematic research has so far been conducted on what kinds of subject knowledge are needed and how they can be cultivated for English language teachers to teach effectively (Sze, 2003). Research in this area will be very helpful in future work on standards.

3. Beyond English Standards—A Holistic Approach

While English standards focus on the proficiency components of a language teacher's repertoire of knowledge and skills, what are the other professional standards required of language teachers?   What are the necessary attitudes and dispositions to cultivate?   What are the self-learning and help-seeking skills that are needed in a fast changing world?   For instance, can a teacher with less than optimal meta-linguistic knowledge but with effective help-seeking skills easily find grammar help on the Internet for their everyday teaching needs (as grammar rules are changing fast in the world too)?   Research on these topics will help to broaden our notion of proficiency standards for language teachers, and will inform the building of a balanced approach to policies regarding teacher education and teacher credentialing.

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**List of Acronyms:**

**ACTEQ:** Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications

**Bed:** Bachelor of Education

**CLA:** Classroom Language Assessment

**ECR:** Education Commission Report

**EDB:** Education Bureau (new name of EMB from 2007 onwards)

**EMB:** Education and Manpower Bureau

**HKCEE:** Hong Kong Certification of Education Examination

**HKEAA:** Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

**HKSAR**: Hong Kong Special Administration Region

**LPAT:** Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers

**LPR:** Language Proficiency Requirement

**PCEd:** Postgraduate Certificate in Education

**PGDE:** Postgraduate Diploma in Education

**PGDE (SK):** Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Subject Knowledge)

**PGSK:** Postgraduate Subject Knowledge Diploma

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