

# Discourse Management and Communicative Competence in Preparing English Language Examination

Chon Io Wong<sup>1</sup>, Yini Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Language Centre, School of General Education, Beijing Normal University & Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai, China

<sup>2</sup>University International College, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, China  
Email: choniowong@uic.edu.cn, Liyini18769692909@163.com

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## Abstract

This study, conducted from the perspective of teachers, aims to explore the challenges faced by Chinese students in English exams, particularly in the areas of discourse management and communicative competence. It further investigates the factors that facilitate or hinder students' preparation for these exams. Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven English teachers, followed by focus group discussion with four teachers. The findings revealed that Chinese students are particularly weak in speaking and writing in English exams. Improvements can be made in phonological ability, logical thinking, comprehensive and positive learning approaches. However, current curriculum development, lack of intercultural communication in English, and insufficient accuracy in discourse expression hinder students' exam preparation. Based on these findings, this study provides recommendations to address the aforementioned issues.

## Keywords

Discourse Management, Communicative Competence, English Language Examination, Chinese Students

## 1. Introduction

“A good IELTS (The International English Language Testing System) result is evidence of non-native speakers' language proficiency for entering foreign universities, so attaining the required score in each band of the IELTS is extremely important for Chinese test takers” (Zhang & Hope, 2021: p. 955). However, the English language public exam results are currently experiencing a performance issue

among Chinese students. For example, a student may pass all the other standards for applying to a master's programme in a UK (United Kingdom) university but not the IELTS examinations, more specifically, pass the other two sections, reading and listening but not writing and speaking. The data released by IELTS shows that the Chinese test-takers' speaking score is the lowest compared to their performance in the writing, listening and reading sections of the IELTS exam. It is possible that many other Chinese students are also facing these difficulties, despite having undergone extensive training before the exam (Zhai & Razali, 2020). Hu and Trenkic (2019) conducted a study in which 153 Chinese students in the UK was assessed using the Duolingo English Test and a C-test. The findings showed that students who had attended IELTS preparation programs scored lower on both of these alternative proficiency measures compared to students who had met the English entry requirements without such coaching assistance. Furthermore, the number of attempts students made to achieve a target IELTS score was negatively correlated with their other English proficiency scores. The results confirm that preparation programs and to some degree repeated IELTS testing, have the effect of inflating IELTS scores without corresponding improvements in broader English language abilities. To discuss more of the historical claims about the complexity of writing proficiency, Cho (2003) studied candidates' performance under the exam condition and the research found that text organization and paragraph structure are the most difficult to improve. Archibald (2001) also justified similar outcomes in ESL (English as Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) practice. Until recent ages, according to Jiang (2018), there is still a need to examine how professionalism affects writing performance in language tests. It is stressed that the performance of speaking and writing is strongly connected with Chinese ELT (English Language Teaching) frameworks and curricula, and there is a need to explore the professionalism of English teachers, especially for those who are teaching ESP (English for Special Purpose) regarding exam-oriented education (Liu, 2017; Jiang, 2018).

How students can be equipped with intensive training courses and what materials are suitable for them to achieve better performance in examinations are challenges. The research aims to help with the problems of Chinese students' preparation for international English public examinations, such as IELTS, FCE Cambridge, PET Cambridge and KET Cambridge, especially focusing on writing and speaking, as these two sections shown are the most desperate parts for the test-takers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework Guiding Communicative Competence with Discourse Management

The fundamental tenet of "Communicative Competence" in language evaluation refers to the target language's proper context, which includes sociocultural and grammatical knowledge in an interactive environment. The later components of practicing "Communicative Competence", such as Canale and Swain (1980) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), offer a broader focus on language education along with

detailed explanations of “Communicative” itself as a concept. This brings us to the discussion of the communicative approach, which displays the earliest conceptualization by Hymes (1972). Additionally, new findings like those of Byram et al. (2013) and Baker (2015), which examine and extend the cultural sense into more thorough explanations, have called into question the cultural and interactional parts of “Communicative Competence”. Furthermore, these recent examples of interaction in cultural competency within communicative language may present chances for critical analysis of the surrounding context. The intercultural components of communication may enhance students’ comprehension of many cultures and their capacity to interact with peers and others.

The most important researcher in the early years of educational research was Dell Hymes. Hymes was inspired in 1967 by Cazden’s (1967) exposition of the principle of “Competence”, which describes what individuals can accomplish when they integrate practical knowledge with cognitive capacity. For instance, an action may result in another behavior. Therefore, to put it more practically, “competence” in these contexts refers to the capacity to utilize something. This type of skill was investigated by Goffman (1967) in the context of language instruction, and he recognized it as the interaction pertaining to “How to Use Knowledge”. Consequently, Hymes (1972) synthesized terminology from Cazden and Goffman, redefining “competence” to encompass skills like gameplay, concept presentation, and confidence expression. Hymes showed that, above all, “Communicative Competence” emerged as the primary area of concentration for “language use” within “the ability to function language”. According to this definition, one of the primary subjects of “Communicative Competence” is “performance”. There have been many discussions between Dell Hymes and Noam Chomsky. Hymes’ concept ran against Chomsky’s earlier published linguistic study, which defined “performance” in language in terms of syntactic studies and the relationship in biological endowment, hence restricting “Communicative Competence” (Chomsky, 1965). Hymes challenges this progress strongly, contending that there is insufficient diversity in the range of communicative language use (Hymes, 1972). For instance, “performance” refers to both the capacity to differentiate between grammatical and non-grammatical language settings as well as the everyday language use—that is, the proper functioning and use of language within the pertinent social and communication contexts.

The idea of “language as a set of forms” and the pursuit of the ability to “accomplish the communicative context” represents a substantial shift from the previous emphasis on linguistic competence alone (Tarone & Yule, 1989: p. 17)—for example, language in terms of acceptable syntax, registers, and social codes. The concept of “Communicative Competence” has suggested a thorough understanding of language, occasion, situation, and cultural context. Language in practical contexts is sociocultural knowledge. For instance, decisions about “what to talk about with whom” and “when to speak” are made based on one’s “communicative competence” (Saud, 2018; Berns, 2020). Moreover, discussing the development of “Communicative Competence” in a real-world contextual background also refers

to the “openness” in “linguistic competence”. Therefore, the performance of candidates in how they use and function the language in the testing systems may be a critical aspect to explore in this study.

Critical evaluation is required when English language learners connect the “use” of language with the appropriate discourse. One of the challenges in using language is ensuring the cohesion of discourse. Cohesion leads speaking and writing to be more effective for listeners and readers to understand the “real-world” meaning. Creating a coherent discourse is essential to guaranteeing cohesion in producing language. Researchers such as Halliday and Hasan (2014), Nugraheni (2016) and Saud (2018) have been highlighting that discourse management has a significant impact on English speaking and writing output that can be used to provide cohesive settings. Almutairi (2017) conducted a discourse analysis of cohesive devices in the essay writing of Saudi students. Almutairi found that when students did not activate cohesive texts properly, it would negatively impact the quality of their essays to a great extent. Parazaran and Motahari (2015) conducted a study on grammatical cohesive devices in translating narrative text. The study used a mixed method to analyze 39 different stories by comparing the translated texts and original texts. It found that there were huge differences in terms of the styles of expression. The quality of writing and speaking depends on cohesion, which involves using proper grammar and vocabulary.

Previous studies suggest that foreign language learners face difficulties in managing their discourse ability. However, studying and investigating relevant practice can help determine the students’ capacity to present cohesive devices, enabling them to write properly and achieve their discourse management (Saud, 2018). Cohesion is a vital aspect in determining writing quality since it carries both grammatical and lexical devices, strengthening the writing to be more precise and contextually meaningful. Therefore, it is worth to explore how do test-takers in English language testing systems ensure the effectiveness of their cohesive devices in their argumentative writing along with their speaking competence.

## **2.2. Communicative and Discourse Proficiency in Preparing Language Examination**

### **2.2.1. Refer to Speaking Ability**

Discussing the impact of international English language examinations on test-takers and their speaking performance is a broad and extensive topic. “Pre-justice” of speaking training courses is likely to be a problem statement. Test-takers’ opinions on teaching and learning have a critical connection with relevant Language Testing preparation. Some factors may cause them to have a negative attitude towards communicative language learning and relevant speaking activities that are not directly referred to the examinations. In these cases, the test-takers may perceive that those activities do not align with the examination requirements. In Zhan and Andrews’s (2014) interview, Chinese university students expressed a significant need for predictability from their instructors within their university’s internal IELTS speaking course and more than 80% of them argued that repetitive

interviewing exercises with conductive “skills” are the settings they prefer. Those participants would be worried if their teachers were unable to predict the examination questions in a specific sense. Studies show that students are more likely to focus on speaking skills which are just for the test rather than enhance their learning approaches in real-world English speaking competence (Chen & Hu, 2020; Read & Hayes, 2003; Park, 2018; Zhan & Andrew, 2014). Many test-takers need help with speaking effectively during exams. Since there are limited opportunities to practice speaking English in daily life, it may be recommended to explore speaking training courses that are relevant to the local context.

Communicative speaking proficiency in real-world discourse and relevant performance in Language Testing Systems might be related to the quality of preparation. For example, private institutions such as language centers, supplementary schools, or even personal language tutoring are likely to be a common platform to aim for getting improvement within the speaking section of language tests. Since 2020, IELTS Handbook stated that “up to 200 hours of language tutoring to improve one IELTS level” (p. 17). To explore the vast amount of time within intensive speaking training, it is observed that students with relatively ineffective speaking ability, such as band 5 (within B1), tend to make faster progress in order to improve their scores on the IELTS examinations. However, those students who have already gotten a decent result, such as band 6.5 (B2 - B2+), tend to make slower progress in improving their scores (Zhan & Andrews, 2014; Park, 2018). All of them are likely to be expected to have repetitive speaking training.

### 2.2.2. Refer to Writing Ability

The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS was published by IELTS officials in 2014. The Guide, edited by Cullen, French and Jakeman, includes relevant research findings. For instance, when it comes to writing, ESL/EFL students often struggle with the length of their sentences. According to Weir et al. (2009), it is essential for test-takers to understand the meaning of individual sentences or groups of sentences they are working with, regardless of the task at hand. In previous research, it was discovered that using long, improper sentences can make it harder for readers and examiners to comprehend and evaluate a writing task (Graves, 1986). For test-takers, Hamby and Ickes (2015) suggest that longer sentences can be particularly challenging for ESL learners, as they may take longer time to read and comprehend, especially if the sentence structure is not in proper discourse. As such, Chinese students taking English language public examinations struggle with multiple aspects of writing, including text organization, paragraph structure and sentence length. It is crucial to explore how to enhance students’ abilities in “Discourse Management” and “Communicative Competence” in a testing environment to address these proficiency issues.

In the line of enhancing writing proficiency, Chinese students are experiencing a certain amount of stress within the “time”. In China, students often worry about their English writing skills, especially how to write formally, academically and relevant performance in international language examinations. For some test-takers,

taking an intensive writing course and/or hiring tutors to offer feedback on their writing work, is likely the most popular approach to measuring their standards and progressions towards meeting the score requirements for university enrollment (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Zhang & Hope, 2021). While many have taken preparatory courses, they may be getting confused about how to improve their written language abilities further. For example, most of them expect in-depth advice, direct correction and long pieces of feedback that can give them the predicted scores (Cheng & Cutis, 2010). High-stakes exams like the IELTS can cause stress for students who want to perform well in a short period of time. Most participants in China highlight that taking a “reputable course that reduces academic pressure can greatly benefit them (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Council of Europe, 2001; Zhang & Hope, 2021). With those feedback on their performance and relevant guidance on improving their English writing performance, they think that they could meet academic requirements more effectively in terms of time management; it is also motivated to build critical connections by developing effective improvement in speaking and writing at the same time.

This study aims to understand the challenges faced by Chinese students when preparing for international English exams and to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Chinese students improve their communicative competence and discourse management in these exams. Therefore, the study will answer specific research questions upon completion:

- What factors and conditions do Chinese English teachers identify as ideal, conducive and beneficial for developing students’ performance in Discourse Management and Communicative Competence during English language tests?
- How do these teachers conceptualize the role of Discourse Management and Communicative Competence to develop students’ writing and speaking proficiency? What do they consider to be “successful” or “problematic” language exam preparations?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 11 English teachers from middle schools and universities in Guangdong Province, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 10 years. Semi-structured interviews were carried with 7 teachers one by one and then followed by focus group discussion among 4 teachers.

#### *Participants’ Demographics*

Participant Number	The Highest Educational Level	Teaching Experience	Level of Teaching
P1	Master; major in English	10 years	Students of 17 - 18 years old
P2	Master; major in English	8 years	Students of 17 - 18 years old
P3	Master; major in Communication	7 years	Students of 12 - 13 years old

**Continued**

P4	Bachelor; major in English	4 years	Students of 17 - 18 years old
P5	Postgraduate Diploma in Education—English	4 years	Students of 10 - 12 years old
P6	Master; major in Communication	4 years	Students of 12 - 14 years old
P7	Postgraduate Diploma in Education—English	7 years	Students of 8 - 11 years old
P8	Master; major in Communication	7 years	Students of 12 - 13 years old
P9	Master; major in Communication	4 years	Students of 12 - 14 years old
P10	Master; major in English	6 years	Students of 17 - 18 years old
P11	Master; major in English	10 years	Students of 17 - 18 years old

### 3.2. Data Collection

To collect data from interviews, participants were invited to sign a consent form, gave their permission and allowed access to the research. All these participants were promised that their participation in the interviews would be entirely volunteering-based, and they could withdraw at any time. Additionally, they received emails to schedule the interviews at a time that was convenient for them without interfering with their regular teaching and working schedules. Upon receiving the email and consent form, the researchers explained the purpose and procedures of the interviews; participants were informed about the issue of confidentiality and asked to sign a consent form; they were also provided with an information sheet in which study purpose was explained in detail.

Settings of conducting semi-structured interviews offered two options to the participants, 1) Face-to-face; 2) Online. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in a separate quiet office in a university or a library when it was in a face-to-face setting. At the same time, Zoom or Tencent meetings were the platforms for online setting. Since all the participants are well-experienced and qualified English teachers, both the interviews in semi-structured and the focus group adopted English language as a medium of conversation to reduce the error caused by translation and transcription. Afterwards, the data was transcribed, and additional notes were attached to each participant's information and summaries related to the research questions, also with any details related to the literature review. This development includes attaching critical notes to the short narrative raw data, which might help the researchers to keep productive awareness in terms of any thoughts regarding the data at all procedures of analysis and generate a more comprehensive understanding of the dataset (Guest et al., 2012).

At the beginning of the semi-structured interview, the researcher extended greetings and appreciation to the participants for their valuable participation and commitment. The interview initiated with open-ended inquiries concerning their perspectives on their students and the current language testing systems. Some questions were prepared in advance to provide a framework for the discussion,

while others were prompted based on the participants' responses during the interview. Additionally, participants were encouraged to elaborate on the reasons behind their specific reactions to certain experiences. Towards the conclusion of the semi-structured interviews, each participant possessed a recording ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, and a final expression of gratitude was conveyed as a gesture of appreciation at the end of the interviews. For the second stage of data collection, a focus group interview was conducted with four participants who agreed to meet again. The interview followed similar procedures to the previous one, with the participants working together as a group and the researcher serving as a moderator to host the discussion. The focus group interview was recorded and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

After collecting the data gathered from the interviews, there was a process of transcribing from the verbal conversation, from recorded audio to written text and saved as a Microsoft Word Document. It is a transformation of primary data from collected data into a long piece of written discourse. The Qualitative Content Analysis Approach is the best and safest method in this specific line because no third parties have the right to access the data. The procedures would be coding, comparing, and bringing to the subject. The written discourse was analyzed in reference to the literature review to seek contributive findings. Each step and stage of the data analysis was repeated two or three (or more) times to limit the possibility of human error (Bengtsson, 2016); it is also an important step to ensure that the researchers enhance familiarity with the data.

Thematic analysis was applied to the data inductively and deductively as well. "Thematic analysis approach is a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible" (Guest et al., 2012: p. 15). After transcribing the data, the researchers implemented a thematic analysis of the qualitative data according to general guideline principles. This method is crucial for identifying specific themes from data sets, which were then organized and detailed accordingly. Braun and Clarke (2006) presented six individual stages for the thematic analysis: 1) Comprehending the data sets; 2) Coding the data to identify initial codes; 3) Creating relevant themes from the data; 4) Designing a data table and data notes to review the themes; 5) Naming and defining the themes; 6) Producing and formatting a final report. Before providing the initial codes to the transcripts in NVivo Version 11, the process underwent multiple proofreading sessions.

During the analysis process, each interview's complete answer was broken down into smaller codes and sorted into potential themes, and the transcripts were re-read to ensure a thorough assessment of the codes; the codes were then analyzed on a broader level of themes with potential themes sorted and data extracts placed together. This process was iterative, with the data and findings revisited multiple times. Once the themes and sub-themes were created, they were

reviewed, and relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes were determined. In this development, main themes were identified, and theme names also was reviewed and refined by comparing them to previous literature in a critical sense. However, this process allowed for adjustments if necessary, resulting in a final report analyzing the entire data set under these themes.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Findings Related to Semi-Structure Interviews

#### 4.1.1. Chinese Students' English Proficiency Enhancement upon "Language Testing System"

##### *Development for Enhancing Phonological Ability*

As mentioned in literature review, problems about building sentences and vocabulary, critical skills upon this development are likely to be one of the leading roles. According to P6:

*"...many of them are very poor in writing composition; they even do not know how to write essays or stories. They cannot even write sentences. The first and the most terrible is that they have a poor vocabulary range, which makes their grammar contexts not well-developed." #P6*

Further, P5 explored the sense of developing younger generations, as widely and recently well-known examinations in China, such as YLE and Cambridge, for young learners, most are 5 - 7 years old, CERF A1 level.

*"...from my experience about training my students to take Cambridge Examination, especially for YLE... I think the writing parts are the most difficult. I think they need phonics knowledge and foundation to boost their writing ability step by step, especially with better phonological ability. They will be better at spelling and enhancing their scores... I think for us as teachers, we have to adapt phonological teaching to train them for YLE examinations... and for those institutions, they may consider applying a phonics curriculum to train the candidates..." #P5*

##### *Logical, critical, creative, and comprehensive thinking skills*

Test-takers should think deeper to offer ideas that answer the tasks when exploring parts of the marking criteria, referring to most of the international and public English examinations, particularly Cambridge KET (A2) and Cambridge PET (B1) speaking. However, there is a possibility for enhancement in this part.

*"...take some of my students as examples. Their thoughts are also very narrow. They do not like to think. Even though I tried to let them think in Chinese, they could not or refused to think... In these cases, I tried to start with the basic vocabulary and build it into a sentence. After that, I put more requirements, such as, 'now, provide me 3 sentences'..." #P5*

In mentioning the development of creative thinking within comprehensive growth for test-takers, P7 also explored her views on her teaching practice.

*“In terms of preparing for assessment, for sure that accuracy of English is important. Moreover, I personally focus on social parts, socio-cultural practice and how the student will perform English, the process of using English... in training their logical and systematical writing skills...breaks down activity of writing is the approach which I usually apply. First, assign them from very basic, non-system ‘draft about ideas, or even drawing, expand to the formal writing...during the process, the teacher will offer a tutorial to some students who are not very good in building sentences...those explorations are focusing more on creativity...” #P7*

From the above revolution in the Chinese context, it may likely be showing that creativity training is applied to students and test-takers for assessment and refers to teachers, tutors, and curriculum developers.

*Supportive learning atmosphere for improving “Discourse Management” and “Communicative Competence”*

All these participants emphasized the encouragement and engaging atmosphere between teachers and students for preparing for the examinations, along with the actual performance during the examinations. P1 claimed the supportive and positive learning environment is a conducive factor in developing students’ discourse ability.

*“...‘Discourse Management’ may not be an easy ability for our students to learn this skill; it is about their understanding and their ‘real’ use of vocabulary, sentences, and even paragraphs...it takes time and process...my cases in Gao Kao (College Entrance Examination in China) writing, two of the most important factors...first, students themselves to have antonyms of learning and improvement, and second is the teachers’ ability, antonyms and interests to train our students—for teachers, we should raise their awareness in discourse analysis and boost each other antonym... Really, to improve ‘Discourse Management’, especially in writing, students and teachers must also have a sense of achievement... Teachers may need to offer more support and encouragement, not only academic, and academic...” #P1*

P7 also highlighted the effectiveness of offering conducive “Corrective Feedback” (CF) to students for discourse ability, especially when it referred to writing. In most cases, students and test-takers were recommended to process a specific duration of practice writing in this line—as tutors or teachers, “corrective feedback” stands a crucial role.

*“...I usually tell them—kids, do not be afraid to have even a lot of mistakes in your writing, they are certain stages, I will come back to explain how those mistakes are...just submit to me when you are ready...” #P7*

#### **4.1.2. Current Issues—“Successful” or “Problematic” Preparations for Language Testing**

##### *Curriculum development*

The curriculum development, within the specific purposes, such as preparing

“better” results for English language examinations. In this sense, P3, as an English teacher who trained students IELTS for speaking upon extra-curriculum approach, highlighted:

*“...I believe that their schools did not provide them ‘reasonable time’ with exposure to the English curriculum. They have limited hours of English lessons... From their familiarity in using English and how their attitude in speaking English, I could say that...” #P3*

The curriculum within the in-class design was also a critical aspect associated with what P3 mentioned:

*“...to talk about the curriculum in English subject, because of assessing students, examinations, and in-school reports, etc., ... undoubtedly, there would be a certain requirement of comprehensions, from my personal opinions, comprehensions sometime invest too much focus on at reading and listening... I think they have limited ability to output the knowledge, as writing and speaking are output, and exercise their knowledge. Speak what they know, write what they know... in Macau, China most of them do not have those practical chances...” #P4*

Therefore, limitations and narrow senses of the schools’ curriculum may lead to a lack of comprehensive skills in terms of English proficiency. There is a worthwhile exploration area of studying to equip students and language testing candidates to enhance their output of English, especially working on curriculum aspects.

#### *Intercultural Communication in English Language Testing*

About the title of the current research project, the researcher focused on China, and the participants and data were diverse in terms of cultural and educational background. Upon their description, a significant number, or even the majority of students currently studying in the mainland of China or Macau, China, are relatively passive in expressing themselves. Therefore, it is an essential development of combining exam-oriented training with social-cultural skills.

*“...to describe my experience, positive outcomes about the learning process of English, and expand to prepare the public examinations of English, I would strongly agree with building whole-person development in language teaching-learning...many years ago, my friend invited me to be an English teacher in her tutorial centre... I tried for a while and started to enjoy it... the most rewarding parts of their enhancement sometimes connected with building more personal connections and whole-person development with me..., especially for the students who are teenagers—around 15 - 17 years old...when we know more about each other, they started to speak more...” #P6*

*“In the line of IELTS speaking...most of the time I did not start with the formal and academic approach of requiring my students to speak... I started by encouraging them with fluency and not worrying about mistakes...”*

*sometimes even basic conversation, and getting them to be confident to share daily life contexts in spoken English...at least those are good starts...” #P7*

Referring to literature review, studies have shown that even using English to finish fundamental tasks would be the process of adopting effective language learning skills. Although the “contents” and “materials” of public international examinations are relatively “difficult”, social-cultural skills, cross-cultural skills and critical expansion to intercultural skills might likely boost the effectiveness of Language Testing Systems and test-takers.

*A critical sense to enhance accuracy*

Requirements of examinations, assessments, and international standards were listed for the marking rubric. According to participants, a balance and further association with accuracy in English usage were emphasized.

*“In Shenzhen’s Gao Kao (College Entrance Examination in China), students need to take speaking as part of the English examinations. I think Shenzhen is one of the main cities in China, and it is close to Hong Kong and Macau in China...very international set. In Gao Kao (College Entrance Examination in China), they emphasize listening and speaking... I think we also need always to emphasize accuracy...you know, training fluency mainly for encouragement to our students, for preparation and the REAL exam, it is better to focus also on accuracy...” #P1*

There may be a possibility of having a candidate take the language examination. They may be equipped with all the other language skills instead of accuracy in outputting English uses—formal speaking and formal writing; they may experience an influential destructive impact on the results of examinations.

*“...in terms of Second Language Acquisition Theories, especially for our students, Chinese learning English as a second language, in which I define them as second language speaker and writer, it is easy to be influenced by common errors which highly associated with first language’s confusion...in this line... I think students must read as much as possible and improve their critical analysis skills step by step.” #P2*

Upon the above development, the accuracy of Discourse Management skills and Communicative English ability may be highly related to test-takers repetitive practice and building up their sense of discourse analysis in English texts.

## **4.2. Findings Related to Focus Group Discussion**

### **4.2.1. Accuracy of Spoken and Written Discourse from the Test-Takers**

P5 before highlighted in her semi-structured interview, teachers are suggested to adapt phonological teaching to train students in the accuracy of writing and public English examinations, as those spelling errors and grammar errors led to negative development to the tests’ results. Upon the discussion on the focus group interview, P8 agreed that accuracy is one of the most influencing factors affecting

public examinations' results. However, she also emphasized:

*“...two main factors for me, first, teachers and students should build autonomy and awareness to a total English environment...better throughout all the school-life when they are physically in campus, otherwise, English lessons MUST be using English as a Medium of Instructions, and encourage students for NOT speaking Chinese in English lessons...before mentioning accuracy in spoken English...both teachers and students should speak as much as possible... I think total English environment should come before accuracy...”*  
#P8

At this stage, contexts may provide variations in terms of opinions and data; P5 taught in an international school, while spoken English in daily life at school had already been commonly used. At the same time, though P8 taught in one of the main cities in China-Shenzhen, her students faced the challenge of being able to not being “afraid” to speak in English. A broader definition may be offered to those “factors” and “conditions” in the process of preparing and training for the exam-focused approaches.

#### **4.2.2. Critical Discussion in Cultural Practice Involving English Testing Systems**

Referring to the aims of English Testing Systems, whether the approaches are applied within China or overseas contexts for international purposes, there was a crucial enhancement role in using formal English. Earlier literature and data showed, such as 2.1, within the intercultural backgrounds in English Language Learning to “function” the “real-world” discourse appropriately. Some contextual-based examples have been mentioned during the focus group interviews and discussions in real-life teaching practice. P8 continued her expression about her students and campus-based training:

*“...I think Native English Teachers (NETs) in our school are quite valuable...environment in a total English and cultural, such as NETs to host English corners, watching English movies and share with our kids... English reading workshops, etc., those are all quite reputable, at least in my school... Learning in a practice way and encouraging our students to try comprehensive activities... I am quite sure in the long-term it will boost their grades in internal or public examinations too...”* #P8

P10 in the focus group also mentioned a similar approach. However, according to her teaching practice, her students were in high school, and it even involved cultural practices outside the campus and the curriculum.

*“...I have one of the good examples, one of my former students. She has a role model. She loves a singer, who is..., day by day in the evening, she searched the singer's information, repeated singing her songs, and tried to practice her pronunciation and accent. She was one of the most significant examples from all of my teaching experience. She improved so fast, resulting*

*in test scores as well. Therefore, I think interests and motivations are one of the keys to improvement...* #P10

Upon the senses of cultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural development, especially in the aspects of “Communicative Competence” and “Discourse Management”, it was shown that productive practice was emphasized within curricular activities and outside curriculum, and even outside the schools and campuses. A comprehensive sense of cultural development with well-rounded curricular scenarios might be worth studying.

#### **4.2.3. Specific Professional Development for Training Teachers to Train Candidates**

Referring to the second research question, how do participants in this research think about the role of explicitly developing test-takers writing and speaking performance in highlighting their public English examinations and relevance? In this line, P11 questioned the diversity of current Professional Development for language teachers. She took Macau, China education as an example to share:

*“... while teaching English, teachers have to be the great example, teachers are supposed to be and engaging in student learning... those are very general development... when thinking up to the particular development in English public examinations... Professional Development in Macau, China is not diverse. Most of those are conducted in Cantonese Chinese. For me as a foreign English teacher, I have to seek more platforms... although we are all professional English teachers who have degrees in relevant areas, we still need specific teaching training in training how we improve students’ IELTS writing... how we improve students’ Cambridge Speaking, etc., ...” #P11*

P9 continued this conversation:

*“... exactly, while a student wants to get a specific band and score in IELTS or other public examinations, the tutor’s professionalism values a lot... not only professionalism in language abilities in writing or speaking... But also, in terms of up-to-date teaching-learning methodologies... providing comprehensive activities to candidates’ preparations for examinations... And not only following the textbook things...” #P9*

The contextual development for enhancing professionalism for teachers to teach English for examinational purposes is an aspect to study.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1. Factors to Improve Students’ Discourse Management and Communicative Competence**

Findings have shown 3 main factors stressed by the participants and relevant analysis, and they are 1) beneficial phonological ability (Discourse Management), 2) logical thinking skills (Communicative Competence), and 3) comprehensive and positive learning approaches in communicative discourse.

A certain number of students have experienced difficulty building sentences due to a lack of adequate range vocabulary. The current study's results explored the need for phonics knowledge and foundation to boost test-takers' writing ability. With better phonological ability, students were likely to be better at spelling and enhancing their scores, especially for younger ages. Students in this development developed the capacity of discourse management reflect on their appropriate level, as widely and recently well-known examinations in China, such as "Young Learners English (YLE) test, Cambridge", for those test-takers, most are 5 - 7 years old, CEFR A1 level.

Additionally, findings also highlighted that candidates should think deeply to offer ideas to answer the tasks during the practice of examinations. The participants emphasized the teaching-learning process of starting with the basic vocabulary and building it into a sentence and paragraph. Upon those processes, creative thinking within comprehensive growth is vital for test-takers' improvement. Regarding Communicative Language Learning and Teaching, socio-cultural practice and how the students performed English, their processes of "using" English are strongly connected with logical thinking skills.

The data in this and previous studies have shown that "negative" stress may lead to relevant inappropriate development. All these 11 participants emphasized the encouragement and engaging atmosphere between teachers and students for preparing for the examinations, along with the actual performance during the examinations. The findings also emphasized the role of language teachers. Their awareness of discourse analysis offered a critical connection with students' linguistic skills. In this line, some participants highlighted the effectiveness of providing constructive "Corrective Feedback" (CF) to students for discourse ability, especially when it referred to writing. In most cases, students and test-takers were recommended to process a specific duration of practice writing.

## 5.2. Issues of Language Exam Preparations

Current issues stressed from the findings are 1) curriculum development, 2) intercultural communication in English and 3) accuracy of discourse delivery.

The current study showed that the duration of time, in terms of achieving the intended sources, was the exposure to the curriculum. To discuss more, students and teachers needed appropriate time to learn, improve, and design tasks according to different circumstances. Also, limitations and narrow senses of the school's curriculum may lead to a lack of comprehensive skills in terms of English proficiency. There is a worthwhile exploration area of studying to equip students and language testing candidates to enhance their output of English, mainly working on curriculum aspects.

The researchers focused on China, and the participants and data were diverse regarding cultural and educational backgrounds. Upon their description, a significant number, or even most students currently studying in the mainland of China or Macau, China, are relatively passive in expressing themselves. Therefore, it was

an essential development of combining exam-oriented training with social-cultural skills. Social-cultural skills, cross-cultural skills and critical expansion to intercultural skills likely boost the effectiveness of Language Testing Systems and test-takers.

Requirements of examinations, assessments, and international standards were listed for the marking rubric. According to current findings, further associations with accuracy in English usage were emphasized. The accuracy of Discourse Management skills and Communicative English ability might be highly related to test-takers' repetitive practice and building up their sense of discourse analysis in English texts.

### 5.3. Recommendations for Practice

In the realm of English testing systems, cultural practices play a significant role. Therefore, the first point is to incorporate cultural practices into preparation process. P10 highlighted the importance of incorporating cultural practices outside the campus and curriculum, such as using songs and videos for learning, in her high school teaching practice. Upon the senses of cultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural development, especially in the aspects of "Communicative Competence" and "Discourse Management", it was shown that productive practice was emphasized within curricular activities and outside curriculum, and even outside the schools and campuses. A comprehensive sense of cultural development with well-rounded curricular scenarios might be worth studying.

Furthermore, teachers' professionalism plays a key role in providing guidance and support to facilitate students' learning and achieve successful examination results. Therefore, there is a need for diverse professional development opportunities for language teachers, as raised by P11. In Macau, China, the current professional development programs are predominantly conducted in Cantonese Chinese, which poses a challenge for foreign English teachers. The need for specific training to improve students' performance in IELTS writing, Cambridge Speaking, and other exam-related skills was emphasized. Enhancing professionalism in teaching English for exam purposes requires contextual development and tailored training programs.

### 5.4. Research Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The limited participant size in this study is indeed an important limitation which can affect the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, this study primarily employed qualitative research methods. Regarding relevant limitations of semi-structured interviews and data, [Dornyei \(2007\)](#) questions the conversational approach with open-ended answers, such as the participants could only respond to the questions asked and may not likely ask other questions that have yet to be predefined. [Given \(2016\)](#) claimed there may be a need for more flexibility for participants to expand the contextual answers. Also, the "formal" setting of interviews may make participants consider it an "unnatural" activity.

Therefore, research questions, the well-justified literate framework, and interview questions must be connected comprehensively and concerning participants' feelings. To explain the limitations of conducting focus group data, the procedures of discussion and collecting those as raw data may sometimes not be a natural environment and atmosphere (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011). Also, the researchers worked as moderator, which also meant that there are limitations in generating the data. It required a certain extent of text analysis and critical thinking skills from the researcher (Franz, 2011). For focus group interviews, well-rounded preparation and research skills were strongly stressed, especially in developing interactive social norms and relevant interpretation.

In light of the limitations outlined in this study, future researchers should be cognizant of several crucial considerations. Firstly, future studies should aim to expand the participant sample to cover a wider range of demographic characteristics, such as different age groups, regions, educational backgrounds and so on. Additionally, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods may help offset the limitations of a small sample size and sole research method. For example, a survey questionnaire could be designed to collect larger-scale quantitative data, which can then be used to validate and complement the qualitative findings. Moreover, it is imperative that the interview questions employed are carefully crafted to establish a close connection with the research objectives and address the participants' subjective experiences and perspectives. By incorporating participants' feelings and viewpoints into the interview process, researchers can garner more nuanced and comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Lastly, when analyzing the data collected from focus group discussions, future researchers should place heightened emphasis on the application of critical thinking skills and text analysis techniques. This analytical approach enables a meticulous examination of the data, facilitating the identification of underlying patterns, themes, and divergent viewpoints within the group dynamics. By employing these analytical strategies, researchers can derive a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the research context, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study findings.

A promising direction for future research entails conducting an in-depth investigation into the specific strategies or interventions that hold the potential to significantly enhance Chinese students' phonological ability in the context of English language examinations. This research should focus on exploring the tangible impact of targeted phonological training programs on students' pronunciation accuracy and, consequently, their overall language proficiency. By delving deeper into this area, researchers can shed light on the efficacy of such interventions in facilitating substantial improvements in Chinese students' ability to articulate English sounds accurately, thereby enhancing their performance in language examinations. Another imperative area for future research involves a comprehensive re-evaluation of the current curriculum development approaches employed for English language examinations in China. This research should delve into the examination of how the integration of task-based learning or project-based learning

methodologies can effectively foster students' language skills and yield noteworthy improvements in their performance, particularly in writing and speaking assessments. By undertaking a meticulous exploration of this realm, researchers can gain valuable insights into the potential benefits of these innovative pedagogical approaches in nurturing students' language proficiency and communicative competence.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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