

# **A Comparison of the English Reading Comprehension Passages and Items in the College Entrance Examinations of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China<sup>1</sup>**

Hengsyung Jeng  
National Taiwan University

This paper attempts to compare the difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages and items in the nine sets of English tests in the 1999 college entrance examinations of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China by applying Chall and Dale's (1995a and 1995b) Readability Formula. It has been found that of the nine sets of English tests, Hong Kong's English Test of the Advanced Supplementary Level is the most difficult one, its reading comprehension passage reaching level 12, comparable to the level for American high school graduates and its reading comprehension items reaching level 5-6, comparable to the level for the American 5th to 6th graders. As for Hong Kong's Syllabus A English test, Taiwan's English test in the Joint College Entrance Examination, and Mainland China's Shanghai English test and English test for overseas students, the difficulty levels of their reading comprehension passages and items are the lowest among the nine English tests, reaching levels 3 to 5, comparable to those for the American 3rd to 5th graders. The other four English tests of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China are in between, ranging from levels 6 to 9.

Keywords: reading comprehension tests, difficulty levels, the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula, types of reading comprehension questions

## **1. Introduction**

English reading comprehension is an important category in many English tests, for example, TOEFL, SAT, GCE O'Level (Cambridge General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level), and the college entrance examinations in many countries/areas in Asia. But because the levels of English reading abilities of the candidates in different countries/areas in Asia vary, the difficulty levels of English reading comprehension passages and items accordingly differ from one country/area to another. This paper will compare the difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 college entrance examinations of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, where the candidates are generally native speakers of Mandarin Chinese or at

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Third International Conference on English Language

least a Chinese dialect. Furthermore, some suggestions will be made for improving the techniques of making English reading comprehension tests.

## **2. The difficulty levels of English reading comprehension passages and items**

In estimating the difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 college entrance examinations in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula (1995a; 1995b) and Rodrigues and Stieglitz' computer program of *Readability Master 2000* (1997) based upon the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula will be used as the instrument. The Dale-Chall Readability Formula was first put forward in 1948, which made use of a basic fourth grade list of 3,000 English words and sentence length within a passage of 100 words to estimate the levels of reading materials ranging from the elementary grade one level of 1 to the graduate level of 16. The New Dale-Chall Readability Formula is the result of repeated experiments over the past 50 years, and it has been found that it "correlates .92 with reading comprehension as determined by cloze comprehension scores." (Chall and Dale 1995a:6) But in this paper, I have made three modifications of their formula: (1) proper names don't count as unfamiliar words even if they don't appear on their list of 3,000 words for the fourth graders in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>; (2) an unfamiliar word counts only once no matter how many times it appears in the text<sup>3</sup>; (3) a compound word or a hyphenated word counts as an unfamiliar word if one or all of the components do not appear in the 3,000 word list, but if all of the components

---

Testing in Asia held in Hong Kong, October 27-28, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> There are two reasons for not counting proper names: (1) their list contains such proper names as "Easter," "Stars & Stripes," "Eskimo," etc., which may be unfamiliar to most of the Chinese high school graduates in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, but not "Asia," "Hong Kong," "Taiwan," "China," etc., which are familiar to these high school graduates, so if proper names not appearing on their list are counted as unfamiliar words, there will be some distortion of the levels of difficulty; (2) the common proper names such as "John," "Paul," and "David" not appearing on the list do not pose any difficulty either to native speakers of English or non-native speakers, so counting them as unfamiliar words will make the level of the passage under study far too difficult. Therefore, not counting proper names altogether will do without such distortions.

<sup>3</sup> Their instruction of "Underline all unfamiliar words as many times as they appear" (Chall and Dale 1995a:13; Chall and Dale 1995b:3) does not consider the fact that an unfamiliar word at the beginning of a passage may become familiar in the following contexts and the students may figure out its meaning in the course of reading the passage. My statistics of the English reading comprehension passages in this paper show that counting each unfamiliar word only once in a passage instead of as many times as they appear arrives at a better evaluation of the difficulty level of a passage.

appear on the list of 3,000 words, it does not count as an unfamiliar word unless its meaning cannot be derived from the components.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the formula for estimating the difficulty levels of English reading materials in terms of the number of unfamiliar words and sentence length, the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula also includes a checklist for evaluating the cognitive complexity of English reading materials in terms of textual organization, conceptual difficulty and the textual format.<sup>5</sup> In the following, the difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 college entrance examinations of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China will be estimated on the basis of the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula and *Readability Master 2000* together with the three modifications of mine. Moreover, Nuttall's (1996) different types of questions will also be used to evaluate the cognitive structures of reading comprehension items.

## 2.1 The difficulty levels of Hong Kong's English tests

Hong Kong has three English tests for its high school graduates: Syllabus A, Syllabus B, and the AS (Advanced Supplementary) level. According to Hong Kong Examinations Authority, the Certificate of Education English Language Examination offers Syllabuses A and B for two different groups of candidates, with Syllabus B higher in standard than Syllabus A.<sup>6</sup> "The overall aim of the examination is to assess candidates' achievement of the aims of the Syllabus for English Language (Secondary) prepared by the Curriculum Development Council and recommended for use in schools by the Education Department." (1999 Hong Kong Examinations Authority *Annual Subject Report*: 196) Whereas the AS level "aims to foster the development of students' English language skills in order to equip them for tertiary education and/or employment." (1999 Hong Kong Examinations Authority *Annual Subject Report*: 501) Given the two distinct goals, the AS-Level, a proficiency test for the college entrance

<sup>4</sup> Chall and Dale (1995b:4) state that "Count as two unfamiliar words if both are not on the list." However, according to English morphology, each compound or hyphenated word is considered one word. Therefore, an unfamiliar compound or hyphenated word should be considered only one word no matter whether one or more morphemes in it are not on the list.

<sup>5</sup> Chall and Dale (1995b:10) state that to supplement the statistics acquired by the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula, sometimes it may be necessary to "estimate whether the text organization, its conceptual difficulty and density, and its format may make the text more difficult, less difficult, or about the same as predicted by the new Dale-Chall Readability Formula."

<sup>6</sup> These two English tests have nothing to do with college entrance examinations, but they are included

examination in Hong Kong, is far more difficult than Syllabuses A and B, which are achievement tests for Hong Kong high school graduates. The difficulty levels of their English reading comprehension passages and items of the three 1999 English tests are shown in the following tables.

**Table 1.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in 1999 Hong Kong's English Test for high school graduates (Syllabus A)**

Passage No.	A	B	Items for A	Items for B
Level	3-4	6-7	2	2-3
Average	5		2-3	

**Table 2.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in 1999 Hong Kong's English Test for high school graduates (Syllabus B)**

Passage No.	A	B	Items for A	Items for B
Level	6-7	7-8	3-4	4-5
Average	7		4	

**Table 3.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in 1999 Hong Kong's English Test for college entrance examination (AS Level)**

Passage No.	A	Items for A
Level	10-11	5-6
Average	10-11	5-6

Table 1 shows that the average level of the two English reading comprehension passages in Syllabus A is 5 and the average level of the items for these passages is 2-3. Table 2 shows that the average level of the two English reading comprehension passages in Syllabus B is 7, higher than that of Syllabus A, and the average level of the items for the passages is also higher, namely 4. Table 3 shows that the level of the English reading comprehension passage of the AS-Level is 10-11 and that of the items is 5-6. The two reading comprehension passages "A healer's life" and "Family ties" in Syllabus A are about daily life in Hong Kong and do not require particular background knowledge to understand them, and hence there are no special cognitive structures posing extra difficulty that requires upgrading of the average difficulty level

---

in this study for comparison.

estimated by the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula. The two passages “When work is the lesser of two evils” and “A born bird-watcher” in Syllabus B involve backgrounds which are not so familiar to the average Hong Kong high school graduate, and hence their average difficulty level should be upgraded by one level, from level 7 to level 8. And the AS-Level reading comprehension passage “McDonald’s in East Asia,” being a review of a scholarly book by a Harvard professor, is much more complicated in content and sophisticated in organization, should be upgraded by at least one level from level 10-11 to level 12. As a result, the average difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages are adjusted and shown in the following table.

**Table 4.**  
**The adjusted average difficulty levels of Hong Kong’s three English Tests**

Type of English Tests	Average Difficulty Level
Syllabus A	5
Syllabus B	8
AS-Level	12

These four tables show that these three English tests are well graded by a difference of about 3 to 4 levels and Hong Kong Examinations Authority’s distinct goals for these three English tests are well substantiated. The adjusted level of the AS-Level reading comprehension passage indicates that it is about the level of native-speaker high school graduates. A candidate succeeds in passing this level of English proficiency is well-prepared for college education in English as in the native-speaking environments of the U.K. and the U.S. And this level of difficulty clearly conforms to the Hong Kong Examinations Authority’s goal to “foster the development of students’ English language skills in order to equip them for tertiary education.”

Now we shall examine the reading comprehension items in these three English tests. The two passages in Syllabus A are of the narrative and descriptive types of writing, with simple backgrounds of daily life in Hong Kong. Therefore, the statistics of Table 1 does pretty good justice to the difficulty level of these two passages. The reading comprehension items for these two passages involve mainly the basic skill of literal comprehension of words and main ideas and the somewhat more difficult skill of reorganization or reinterpretation (paraphrase); only 2 of them require the more

advanced skills of making judgment.<sup>7</sup> And the English used in asking the questions is, in keeping with the theory of testing reading comprehension, simpler than that of the text.<sup>8</sup> In the following table, different types of questions about these two passages are given together with their numbers and percentages.

**Table 5.**  
**Types of questions about the two passages in Syllabus A**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Judgment
No. of Items	13	13	2
Percentage	46.5%	46.5%	7%
Total Items	28		

Table 5 shows that among a total of 28 items about these two passages, 13 (46.5%) have to do with the basic skill of literal comprehension, also 13 (46.5%) concern the slightly higher skill of reinterpretation, and only 2 (7%) involve making judgment. The statistics of the types of questions are closely related to the cognitive structures of these items and they are in keeping with the statistic evaluation of these items at the elementary levels of 2-3.

The 13 items involving reinterpretation are rather elementary. For example, item 2 for the passage “A healer’s life” asking about the age of Mr Chan when he came to Hong Kong requires the candidate to reinterpret the sentence “just before I was 17, I came to Hong Kong with my uncle” and choose the correct answer “D. was 16.” (paragraph 1)<sup>9</sup> Item 19 is more difficult in its cognitive structure in that it asks the candidate to use the more advanced skill of making judgment on why Professor Cheung Kar-wai is quoted in the passage of “Family ties,” and the answer is “C. (he) can

---

<sup>7</sup> Nuttall (1996:188-89) classifies reading comprehension questions into six types: (1) literal comprehension; (2) reorganization or reinterpretation; (3) inference; (4) evaluation or judgment; (5) personal response; (6) how writers say what they mean. The first is a basic skill, the second is a somewhat more difficult skill, and the other four are more advanced skills. Among the six types, the first four are more frequently used.

<sup>8</sup> Nuttall (1996:187): “The language used for questions ...should be as clear as you can make it. At the very least, it ought not to be more difficult than the language of the text itself.”

<sup>9</sup> But according to HKEA 1999 *Annual Subject Report*, the passing rate is surprisingly low, just .22.

explain changes in society.”<sup>10</sup>

In Syllabus B, the two passages are more difficult than those in Syllabus A, and the items are also more difficult because more of them involve the more difficult skills of reinterpretation, inference and judgment, while only 4 items (15%) concern the basic skill of literal comprehension. The following table shows the different types of questions about these two passages together with their numbers and percentages.

**Table 6.**  
**Types of questions about the two passages in Syllabus B**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference	Judgment
No. of Items	4	18	3	2
Percentage	15%	67%	11%	7%
Total Items	27			

Table 6 shows that the items for the English reading passages in Syllabus B involve far less literal comprehension (only 15%) and more reinterpretation, inference and judgment (85%) than those in Syllabus A. And the items involving inference and judgment are much more sophisticated than those in Syllabus A. For example, item 3 for the first passage in Syllabus B asks about the boss' worry, and the correct answer "D. Hanif might say bad things about his life and work at the factory" is not explicitly stated in this paragraph and can only be inferred from the details in this paragraph. An example of judgment can be found in item 27 for the second passage, which asks about the most suitable subheading for this article and the correct answer is "C. Young bird-watcher amazes experts with his natural talent." A candidate can answer this question correctly only after grasping the global concept of this article and making the right judgment on the focus of this article.

Generally speaking, the reading comprehension items in Syllabus B English test are well designed. But item 21 about "A born bird-watcher" seems rather dubious. The question is "Mr Lee's main strength is ....." and the correct answer given in the key is "D. matching birds' sounds with their appearance" (supported by the text in paragraph

<sup>10</sup> According to HKEA 1999 Annual Subject Report, the passing rate for this item is rather low, only .33.

4 “When you hear a bird, you have to be able to identify it by forming a picture in your mind. Kwok-shing is a master at that.”), but another part of the text (paragraph 4) “Lam Chiu-ying...says of Mr Lee: ‘He is amazing...he is always the one who picks out the most interesting birds” supports the answer “B. finding rare and unusual birds.” In fact, finding rare and interesting birds seems to be more of a strength than just matching birds’ sounds with their appearance. It is suggested that a dubious item like this be avoided in the future English tests.

As for the AS-Level English reading comprehension test, there is only one long passage with about 1,000 words entitled “McDonald’s in East Asia.” The items related to reinterpretation far outnumber the items related to literal comprehension (94% to 6%), but there are no items related to inference and judgment. The following table presents the different types of questions about this passage together with their numbers and percentages.

**Table 7.**  
**Types of questions about the passage in the AS-Level**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation
No. of Items	1	15
Percentage	6%	94%
Total Items	16	

Among a total of 16 items about this passage, a large majority (94%) concern reinterpretation. As for literal comprehension, there is only 1 item (6%), while Syllabus A has 13 items (46.5%) and Syllabus B has 4 items (15%). The different numbers of literal comprehension items in these three tests seem to point to an interesting principle: the difficulty level of an English reading comprehension test seems to be in reverse proportion to the number of literal comprehension questions and in proportion to the total number of other types of questions. We shall see whether this principle can also be borne out by the statistics of the English reading comprehension items in the college entrance examinations of Taiwan and Mainland China.

Another interesting fact about these three English tests is that there are no questions concerning the more advanced skills of inference and judgment in the AS-Level test,

whereas both Syllabuses A and B tests have 2. Why there are no questions concerning these advanced skills may be due to the high difficulty level (12) of this article. Since this article, in addition to containing far more unfamiliar words<sup>11</sup> and more complicated sentence structures<sup>12</sup>, also has more sophisticated cognitive structures than those of the reading comprehension passages in Syllabuses A and B tests, the test-makers might not want to make the items too difficult by asking questions involving more advanced skills.

But the reinterpretation items in the AS-Level test are much more difficult than those in Syllabuses A and B tests for two reasons. For one thing, the AS-Level reading comprehension items contain a larger number of unfamiliar words.<sup>13</sup> For another, the style and cognitive structure of the AS-Level reading passage “McDonald’s in East Asia” are far more complicated than those of Syllabuses A and B. An example of reinterpretation items from the AS-Level test will illustrate this point of cognitive difficulty. The correct answer to item 16 “Overall, what is the assessment in *Golden Arches East* of the impact of McDonald’s on East Asia?” is “C. There has been a great deal of change which is not negative and which, in fact, may be positive.”<sup>14</sup> The correct answer includes a local part and a global part: the first part of the correct answer about the negative aspect of change, being rather local, can be found in the text (paragraph 1) “They conclude that, while the fast-food giant has had an enormous impact on East Asian societies, it is not a negative one”, but the second part about the positive aspect of change, being rather global, is not explicitly stated, and a candidate can arrive at this idea only through observation of the many positive details given in the

---

<sup>11</sup> The average number of unfamiliar words in 100-word samples from the reading passage in the AS-Level test calculated on the basis of the New Dale-Chall Formula is about 20, but that of the reading passages of Syllabus A is 7.5, and that of the reading passages of Syllabus B is 13.5.

<sup>12</sup> The average number of sentences in 100-word samples from the reading passage in the AS-Level test calculated on the basis of the New Dale-Chall Formula is 4.7 (average length of each sentence: 21 words), but that of the reading passages of Syllabus A is 5 (average length of each sentence: 20 words), and that of the reading passages of Syllabus B is 5.2 (average length of each sentence: 19 words). The smaller the average number of sentences, the longer the sentences, and hence the more complicated structures.

<sup>13</sup> As calculated by the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula, the average number of unfamiliar words found in the two samples of 100 words from the 16 questions of AS-Level is 16, whereas that of Syllabus A is only 5, and that of Syllabus B is 9.

<sup>14</sup> According to HKEA’s 1999 *Annual Subject Report*, the passing rate for this item is .65, which is pretty good.

different parts of the text.

## 2.2 The difficulty levels of Taiwan's English tests

Taiwan has three kinds of English tests for three kinds of college entrance examinations, which afford Taiwan's high school graduates three channels to enter college: (1) the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE); (2) the College Entrance Examination for Recommended High School Students (CERS); (3) the College Entrance Examination for High School Students Excelling in English (CEEE).<sup>15</sup> The first one has the largest population of up to 120,000 candidates taking it every year; the second one has a slightly smaller population of up to 90,000 candidates every year; the third one has only about 150 candidates every year. Because of the different purposes of these three college entrance examinations, the English tests designed for them accordingly vary to a certain extent.<sup>16</sup> The difficulty levels of their English reading comprehension passages and items of the three 1999 English tests are shown in the following tables.

**Table 8.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in Taiwan's English Test for the Joint College Entrance Examination**

Passage No.	Level	Average
1	4-5	4-5
2	4-5	
3	4	
4	4-5	
Items for 1	3	3-4
Items for 2	4	
Items for 3	5-6	
Items for 4	2	

<sup>15</sup> But starting in 2002, the third channel will be canceled, and the candidates taking this test have to switch to other channels.

<sup>16</sup> For the JCEE, each candidate may have the choices of up to 66 departments if s/he qualifies for admission. For the CERS, each candidate has only one choice of major. For the CEEE, each candidate also has only one choice of the major s/he excels in.

**Table 9.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in Taiwan's English Test for the Recommended High School Students**

Passage No.	Level	Average
1	3	5-6
2	5-6	
3	7-8	
4	6	
Items for 1	4	4-5
Items for 2	5-6	
Items for 3	5-6	
Items for 4	3	

**Table 10.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in Taiwan's English Test for the Students Excelling in English**

Passage No.	Level	Average
1	9-10	9
2	10-11	
3	9	
4	3-4	
5	11-12	
Items for 1	5-6	4-5
Items for 2	3	
Items for 3	3	
Items for 4	4	
Items for 5	7-8	

Among the three English tests, the one for the high school students excelling in English is by far the most difficult, reaching the average level of 9 for the reading comprehension passages and the average level of 4-5 for the items, because the small number of students taking this test is supposed to be in the top 0.2%.<sup>17</sup> As for the JCEE and CERS English tests, they are much easier: for the former, the reading comprehension passages reach the average level of 4-5, and the items reach the average level of 3-4; for the latter, the reading comprehension passages reach the average level of 5-6, and the items reach the average level of 4-5. However, such statistics calculated in terms of the number of unfamiliar words and sentence length should be

supplemented by the cognitive structures of the reading passages. The following table showing the contents of the reading passages in these three tests will provide cognitive information for adjusting the difficulty levels of the reading passages in these three English tests.

**Table 11.**  
**The contents of the reading passages in Taiwan's three English Tests**

JCEE Test	Passage No.	1	2	3	4	
	Content	A musician suffering from a brain disease	A book- seller's view of books	Training your pet dog	Preventive medicine	
CERS Test	Passage No.	1	2	3	4	
	Content	Authors' intentions	The island of Kauai	The cycle of life	Parades for John Glenn	
CEEE Test	Passage No.	1	2	3	4	5
	Content	Humor	Life in a small town	The unkind wife of a Coaldealer	A fable about a unicorn	problems of adoles- cence

The above table shows that the contents of the passages in the JCEE and CERS English tests concern general knowledge, which do not pose particular difficulty to the candidates, and hence no adjustment is necessary for their difficulty levels. As for the English test for students excelling in English, only passage five about the problems of adolescence is more academic and has more complicated cognitive structures, and hence its difficulty level of 11-12 can be upgraded to 12-13. But the upgrading of this passage does not have much influence on the average difficulty level of the reading comprehension passages of the CEEE English test, and hence it remains level 9. The following table compares the average difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages in the three English tests.

---

<sup>17</sup> This is the percentage of the group of candidates totaling about 70,000 intending to specialize in the humanities, law and business.

**Table 12.**  
**The average difficulty levels of the reading passages**  
**In Taiwan's three English Tests**

Type of English Tests	Average Difficulty Level
JCEE English Test	4-5
CERS English Test	5-6
CEEE English Test	9

This table reflects quite realistically the three populations of candidates taking the three kinds of English tests: the JCEE English test, with its largest population, is the easiest one; the CERS English test, with a slightly smaller population, is slightly more difficult than the JCEE English test; the CEEE English test, being the most difficult, is for the smallest population of about 150 candidates.

As for the difficulty levels of the reading comprehension items in terms of the number of unfamiliar words and sentence length, those of the CERS English Test and CEEE English test are the same, namely level 4-5, and that of the JCEE is slightly easier, namely level 3-4. However, such statistics should be supplemented by the question types of the items in order to find out whether their cognitive structures will influence their difficulty levels. The following tables show the different types of questions in the three tests together with their numbers and percentages.

**Table 13.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the JCEE English Test**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference	Judgment
No. of Items	1	11	2	1
Percentage	7%	73%	13%	7%
Total No.	15			

**Table 14.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the CERS English Test**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference	Judgment
No. of Items	1	8	3	3
Percentage	7%	53%	20%	20%
Total No.	15			

**Table 15.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the CEEE English Test**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference
No. of Items	1	16	8
Percentage	4%	64%	32%
Total No.	25		

The above tables show that both the JCEE and the CERS English tests have four types of questions, and the CEEE English test has only three types. Each of the three English tests has only one single item about literal comprehension. As for reinterpretation, the JCEE English test has the highest percentage, namely 73%, the CEEE English test has the next high percentage, namely 64%, and the CERS English test has the lowest percentage, namely 53% (but still more than 50%), which is quite appropriate for an English test of this level. As for inference questions, the CEEE English test has the highest percentage, namely 32%, the CERS English test has the next high percentage, namely 20%, and the JCEE English test has the lowest percentage, namely 13%. Such varied percentages are quite appropriate for these three different levels of English tests. Both the JCEE and the CERS English tests have judgment questions, but the CEEE English test does not have any. The CERS English test has 3 items about judgment, constituting 20%, while the JCEE English test has only 1 item, constituting 7%. The fact that the CEEE English test, being the most advanced test, does not have any judgment items is quite surprising. It is suggested that for an advanced English test like this, some judgment items be included to test the higher cognitive ability of the candidates.

The above discussion about the question types of the three tests may shed some light on the cognitive structures of the items in the three tests: the CEEE English test has the highest percentage of non-literal comprehension question (96%), and hence is the hardest in terms of cognitive structures, while both the JCEE and CERS English tests have only 93%. But a difference of 3% is not significant enough to modify the average difficult levels of the items in these three tests in terms of the number of

unfamiliar words and sentence length. That is why Chall and Dale (1995b: 7) state that “Estimates of organization and idea difficulty are not substitutes for readability scores. They are supplements to them.”

For each of the four types of questions in the three English tests of Taiwan, one or two examples will be given for discussion.

### **Literal Comprehension**

From the fourth passage of JCEE:

52. According to this passage, many soldiers fell ill because

- (A) they raised too many horses and mules.
- (B) they didn't want to go to war.
- \* (C) they all lived very close together.
- (D) they didn't have record keeping.

The correct answer (C) is very close to the original wording in the text (paragraph 1): “...although they [doctors] knew that many people living close together often gave their diseases to others.”

This item, being very literal, has a pretty high passing rate, namely .55, and its discrimination index is exceedingly high, .67, far above the minimum desirable index of .30.<sup>18</sup> This shows that such a literal comprehension item is quite appropriate for the population of about 120,000 candidates.

### **Reinterpretation**

(1) From the second passage of CERS:

47. What is the rainfall condition of Kauai?

- \* (A) The rainfall concentrates in some spots.
- (B) It rains a lot except in high mountains.
- (C) There is a lot of rain everywhere most of the year.
- (D) The rainfall changes much with seasons.

---

<sup>18</sup> This minimum discrimination index for an English multiple-choice item with four options was

The correct answer (A) is based upon the reinterpretation of the original wording in the second paragraph of the text: “Yet this amount of rain is surprisingly localized. Just a few miles west, there’s a dry region that receives a mere 6 inches of rain annually.” Because of its local reinterpretation, this item is not very difficult: the overall passing rate is .49, almost 50% of the total population, and the discrimination index is very good, namely .60.

(2) From the second passage of JCEE:

44. This passage states that a bookseller’s main concern about a book is its  
(A) contents      \*(B) appearance.      (C) cost.      (D) publisher.

The correct answer \*(B) cannot be found directly in the original wording of the text. Instead it must be based upon the reorganization and reinterpretation of such details as “We know them all, we like them all, we enjoy their companionship, because to a bookseller a book is not something to read; it is something to handle, something to sell. To a bookseller a good book is something that is well designed and well made, and the handling of it gives him or her great pleasure.” (paragraph 1), and “How can I judge a book about which I know nothing? The answer is that I can because I can get the help of others, including the publisher, the reviewers, and other customers.” (paragraph 2) The information for the correct answer is scattered in different parts of the text, and a candidate has to reorganize and reinterpret them in order to get the correct answer. This is a very good example for the more advanced skill of global reorganization and reinterpretation. Because this item demands a higher cognitive skill, the candidates’ responses to this item are less successful than their responses to the literal comprehension item or even the local reinterpretation item given above. The overall passing rate for this item is a mere 29%, and the discrimination index is only .28, failing to reach the minimum index of .30. (But the top 20% of the candidates did very well on this item: the passing rate is .58.) This does not mean that this is a poor

item. This phenomenon rather indicates that this item involving global reorganization and reinterpretation demands a higher cognitive skill than literal comprehension items or local reinterpretation items.

### **Inference**

(1) From the first passage in the CERS:

42. Regarding the first example, which of the following is **FALSE**?

- (A) Nelson was not a responsible person.
- \***(B) Adam and Nelson are military officers.**
- (C) Nelson left his empty boxes in Adam's office.
- (D) Adam played a practical joke on Nelson.

The correct answer (B), being false, cannot be found anywhere in the original text. Therefore, a candidate has to make inference about it from the global context. Fortunately the context is clearly not military, and that is why the overall passing rate is not so bad, namely .44, just slightly lower than 50%, and the discrimination index is .43, higher than the minimum of .30.

(2) From the passage in the CEEE:

17. What was the husband's first reaction to the unicorn in his garden?

- (1) He was displeased to see the roses and tulips devoured by the unicorn.
- \***(2) He wanted to share with his wife this marvelous experience.**
- (3) He wanted to play tricks on his wife with such a fantastic story he invented.
- (4) He hated to be called a booby once again because of his wild imagination.

The correct answer (2) cannot be found in any explicit statement in the text. Instead, a candidate has to infer the husband's reaction from such details as "The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. 'There is a unicorn in the garden,' he said. 'Eating roses.' She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast,' she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly away downstairs and out into the garden." (the first paragraph)

As there are no statistics of passing rates and discrimination indices for the CEEE English reading comprehension test, there is no way to know the candidates' responses. Nevertheless, this is a good example for the inference question.

**Judgment**

From the first passage of the JCEE:

41. The overall tone of this passage is one of

- (A) sadness.      \*(B) hope.      (C) forgiveness.      (D) irony.

The correct answer (B) cannot be found anywhere in the text. A candidate has to read through the whole passage to feel its tone and make a judgment. This type of questions demands a higher cognitive skill, but the candidates generally did pretty well on it: the overall passing rate is .51, and the discrimination index is .49, much higher than the minimum of .30. This item of judgment shows that for the total population of about 120,000 candidates, about half of them could get it right by making the right judgment. Therefore this type of questions is worth trying.

2.3 The difficulty levels of Mainland China's English tests

Mainland China has three kinds of matriculation English tests: (1) the Shanghai Matriculation English Test; (2) the Matriculation English Test for Overseas Chinese Students; (3) the National Matriculation English Test. The difficulty levels of their English reading comprehension passages and items of the three 1999 English tests are shown in the following tables.

**Table 16.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 Shanghai Matriculation English Test**

Passage No.	Level	Average
A	4	3-4
B	4-5	
C	3-4	
D	3-4	
Items for A	2	3-4
Items for B	4	
Items for C	4	
Items for D	3	

**Table 17.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 Matriculation English Test for Overseas Chinese Students**

Passage No.	Level	Average
A	3-4	3-4
B	4	
C	2	
D	4-5	
E	3-4	
Items for A	3	3
Items for B	3	
Items for C	2	
Items for D	3	
Items for E	4	

**Table 18.**  
**The difficulty levels of reading comprehension passages and items in the 1999 National Matriculation English Test**

Passage No.	Level	Average
A	7-8	5
B	5-6	
C	3	
D	4-5	
E	4-5	
Items for A	1	2-3
Items for B	3	
Items for C	1	
Items for D	3	
Items for E	4	

The above tables show that among the three English tests, the reading comprehension passages of the National English Test are of the highest difficulty level (5), and the reading comprehension passages of the Shanghai English Test and the Overseas English Test are about the same level (3-4) and slightly lower than that of the National English Test.

To supplement the above tables, the cognitive structures of the passages should also

be studied and the following tables describing the contents of these passages may suggest something about their background knowledge in relation to their difficulty levels.

**Table 19.**  
**The contents of the reading passages in China's three English Tests**

Shanghai Test	Passage No.	A	B	C	D	
	Content	a dog's railway journey	Disneyland management	history of diners	glaciers in North America	
Overseas Test	Passage No.	A	B	C	D	E
	Content	life in Syria	capital of Brazil	Hemingway's kindness	problems of pets	a factory job
National Test	Passage No.	A	B	C	D	E
	Content	a lost diary	computer literacy	British train fares	safety belt	stage schools

The above table shows that in the Shanghai English Test, the reading passages are about general knowledge, which does not require special background knowledge to understand them. The D passage about glaciers may be less familiar to the Chinese candidates, but there is a Chinese gloss “冰川” for it, which makes it easier to understand. And the organizations of these passages are quite straightforward. Therefore the cognitive structures of these passages do not raise their difficulty levels and the statistics given in Table 16 do not need modifications. The same with the passages in the Overseas English Test. As for the National English Test, the passages about computer literacy and British train fares seem to require more than general knowledge. For a candidate not familiar with computers and the complicated British system of train fares, the ideas in these two passages may pose difficulty and hamper his comprehension. So the difficulty level of passage B (level 5-6)<sup>19</sup> perhaps should be upgraded by one level to level 6-7, and the difficulty level of passage C (level 3) should also be upgraded by one level to level 4. As for the other three passages, they

<sup>19</sup> Please see the appendix for the difficulty level of the passage about computer literacy in the National English Test.

pose no particular cognitive difficulty. As a result of the modifications on the basis of cognitive structures, the respective average difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages in the three English tests are adjusted in the following table.

**Table 20.**  
**The adjusted average difficulty levels of the reading passages  
in China's three English Tests**

Type of English Tests	Average Difficulty Level
Shanghai English Test	3-4
Overseas English Test	3-4
National English Test	5-6

The above table shows that the average difficulty level of the reading passages of the National English Test has been adjusted as 5-6, slightly higher than the original level of 5, and the average difficulty levels of the other two tests remain the same.

As for the difficulty levels of the reading comprehension items in terms of the number of unfamiliar words and sentence length, that of the Shanghai English Test is of the highest level (3-4), that of the Overseas English Test is slightly lower (level 3), and that of the National English Test is the lowest (level 2-3). But these difficulty levels should be supplemented by the cognitive structures of the reading passages and the different types of questions found in these items. The tables below show the different types of questions found in the three tests together with their numbers and percentages.

**Table 21.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the Shanghai Matriculation English Test**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference
No. of Items	9	8	3
Percentage	45%	40%	15%
Total No.	20		

**Table 22.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the Matriculation English Test  
for Overseas Students**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference
No. of Items	3	13	4
Percentage	15%	65%	20%

Total No.	20
-----------	----

**Table 23.**  
**Types of questions about the passages in the National Matriculation English Test**

Types of Questions	Literal Comprehension	Reinterpretation	Inference
No. of Items	2	14	4
Percentage	10%	70%	20%
Total No.	20		

If we accept the principle mentioned in the section about Hong Kong English tests that the difficulty level of the English reading comprehension items in a test is in reverse proportion to the number of literal comprehension questions and in proportion to the total number of other types of questions, then the items of the Shanghai Matriculation English Test are supposed to be the easiest (45% of literal comprehension items), those of the National Matriculation English Test are the most difficult (10% of literal comprehension items), and those of the Overseas Matriculation English Test stand in between (15% of literal comprehension items). The implication of the statistics of Table 23 about the National English Test question types is not compatible with that of Table 15 about the difficulty level of the reading comprehension items in the National Matriculation English Test: these items are the easiest in terms of the number of unfamiliar words and sentence length, and paradoxically are the most difficult in terms of question types. How could the estimations based on two sets of criteria be so contradictory? It is likely that the reason lies in the difference between language difficulty and cognitive difficulty. The English used in wording these items may be rather simple (level 2-3), but the cognitive content is rather difficult. Similarly, the items in the Shanghai test have the most difficult language (level 3-4), but the easiest cognitive content. As for the items in the Overseas test, their difficulty level is quite constant: they stand between those items of the National test and those of the Shanghai test no matter which set of criteria is used to estimate their difficulty level.

In the following, we shall discuss some typical items of the three types of questions, namely literal comprehension, reinterpretation and inference, in these three English tests. For each of the three types of questions in the three English tests, two examples

will be given for discussion.

### **Literal Comprehension**

(1) From the Shanghai Test (passage A):

68. The stationmaster threatened that if Elvio didn't get rid of the dog, \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. Elvio would be fired
- B. Lampo would be put on the train tracks.
- C. the stationmaster would send him away.
- \*D. a dogcatcher would be called.

The question and the correct answer D is worded in a way very much similar to the original wording in the text (paragraph 3): "Finally, the stationmaster threatened to call the dogcatcher if Elvio didn't get rid of the dog." Such a literal comprehension question is not difficult at all for a candidate who can understand the surface meaning of the original sentence.

(2) From the National Test (passage E):

68. In the writer's opinion, a good stage school should \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. produce star performers
- B. help pupils improve their study skills
- C. train pupils in language and performing arts
- \*D. provide a general education and stage training

In this item, the correct answer is D, which has almost the same wording as "a training for the theatre and a general education" in the original text (paragraph 1).

### **Reinterpretation**

(1) From the Overseas Test (passage B):

51. In planning the city of Brasilia, special attention has been given to \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. architecture
- B. government offices
- C. traffic
- \*D. daily life

In this item, the correct answer is D, which is a reinterpretation or paraphrase of the topic sentence of the second paragraph of passage B: “Brasilia has been carefully planned for modern living.”

(2) From the National Test (passage D):

65. Some people prefer to drive without wearing a safety belt because they believe \_\_\_\_\_.

- \*A. the belt prevents them from escaping in an accident
- B. they will be unable to think clearly in an accident
- C. they will be caught when help comes
- D. cars catch fire easily

The correct answer is A, which is a reinterpretation or paraphrase of the sentence “Safety belt ‘trap’ people in cars that are burning or sinking in water.” (paragraph 6)

**Inference**

(1) From the Overseas Test (passage D)

67. The writer mentions the fact that dogs are given chocolates to eat in order to show that \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. pet owners like dogs
- B. dogs are like children
- C. pet owners do not give dogs a choice
- \*D. dogs as pets do not live a natural life

The correct answer D is not explicitly stated in the text. It can only be inferred from the sentence “Dogs especially have the hardest time, having to eat plastic bones, strange-tasting biscuits or even chocolates, which can’t do their teeth any good.” (paragraph 2)

(2) From the National Test (passage C):

61. A man bought himself a ticket of £15 and three tickets for his family with a family railcard. How much did he pay?

- A. £44
- B. £29
- \*C. £24
- D. £15

To get the correct answer C to this question, a candidate has to infer and calculate the total amount of train fares on the basis of the instruction for “Family Railcard” given in the text (paragraph 5): “For £20 this railcard allows you to take a second adult and up to 4 children for only £3 each when you buy single or return tickets. You can travel as often as you like until the card becomes out of date.” Because a candidate is not likely to have the background knowledge of the British train fare system, it is quite confusing why the instruction mentions £20 as a precondition for buying extra tickets, but the question says that a man bought a ticket of £15 and three other tickets. Does a man have to buy a family railcard of £20 before he can buy a ticket of £15? Since the background knowledge is not familiar to the candidate and the question is not clear enough, it is really hard to get the correct answer C, which is the result of adding £9 ( $£3 \times 3 = £9$ ) to the train fare of £15. Even if a candidate is smart enough to get the correct answer C, he will spend too much time in calculating it. So I guess that most candidates would rather give up this item instead of wasting their precious time on it.

The above discussion of the examples of three types of questions shows that these three types of items are generally well designed. But an unclear inference question like item 61 of the National Test had better be avoided.

Since the item analysis statistics of China’s three English tests are not available to me, it is hard to determine whether their difficulty levels are appropriate for the candidates or not.

### **3. Comparison of the English reading tests of HK, Taiwan and Mainland China**

The difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages of the various English tests for high school graduates in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China are overlapping to a certain extent. According to the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula, the Hong Kong Syllabuses A and B English tests, the Taiwan JCEE and CERS English tests, and Mainland China’s Shanghai, Overseas and National English tests are of more or less similar levels, ranging from level 3 to level 8. As for the Hong Kong AS-Level English Test, it is by far the most difficult. Taiwan’s CEEE English test is next in difficulty. A table ranking the difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages of these English tests is given below for discussion:

**Table 24.**  
**The average difficulty levels of the reading comprehension passages**  
**in the nine English tests of Hong Kong, Taiwan and China**

Type of English Tests	Average Difficulty Level
1. China's Shanghai English Test	3-4
2. China's Overseas English Test	3-4
3. Taiwan's JCEE English Test	4-5
4. HK's Syllabus A English Test	5
5. China's National English Test	5-6
6. Taiwan's CERS English Test	5-6
7. HK's Syllabus B English Test	8
8. Taiwan's CEEE English Test	9
9. HK's AS-Level English Test	12

The difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages should be geared to the reading abilities of the high school graduates in the different areas. To find out whether the difficulty levels are appropriate or not, item analysis statistics are necessary. Each year, the College Entrance Examination Center in Taiwan provides statistics about the candidates' responses to each item in terms of its passing rate, discrimination index, etc. The statistics about the 1999 JCEE and CERS English tests show that 87% of the JCEE reading comprehension items and 67% of the CERS reading comprehension items are above the minimum desirable discrimination index of .30.<sup>20</sup> This is clear evidence that the majority of these items are appropriate for Taiwan high school graduates' English reading abilities. But since the CERS reading comprehension items do not have as many desirable items as those of the JCEE do, the CERS English Test is still in need of improvement.<sup>21</sup> Hong Kong Examinations Authority also has its *Annual Subject Report* evaluating the English test administered every year. For example, in discussing the 1999 Syllabus A English reading comprehension items, it points out that for the 14 items for passage A, the mean passing rate is .44, and for the 14 items for passage B, the mean passing rate is .46. (Hong Kong

---

<sup>20</sup> The CEEE English Test is not administered by the College Entrance Examination Center in Taiwan, and it does not have detailed item analysis. But the nearly normal distribution of the candidates' scores of the 25 English reading comprehension items of this test shows that it is quite appropriate for the advanced level students taking this test.

<sup>21</sup> The main reason is that some of its reading comprehension passages and items are too difficult.

Examinations Authority *Annual Subject Report*) The near 50% mean passing rate shows that this test is rather appropriate for the candidates taking it. In Syllabus B, for the 14 items of passage A, the mean passing rate is .55, and for the 13 items of passage B, the mean passing rate is .52. This shows that the items about passage B are slightly more difficult than those of passage A. But these 27 items are still appropriate for the candidates taking this test, because at least 50% of them got the correct answers. As for the 16 items about the AS-Level English reading comprehension passage, the mean passing rate is .55, which shows that these items are also appropriate for the candidates taking this test. As for Mainland China's English tests, because the item analysis statistics of these tests are not available to me, there is no way to tell whether the reading comprehension items are appropriate for the candidates or not.

But the overall difficulty levels of English reading comprehension tests should have the difficulty levels of the reading passages coupled with those of the items. As pointed out in previous sections, the difficulty levels of reading comprehension items have to do with their question types: the difficulty level of an English reading comprehension test seems to be in reverse proportion to the number of literal comprehension questions and in proportion to the total number of other types of questions. In the following table, the difficulty levels of the items of the nine English reading comprehension tests under study are ranked according to the percentages of literal comprehension questions and other types of questions:

**Table 25.**  
**The difficulty levels of the nine English reading comprehension tests**  
**in terms of question types**

Type of English Tests	Literal Comprehension	Non-literal Comprehension
1. HK's Syllabus A English Test	46.5%	53.5%
2. China's Shanghai English Test	45%	55%
3. China's Overseas English Test	15%	85%
4. HK's Syllabus B English Test	15%	85%
5. China's National English Test	10%	90%
6. Taiwan's JCEE English Test	7%	93%
7. Taiwan's CERS English Test	7%	93%
8. HK's AS-Level English Test	6%	94%
9. Taiwan's CEEE English Test	4%	96%

Tables 24 and 25 are not completely compatible, but the English comprehension tests of the highest and lowest difficulty levels are quite stable: HK's AS-Level English Test and Taiwan's CEEE English Test are close together in the top difficulty category, Hong Kong's Syllabus A English Test and China's Shanghai English Test belong to the lowest difficulty category, and the rest are in between. As for the English tests in the middle, China's National English Test ranks fifth in both tables, and Taiwan's CERS English Test ranks sixth in Table 24 and seventh in Table 25, but always higher in difficulty than China's National English Test. Such close correlations between these two independent tables may be quite useful in revealing their general difficulty levels.<sup>22</sup> But HK's Syllabus A English Test is quite an anomaly: it is of the lowest difficulty level according to Table 25, but in the middle according to Table 24. This may be due to the gap between the difficulty levels of the passages and those of the questions. Sometimes the questions may be far easier than the reading comprehension passages, which results in such an anomaly in the evaluation of difficulty levels.

#### **4. Conclusions and suggestions**

This paper has evaluated the difficulty levels of the English reading comprehension passages in terms of the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula modified by me<sup>23</sup> and English reading comprehension items in terms of Nuttall's four types of questions. It has been found that these two independent approaches to the evaluation of difficulty levels of English reading comprehension tests in the nine 1999 English tests for high school graduates in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China generally converge to yield quite close correlations between reading passages and items. Whether these two approaches<sup>24</sup> will be useful for evaluating other similar English tests in other

---

<sup>22</sup> But further classification of the non-literal comprehension questions into local and global ones may produce even more valid evaluation of difficulty levels of reading comprehension items. HKEA 1999 *Annual Subject Report* also notes that some items involve several lines or paragraphs are more difficult than those items involve only one or two lines.

<sup>23</sup> Please see section 2 of this paper for the three modifications.

<sup>24</sup> Chall et al. (1996) put forward a holistic qualitative approach based upon the scales of samples of different levels instead of objective measurements for those who do not feel comfortable with the quantitative approach. However, the results of the qualitative and quantitative approaches are

countries/areas in Asia is yet to be explored.

Except HK's Syllabus B, HK's AS-Level and Taiwan's CEEE English tests, other six English tests have rather close difficulty levels in their reading passages and items. This may be due to the similar background of Chinese language and culture. High school students sharing similar Chinese language and culture may encounter similar problems in learning English. It is worthwhile for us to do more research in this area in order to have a better understanding of the problems Chinese students face in learning English. On the other hand, it is equally important for us to compare the English tests designed in different countries/areas for candidates who do not share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A more profound understanding of the similarities and differences in designing English tests for the candidates in different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in Asia will certainly lead us toward a closer cooperation between different countries/areas.

It has also been found that the difficulty level of an English reading comprehension test seems to be in reverse proportion to the number of literal comprehension questions and in proportion to the total number of other types of questions. This principle has worked pretty well for the reading comprehension items of the nine English tests studied in this paper. Whether it will be applicable to other English reading comprehension tests awaits further research in the future.

Finally, after evaluating the reading comprehension passages and items in the nine English tests of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, I have some suggestions for improving the techniques of designing English reading comprehension tests.

#### Suggestion 1:

The difficulty levels of English reading passages should be better controlled, preferably by an English readability formula like that of the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula or Chall et al.'s (1996) qualitative approach. Subjective evaluation of the difficulty levels of reading passages without reliable readability principles is not always dependable.

---

supposed to be rather close.

Suggestion 2:

Item difficulty could be better controlled by question types. It is suggested that the four types of questions, namely literal comprehension, reinterpretation (paraphrase), inference, and judgment be arranged in proportion to the candidates' reading abilities: elementary candidates may have more literal comprehension items, and more proficient students should have more advanced questions. And these four types can be further broken down into two subtypes: local and global ones. Global ones tend to be more difficult than local ones.

Suggestion 3:

It is hoped that for each English test administered in Asia, there will be a detailed item analysis, so that we can find out whether the reading comprehension items in the test are appropriate or not for the population of candidates taking the test. This item analysis can even serve as the basis for comparing the English reading comprehension tests in different countries/areas in Asia. If a uniform system of item analysis could be established for English testing in Asia, it would be even more useful for comparison.

Suggestion 4:

The questions should be made as clear as possible. Some of the items in the nine English tests studied in this paper do not have clear and precise wording, which makes the candidates rather puzzled and confused.

Suggestion 5.

Some of the reading comprehension items examined in this paper have possible answers of rather unequal lengths. It is advisable to make these possible answers in more or less the same length so as to have similar distracting power.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Huizhong Yang of National College English Testing Committee and Ms Christina Lee of Hong Kong Examinations Authority for providing me with valuable 1999 English test papers from Mainland China and Hong Kong respectively.

### References

- Center for Special Education, National Taiwan Normal University (1999) *English Reading Comprehension Test for High School Students Excelling in English*. Taipei: Center for Special Education, National Taiwan Normal University
- Chall, Jeanne S. and Edgar Dale (1995a) *Readability Revisited: The New Dale-Chall Readability Formula*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.
- (1995b) *Manual for The New Dale-Chall Readability Formula*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.
- Chall, Jeanne S. et al. (1996) *Qualitative Assessment of Text Difficulty: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Writers*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.
- Chen, Kun-tien (2000) *Item Analysis of the English Test for the 1999 College Entrance Examination for Recommended High School Students*. Taipei: CEEC.
- Chen, Chao-fen (2000) *Item Analysis of the English Test for the 1999 Joint College Entrance Examination*. Taipei: CEEC.
- Hong Kong Examinations Authority (1999) *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination* (CD-Rom). Hong Kong: HKEA.
- (1999) *Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination* (CD-Rom). Hong Kong: HKEA.
- (1999) *Annual Subject Report*. Hong Kong: HKEA.
- Jeng, Hengsyung (1999) "An Experiment on Designing English Proficiency Tests of Two Difficulty Levels for the College Entrance Examination in Taiwan," paper presented at the Second International Conference on English Testing in Asia held at Seoul National University, Korea, included in the *Proceedings*, 12-38.
- et al. (2000) *A Research Report on a Project on English Test-Making*. Taipei: CEEC.
- Nuttall, Christine (1996) *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Heinemann English Language Teaching.
- PRC (1999) *National Matriculation English Test*. PRC.
- (1999) *National Matriculation English Test for the Shanghai Area*. PRC.

----- (1999) *National Matriculation English Test for Overseas Chinese Students*. PRC.

Rodrigues, Mariano and Ezra L. Stieglitz (1997) *Readability Master 2000* (Version 1.1 computer program for *Windows*) Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

**About the Author:** Hengsyung Jeng is Professor of English and Linguistics in Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University. He received his MA from Department of TESOL, University of Hawaii, USA, and Ph.D. from Linguistics Department, University of Hawaii. He has taught English, English Linguistics, Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and English, Linguistic Approach to Literature, and other courses in Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University, for over 30 years. His recent works include "Linguistic Analysis and Literary Criticism" (1997), a keynote speech presented at Symposium on Textual Analysis and published in *WenShan Review* (vol. 1, no.2, 1-34), "Bunun Tense and Aspect," published in the *Proceedings* (1999: 455-87) of the Eighth International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics, "An Experiment on Designing English Tests of Two Difficulty Levels for the College Entrance Examination in Taiwan," published in the *Proceedings* (1999:12-38) of the Second International Conference on English Language Testing in Asia. He is currently also an advisor on English to the College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC) in Taiwan. [E-mail: [hengsyung@yahoo.com](mailto:hengsyung@yahoo.com)]

[Received 20 February 2001;  
revision received 9 May 2001;  
accepted 19 April 2001]

## Appendix:

### The Readability Data of Hong Kong's 1999 ASL English Test, Taiwan's 1999 JCEE English Test and Mainland China's 1999 National Matriculation English Test

#### 1. Hong Kong's 1999 ASL English Test<sup>25</sup>:

His McDonald's study may appear to be an unusual topic for Professor Watson, but he describes it as a 'logical progression' arising out of his earlier more academic research. \ 'I have been following the same group of people in the New Territories for the past 30 years,' Professor Watson says. \ Some think the study is an unacceptable departure for anthropology: its validity is questioned by these 'politically-correct types' who ask: 'Aren't you just defending large corporations?' \ In response, Professor Watson argues that anthropology is the study of everyday life, and that is what McDonald's is for billions of people around....

#### DALE-CHALL SUPPORT DATA SHEET

Title of Source: HK-ad-1c

Number of Words: 100

Number of Unfamiliar Words: 15

Number of Sentences: 3

Reading Level: 11-12

The unfamiliar words in this passage, based on the Dale-Chall List are:

unusual	topic	Professor	logical
progression	academic	research	Territories
unacceptable	departure	anthropology	validity
politically-correct	corporations	response	

<sup>25</sup> The English reading comprehension sample passages in this appendix each containing 100 words selected from the original passages in the respective English tests for evaluating their difficulty levels.

## **2. Taiwan's 1999 JCEE English Test:**

The second element of his past life that mysteriously remains is music. \ When his wife first takes him into a room where there is a piano and a small group of singers, he doesn't know what to do. \ But as soon as the singers start to sing, his face immediately brightens and he begins to sing and conduct a song by Mozart. \ Somehow love and music have remained whole in his weakened brain. \ No one can explain why this can be, when the rest of his memory seems to have been destroyed. \ But somehow in his mind and his heart....

### DALE-CHALL SUPPORT DATA SHEET

Title of Source: Taiwan-1b

Number of Words: 100

Number of Unfamiliar Words: 3

Number of Sentences: 5

Reading Level: 4

The unfamiliar words in this passage, based on the Dale-Chall List are:

element                      mysteriously                      immediately

## **3. Mainland China's 1999 NM English Test:**

One pioneer, in particular, who disagrees is David Tebbutt, the founder of Computertown UK. \ Although many people see this as a successful attempt to bring people closer to the computer, David does not see it that way. \ He says that Computertown UK was formed for just the opposite reason, to bring computers to people and make them people-literate. \ David Tebbutt thinks Computertowns are most successful when tied to a computer club but he insists there is an important difference between the two. \ The clubs are for people who have some computer knowledge already. \ This frightens away non-experts, who are happier....

DALE-CHALL SUPPORT DATA SHEET

Title of Source: China-B-1

Number of Words: 100

Number of Unfamiliar Words: 9

Number of Sentences: 5

Reading Level: 5-6

The unfamiliar words in this passage, based on the Dale-Chall List are:

particular

although

successful

attempt

opposite

people-literate

insists

knowledge

non-experts