

UC Berkeley Online Chinese Placement Test: Impediments, Improvements, and Implementations

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Lecturer

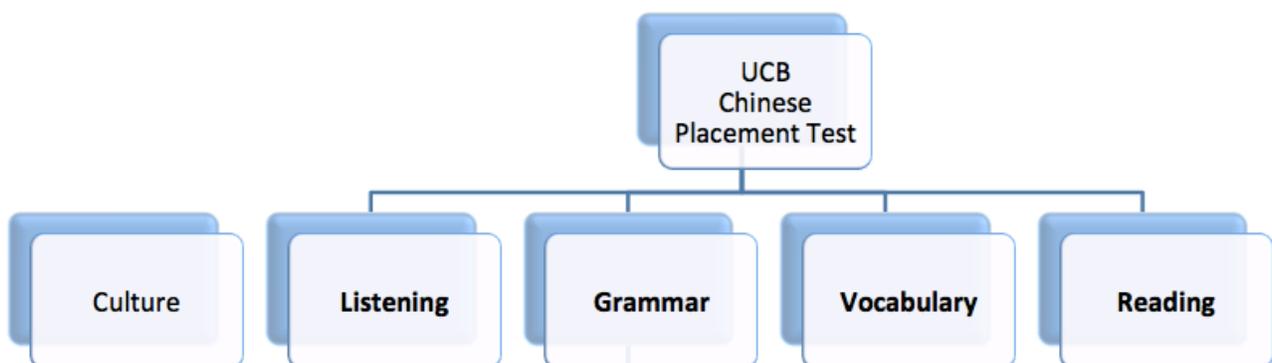
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Introduction

The original version of the Chinese placement test at UC Berkeley was developed more than ten years ago. With the rapid advancement of web technology and the instructional changes in the Chinese curriculum, our placement test needed an update to enhance its functionality and efficiency. This report will focus on the primary improvement implementations in redesigning the test, including the incorporation of demographic data, restructuring of the grammar-based questions, the development of media in the listening section, the addition of a new section assessing cultural knowledge, and test item validation.

Structure Overview

There are four main categories in the Chinese placement test: listening, grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Culture is a new section that will be implemented on achievement tests, so it is not connected to the placement test in the chart shown below.



The Incorporation of Demographic Data

The purpose of the Chinese placement test is to place a student into a particular level (e.g., elementary) and a particular course (e.g., 1A, 1X, and 1Y tracks). The former is determined by the test results while the latter depends on the demographic data. A balanced and efficient integration between the two is essential for placement purposes. However, this matching between a language background and a specific level is not intuitive and not straightforward because of the different pace, course intensity, and course convergence at different points as shown in the following figure.

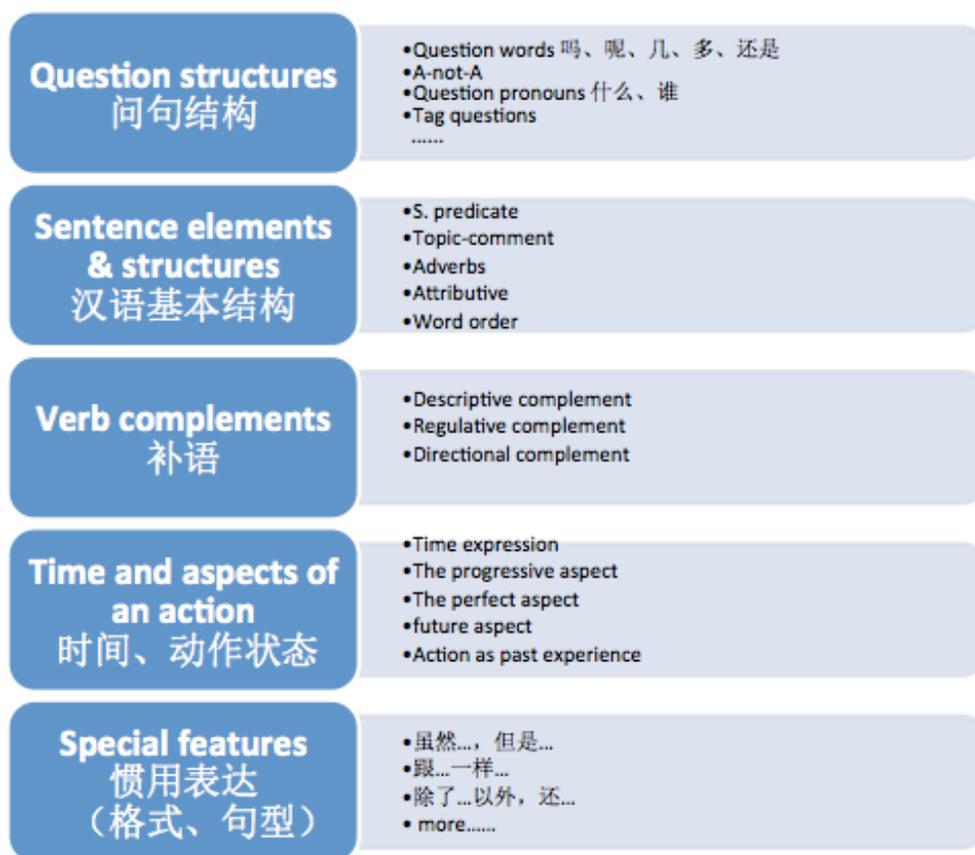
Non-heritage	1A	1B	10A	10B	100A	100B
Mandarin	1Y	10Y	100XA	100XB	102	101
Other dialects	1X	10X				
Semester	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th

- The beginning level
- The intermediate level
- The advanced (I) level

Ever since our placement test has malfunctioned, our instructors have had to handle challenges with placement by scrutinizing hundreds of surveys and conducting endless interviews in the weeks before and after a semester begins. With technical support from the Berkeley Language Center (BLC), we are now able to program specific algorithms to assign our students to a system-suggested level along with a particular track so that the new system accomplishes well the purpose of the placement test. This important update substantially enhances the placement procedure of the Chinese Language Program (CLP) in that the integration could shorten the time-consuming placement process so that our instructors could further invest our time and effort at the beginning of semesters to strengthening and enriching our class and course instruction.

Restructuring the Grammar-Based Questions

The main update in the grammar section is the implementation of subcategories. In the original version, the database lumped all the grammar questions into one group. In an adaptive test, which draws randomly on a large group of questions, certain questions that are important as the basis for students' knowledge might be skipped because of the nature of random selection. The function of subcategories allows us to indicate a certain minimum number of questions, which must come from a group of questions that have been identified to belong to a certain subcategory. In this way, we can ensure that each subcategory will be included in a specific test. By way of illustration, the following figure outlines the subcategories of the grammar section in level 1.



Contextualizing Listening Items

The improvement plan for the listening section in the beginning level is to improve authenticity by contextualizing the test items and modifying the items to closely approximate natural language use and exchanges in real-world tasks. In this updated version, questions can be roughly split into three types: comprehension, responsive

listening, and information transfer. The following is a random example of a responsive listening type. The texts in gray are for report demonstration and not viewable in an actual test.



Instructions: You are visiting your Chinese friend's home. All of you are now in the dining room. She is asking you a question. Which of the options below is the most appropriate response to her question?

Q: [audio] 你想喝点什么? lit. What would you like to drink?

1. [audio] 给我一杯水吧。 lit. May I have a glass of water?
2. [audio] 我不想喝水。 lit. I don't want to drink water.
3. [audio] 给我一盘饺子。 lit. I want a plate of dumplings.

The next item gives an example of an information transfer type, where aurally processed information must be transferred to a visual representation.

Instructions: Please choose the best narration among the three options provided to describe the photo.



1 [audio] 这是我的照片, 我喜欢唱歌、跳舞、游泳、学英文, 还喜欢看电影

lit. This is my photo. I like singing, dancing, swimming, learning English and watching movies.

2 [audio] 这是我的照片, 他们都是我的家人, 我家有八个人, 我没有姐妹。

lit. This is my photo. All of them are my family. There are 8 people in my family. I don't have any sisters.

3 [audio] 这是我的照片, 这是我爸爸、妈妈, 我先生, 我的姐姐和两个哥哥。

lit. This is my photo. This is my father, my mother, my husband, my elder sister and my two elder brothers.

The other major update is the development of various topics and speech genres for all the levels. For instance, in the elementary level, we covered most commonly adopted topics to accommodate different textbooks. The intermediate levels include a wide

The Beginning Level (Level 1)	
介绍	Introduction of oneself, family, friends, etc.
日常生活对话	Daily conversation
访谈	Interview
电话汉语	Phone conversation
购物、讲价	Shopping & bargaining
例行作息描述	Daily description
广告	Advertisement/commercial
讨论	Discussion
邀约	Invitation
通知	Announcements

The Intermediate Levels (Levels 5 & 6 updated by Zhang Laoshi, Cai Laoshi & Song Laoshi)	
对话	Natural conversation
独白	Natural monologue
访谈	Interview
新闻	News story
趣闻、轶事	Anecdote
解释	Explanation
说明、指南	Instructions
旅游介绍	Travelogue description
演说	Formal speech
辩论	Debate

range of genres introduced in our curriculum.

Below are two tables showing more details in the reorganization of topics and genres.

Cultural Assessment in Elementary Level Chinese

Before I talk about the cultural section, it must be noted that the cultural assessment is not a part of the placement test. In our placement test, culture is an element woven into all the test items and cannot be separated from the test. The point of setting up an individual cultural section is to make culture learning more visible in assessment and thus more rewarding for our elementary level learners.

In principle, this section includes (but is not limited to) cultural knowledge and interconnection between Mandarin and Chinese culture. For this report, I'll choose a few items under these two types of divisions to serve as examples. The words in gray are literal translations for the purposes of understanding this report.

● *An Example of Question Sets in Festivals and Customs*

The image below depicts a traditional folk custom of a traditional Chinese festival.
Please answer the following questions about the festival.



Question 1: 这是什么节日？ Lit. What is the name of the festival?

1. 端午节 lit. Duānwǔ Festival
2. 中秋节 lit. Mid-autumn Festival
3. 春节 lit. Spring Festival

Question 2: 这一天，中国人吃什么？

Lit. What is the special food eaten on the day of the festival?



Question 3: 这一天，中国人戴什么特别的饰品？



Lit. What is the special thing that people wear on the day of the festival?

● *An Example of Culture-Bonded Gestures*

Instructions: You are going to buy something for your Chinese friend. When you ask him how many he needs, he shows you the finger gesture (as shown in the image on the right). What does he mean?

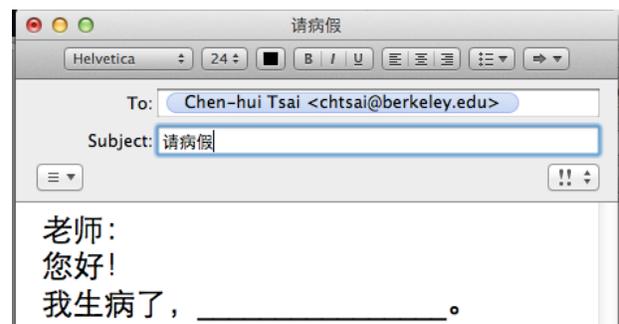


- A. 2
- B. 6
- C. 8

● *An Example of the Interconnection between Mandarin and Chinese Culture*

Instructions: You are not feeling well. You won't go see a doctor, but you really need to rest more. You are now writing an email message to your Chinese teacher. Complete the sentence by filling in the most appropriate sentence emphasizing that you are too ill to attend the class (not because someone tells you that you cannot go).

- A. 我明天不可以去上课
(lit. I cannot go to class tomorrow.)
- B. 我明天不能去上课
(lit. I cannot go to class tomorrow.)
- C. 我明天不要去上课。
(lit. I am not going to class tomorrow)



The distinction between this type of questions and grammar-based questions

lies in the fact that all the three options here are grammatically correct and that all of them can achieve the communicative goal which, as shown in the example, is to inform the teacher that she is not going to class tomorrow. In this case, option 2 is the answer because it additionally delivers the underlining situation, where the student could implicitly emphasize the fact that she is not going to class because her physical ability is seriously affected.

Test Item Validation

The test items are constructed by our instructors in the Chinese Language Program, based on their teaching experience in the assigned levels at Berkeley, ACTFL proficiency guidelines, and word frequency by levels in HSK (i.e., the national standardized test of standard Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers). It is important for any placement test to be accompanied by a systematic periodic corroboration of its effectiveness and steps toward its improvement. We need an evaluation of test items. Additionally, the test is designed to place students primarily through multiple-choice questions. This design was meant to achieve practicality and test administration reliability. Multiple-choice items, which may appear to be the simplest kind of item to construct, are extremely difficult to design correctly. Since multiple-choice is the main format of the test, it is necessary to measure items against the item facility (IF) index in order to appropriately select and arrange suitable multiple-choice items in the test.

Item facility (or item difficulty) is the extent to which an item is easy or difficult for the proposed group of test takers. After collecting data from our students, the IF index will be calculated. It is generally accepted that appropriate test items should have IFs that range between .15 and .85. Items with values smaller than .15 or higher than .85 will be scrutinized to see if they should be included as it is, modified, or thrown out.

We plan to normalize the test items by having our students take the test in the upcoming semesters. The database model will be used by other UC campuses as well. Each campus will be doing its own normalization procedure.

The Characteristics of the New System

As a final point of the report, the following is a brief summary of the characteristics of the assessment system for those lecturers who might be interested in working with the new model in the future.

Sustainability. Thanks to the BLC, the new model provides language instructors with user-friendly database interface and editing panels for item updates. The panels are for the teacher's easy access to directly work on the details of any test item and this greatly enhances the sustainability of the placement test.

Shared Database. The new system is constructed to be a general shared database. For example, Chinese language programs from different UC campuses can contribute assessment questions to the overall database, while each individual program gets to choose question items to be included on any specific test.

Flexibility and Customization. The model offers test management panels for teachers to set up official exams. This gives teachers full control in using the questions in the database on placement, achievement, or program assessment tests. Therefore, it can be customized to serve different assessment purposes and practically benefit the teaching and curriculum mission of any language program at the University of California.