

What is changing?

From Semester 1, 2021, student reports for Chinese will include an estimation of the number of characters students can read and write. This estimate is based on classroom-based assessment tasks undertaken during Chinese classes last semester and some basic statistical modelling. This assessment design *really* is a novel attempt for the Chinese teaching industry nationwide. The Chinese team at APS acknowledges that the tools used are not without imperfections and we are looking forward to refinements under academic guidance over the next few years.

(Note: Character estimation has not been included for a small number of students for whom our assessment has not been able to give consistent or statistically reliable results.)

Why specifically quantify characters?

Characters (also known as *hanzi*) are the fundamental units of literacy in the Chinese language, as each character represents a basic unit of meaning. This is different to English, for which speakers are more used to talk about 'words' as its basic unit.

The reason Chinese uses 'characters' instead of 'words' as its basic unit is that a 'word' in Chinese may be consisted of a single character, e.g.

车 chē = vehicle/car

or more than one character, e.g.

火车 huǒchē = 'fire' + 'vehicle/car' = train

自行车 zìxíngchē = 'self' + 'travelling' + 'vehicle/car' = bicycle.

As you can see, whereas English uses three unrelated words for the three modes of transportation, Chinese uses 车 'vehicle/car' as the basic common unit of meaning and combines it with other basic meaning units to create new words. This is why character knowledge is paramount for being able to learn new words quickly!

To further demonstrate this concept, take the knowledge you have that 火 means 'fire' (from 火车 'train'), you can quickly expand your vocabulary by learning:

火星 huǒxīng = 'fire' + 'star/planet' = Mars

火山 huǒshān = 'fire' + 'mountain' = volcano

火箭 huǒjiàn = 'fire' + 'arrow' = rocket

... provided that you have sufficient character knowledge.

At APS, our program places a strong emphasis on reading and writing in Chinese, and it is hoped that our new reporting format will allow teachers to articulate the progress students have made in reading and writing each semester with greater clarity.

How many characters will my child need to be literate in Chinese?

Unfortunately, there is no one magic number. The list below offers a rough estimate on the number of characters required to be able to function in different contexts:

Chinese Reports from 2021



- Number of characters in the *Kangxi Dictionary* = 47,035
- Number of characters that are in common use = 3,500
- End of primary schooling in China and Taiwan = 2,700
- Number of characters for non-technical daily use = 2,000
- VCE Chinese Second Language = 500
- End of Grade 1 in China and Taiwan = 500

Also, we must remember that due to the 'complex' nature of Chinese characters, being able to read a character does not mean you can necessarily write it. It takes approximately 3-5 times more effort to learn how to write a character compared to learning how to read it. This is why we are reporting on your child's character comprehension and production separately, as we do not expect students to be able to write every character they can read.

(Note: This principle holds true for any language learning in a foreign context. Your ability to read will always exceed your ability to write. Your ability to comprehend orally (listen) will always exceed your ability to speak.)

However, character learning is not an un-manageable task. While each Chinese character looks unique, they are not formed without patterns. Among the 2,000 commonly used characters, there are approximately 100 high-frequency components that regularly appear in characters. (Note: These components form the focus of our new Chinese literacy curriculum for Foundation to Year 2.) The ways in which components can combine to form characters are also limited, with 6-8 'structures' being used most often.

My child knows # characters. Is that good?

As noted above, the VCE Chinese Second Language curriculum requires students to have a character knowledge of 500, which has been set with students who begin from scratch in Year 7 in mind.

By attending a bilingual school, your child has already begun this journey of accumulating character knowledge at a much younger age, which can only be advantageous. Furthermore, they are also more likely to be able to leverage this knowledge for advanced language learning in secondary schools, whether that is in Chinese, Japanese, or even Korean and Vietnamese, which all have a large proportion of character-based vocabulary with Sino roots.

As part of the Chinese curriculum reform Stanley *xiaozhang* has begun since Term 4 last year, the Chinese team has been collecting data and networking other Chinese-English bilingual schools around the country in hope to develop a comparable benchmark for each year level, using characters as the common 'currency.' With no curricula or achievement standards readily available for bilingual schools, APS is currently leading the way in hosting discussions with other schools and academics to determine a standard of achievement for each year level, which will hopefully serve as a point of reference for all Chinese-English bilingual schools in the future.

Regardless of the nationwide curriculum work above, for APS students, it is our hope that the character estimation can serve as an indicator of student achievement and a common language for setting and tracking personal learning goals over time. As per our school value, *Challenge*, we hope that students learn to use the character estimates "to compare themselves to who they were yesterday, not to who someone else is today."

If you have any questions regarding to the character estimation in your child's report, please don't hesitate to contact Fangni *laoshi* (Fangni.Zhou@education.vic.gov.au).