

## Reaching for the stars

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### Forward Foreword



“

Life is to enjoy. So are exams. It's easy for me to say for I am not the one who has to confront the HKDSE. But wouldn't it be wonderful to see years of hard work bear fruit in the form of amazing grades? For those who are well prepared, exams present no more than the opportunities to shine.

The biggest battles are often fought in the mind, and the HKDSE is, in so many ways, a mind game. To win this game, you need to learn how to cope with the tremendous pressure that inevitably builds up to the big day and stay focused throughout the exam. To borrow a term from positive psychology, you stand a much better chance of excelling in the exam if you take it when you are in 'flow' — the mental state of operation in which you are fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, total absorption and enjoyment in the process of performing an activity. The title of my favourite Cold War movie is *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. It's time students learn to stop worrying and love the HKDSE. OUP is here to help you do exactly that.

”

Perry Lam  
Editorial Director, English Language  
Teaching Department

# Oxford HKDSE English Language Mock Exams

On 22 November, Oxford returned to Lee Kau Yan Memorial School, venue for the previous year's event, to hold the new HKDSE English Language Mock Exams. In recent years, Oxford's mock exams have become a popular fixture of the annual HKDSE build-up, and the 2014 event, like its predecessors, experienced an overwhelming number of applications.

Over 1,000 students from more than 50 local secondary schools participated in the event, taking either the Paper 3 (Listening and Integrated Skills) or Paper 1 (Reading) mock exam. Strict exam conditions were observed throughout, contributing to an authentic experience for students.

In the invaluable post-exam sharing sessions, students were treated to informative and engaging

presentations by Mr Wilfred Wai and Ms Agnes Chow of Ng Wah Catholic Secondary School, and OUP's Shaun Luk and Iris Hung, who also fielded questions from students in the audience.



## Top tips for the HKDSE



### Top tips for Paper 1

- Don't waste time in the exam reading through the passages of both Parts B1 and B2. Go straight to the Part you're most comfortable with doing.
- If you're having difficulty identifying a word from a paragraph packed with difficult vocabulary, try underlining all the terms you are unsure of. If you're looking for a noun, eliminate all the verbs and adjectives. Also eliminate any words that don't fit the context. You should be able to make a very good guess from this point.

### Top tips for Paper 2

- Don't go into the exam having already decided which question you are going to attempt in Part B. Look at all the questions before you decide which one you have the most confidence in writing about.
- Use difficult vocabulary only when you know how to use it appropriately.



## Students' workshop: Reaching for the stars

To help students get over the final hurdle of their secondary English education, OUP held a sharing session on 5 February with HKDSE top performers Mr Theodore Tam and Mr Ivan Ma as our guest speakers. About 800 students and teachers from over 30 schools attended the event. The star students chatted with our Editorial Director, Mr Perry Lam, about the specifics of the English exams, and shared personal strategies for tackling each of the four papers. They encouraged students to go into an exam with an action plan, stressing that positive thinking and planning ahead will give them the best chance of succeeding. The afternoon ended with an enthusiastic question and answer session in which our speakers responded to concerns of the student audience.

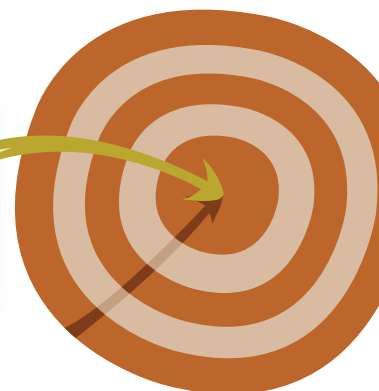


### Top tips for Paper 3

- Concentration is crucial for the listening tasks. When doing exam practices at home, allow yourself to listen to the recording only once. Don't repeat the recording for parts that you missed.
- Another way to gain more practice is to try the Advanced Level Use of English past papers. Their question types and formats are quite similar to those of the HKDSE exams.

### Top tips for Paper 4

- Try not to speak for more than 30 to 40 seconds at a time to allow room for genuine interaction among candidates.
- Always engage others in the discussion. Examiners are aware of the effort and will take note.
- Treat this as a real discussion instead of as an exam. You could even end the conversation by saying, 'Let's discuss this further at our next meeting. When is a good time?'



# The secret to exam success

## lies in laying a firm foundation

We got together with last year's HKDSE top performers Mr Theodore Tam and Mr Ivan Ma for a more intimate discussion about exam preparation strategies and the importance of English in achieving their dreams.

### How much time did you spend preparing for the English exams?

**TT:** A lot. I tried to squeeze in some time for English, even though I was an Arts student and all my elective subjects required some degree of memorization. I believe that apart from language proficiency, we need to develop specific exam skills for tackling the English papers.

**'Early preparation is the key to a good performance'**

**IM:** If you define preparation as the whole process of learning English, well I spent my life preparing! I was encouraged by my teachers, even from primary school, to read extensively. When you read, you learn a lot of vocabulary and sentence structures; you build your



knowledge of English. Early preparation is the key to a good performance in the exams. I think I started preparing for the DSE specifically in Secondary 3 when my teachers provided us with some CE English papers.

### More specifically, how did you approach your preparation?

**TT:** I started drilling for the English exams in the summer holiday before Form 6, beginning with the Certificate level papers. The CE papers, especially those after 2007, covered the basic language requirements of the DSE. To some extent, they illustrated how the Examinations Authority would set our papers. But because they were still much easier than what I should expect in the DSE, I wanted to get them out of the way first. I think students should not leave the CE papers until the study leave; that may give them an incorrect perception of their abilities.

**IM:** I wrote more composition pieces, in addition to routine homework. My English teacher provided a lot of guidance for me and I was able to improve gradually. For Paper 4, I think students should take the initiative to practise more with other students. If you practise speaking more, you will feel more relaxed in the exam. My school organized a joint school speaking practice which was helpful. Completing past papers under exam conditions is also important.

During the summer holiday before Form 6 I started doing CE papers. They were less challenging and made for a good foundation. I also did exercises from different publications, like Oxford's. After the summer holiday, my school encouraged us to do the Advanced Level Use of English papers. A number of papers were very useful for preparation, especially the listening paper. It was very similar to the

DSE exam format. From January 2014, I completed the DSE past papers a couple of times.

**TT:** I also spent the rest of Form 6 practising with other past papers. If students are aiming for a 5\*\*, they should definitely do the A-level Use of English papers. I wanted to expose myself to more question types and higher degrees of difficulty, so I did the A-level Reading and Language Systems and Listening past papers from 2000 to 2013. Those were quite challenging, especially the cloze summary exercises which required a lot of lexical alteration. But the papers were good practices for improving grammar and for understanding context as a whole.

And on the last day before the exam, avoid doing the most difficult papers because this could be psychologically damaging. Students should pick an easier paper to do, get a high mark and enter the examination hall with confidence the next day.

### Do you have any secret recipes to succeeding in the English exams?

**TT:** The key is to practise by doing exam papers, really. Exam formats in Hong Kong tend to be quite rigid. So if students are familiar with the system, they will have already won half of the battle.

### What about the other half of the battle?

**TT:** The other half will rely on language proficiency. If proficiency is to be developed, it has to start from a young age. It's definitely too late for students to start reading madly the year before the exam. Start reading as widely as possible from the junior secondary years. They should read English news and anything that interests them. For example, football fans can start by reading about the Premier League. They should not start by reading political essays or business insights, because it's likely they will have problems digesting the terminology and content. Of course, a progressive approach should be undertaken. Towards the final stages of exam preparation, students should also expose themselves to authentic English from sources such as the *SCMP* and *RTHK*.

**'Build an interest in the topic, then you will be an efficient and effective learner'**

**IM:** It is difficult for students to know what and how to prepare. In science subjects, for example, you continuously take in new information, but with English

there is no fixed framework in which to learn. In general, students are weaker in writing and speaking. They often regurgitate stock phrases that are out of context. I would encourage students to take account of their teachers' feedback, initiate more speaking practices and do lots of past papers under exam conditions. But the most important thing is to build an interest in the topic, then you will be an efficient and effective learner as you are motivated to find learning resources yourself. I like reading books like *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* in my leisure time. There is no need to restrict yourself to exam-type preparation. You can read books, watch movies or even listen to music.

### So what was the most challenging aspect of your preparation?

**IM:** Paper 4 was my weakness so I practised a lot with my peers. I am good at thinking up points, but not at presenting them in an authentic way, or persuading others. I practised with my classmates and sometimes asked my teachers to sit with us and give us feedback.

**TT:** For me, it was pressure. As I mentioned, I did a lot of the Advanced Level papers. Those were quite difficult and demoralizing at times. Too much pressure could be disastrous, though; and what I did to relieve the stress was to immerse myself in gastronomic pleasure!

### Thinking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

**TT:** I think I would have tried to do more practices for Paper 3. I performed poorly in one of the tasks, and although it didn't pull down my overall grade, I felt I could have done better. However, it was quite difficult to find somebody to mark the papers for me, and equally difficult to have the perseverance to sit down to work through two hours of listening and writing.

**IM:** In addition to the exercises provided by my teachers, I looked for more learning resources by myself. Before the DSE I found a good resource called '6 Minute English' on the BBC website. You can learn vocabulary while listening to native speakers. If I had started listening to this programme in junior secondary, I think my English level would be better.

### Is there anything you wish your teachers had done differently to help you with the English exams?

**IM:** In junior secondary, my teachers could have encouraged students to read more. More training for the speaking examination would have been useful too. There should

be more joint school speaking practices.

**TT:** To be fair, my teachers put a lot of time and effort into preparing us well for the English papers. In Forms 4 and 5, they did not simply focus on the examinations, but got our hands dirty in the more interesting aspects of the language. For instance, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and watched classic films. Both the language and the messages were difficult, but the experience helped improve my proficiency. Of course, once we entered Form 6, the focus on the exams was clear. If anything else was to be done, I would have liked to attend oral practice sessions in late April or early May. It would have helped to warm us up before the final challenge. It would be even better if these practices were done with the participation of students from the whole form. We could practise with students of different calibre and it would resemble the real exam more closely.

**'The English language will be the main tool for me to achieve success'**

### Both of you clearly love reading and writing in English. Do you think this love of the language contributed to exam success?

**TT:** Of course. If you have no interest in English, how can you endure all those listening papers and play the tape for hours on end? How can you endure reading English news? This interest was what propelled me to success in the exams because I was doing what I was interested in, instead of simply fulfilling the requirements of the Examinations Authority and consuming whatever they gave me.

**IM:** I cultivated an interest in English in primary school. It was good that I was not forced to learn English. Students should be able to test different methods. I like reading books; others may like watching movies. Having a genuine interest in the subject definitely contributed to exam success.

### What about achieving your goals?

**IM:** I'm studying Medicine at HKU and I use English to communicate in tutorial classes. The skills I learnt in Paper 4 are helping me as I have to summarize what others think, express my opinions and encourage others to speak. In the future, if I have to communicate with doctors or patients who can only speak English, my English will be important for effective communication. I am also

the Chief Editor for the Medical Society's magazine *Caduceus*. English has helped me think about how to structure articles and how to express my ideas effectively.

**TT:** When I became the top student of the territory last year, reporters asked me, 'What do you want to do in the future?' And I said, 'I would like to study linguistics, become a teacher and work in the education industry.' That is why the English language will be the main tool for me to achieve success and will be highly related to what I do later on.

### Can you offer a final piece of advice for students preparing to do their DSE English examinations this year?

**IM:** Don't limit yourself to exam-oriented preparation. Find learning resources from your daily life that are more interesting than just doing past papers. When you develop an interest in English, you will improve. Start preparing early and go into the exam with a good mentality. Try your best to finish everything and don't worry about it after you leave the exam hall. Finally, 'Good luck!'

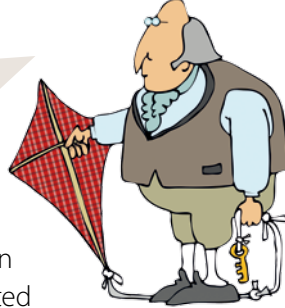
**TT:** When I was younger, I would always ask my teachers before an exam, 'Do you have any tips?' I would often get this as an answer, 'Look at the questions carefully.' I used to think, 'What kind of advice is that!' But when I sat my DSE exams last year, I realized that this piece of advice is gold.



## Heinous homonyms

A homonym is a word that is spelt like another word (or pronounced like it) but which has a different meaning, for example *scene* and *seen*.

'We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.'



This is a famous quotation attributed to Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, at the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. What are the two different meanings of the word 'hang' used here?

Can you complete these sentences using homonyms?

### As easy as pie

- 1 He \_\_\_\_\_ medal in the Olympics.
- 2 The girl \_\_\_\_\_ pancakes for breakfast!
- 3 Why didn't the dog \_\_\_\_\_ when the \_\_\_\_\_ came its way?
- 4 Mum bought two \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ at the supermarket.
- 5 She \_\_\_\_\_ the ball and it rolled \_\_\_\_\_ the mud.



### As difficult as nailing jelly to a tree



- 6 The cut on his \_\_\_\_\_ won't \_\_\_\_\_ in time for the race so \_\_\_\_\_ have to drop out.  
[Hint: the second word means to make well.]
- 7 The man was so upset about being \_\_\_\_\_ that he regularly \_\_\_\_\_ himself up on the bed and \_\_\_\_\_ his eyes out. [Hint: the first word is used to describe someone who has no hair.]
- 8 A rapacious pirate will sail the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ everything he \_\_\_\_\_.  
[Hint: the second word means to grab.]

## Did you know?

Some homonyms are the punchlines for jokes!  
Can you match the joke to the correct punchline?



### Jokes

If four couples went to a restaurant, how many people dined?

What is a large animal with thick fur but no clothes on?

What do you say in the evening to a soldier in shining armour?

What is the loud, sad crying of the biggest animal in the ocean?

### Punchlines

A bare bear

Night-night, Knight!

Eight ate

A whale wail

## Scintillating synonyms

A synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language, for example *shut* is a synonym of *close*.

Circle the best synonym for the following words:

1 diabolic	cruel	boastful	rude	bewildered
2 exuberant	distinct	enthusiastic	frantic	enchancing
3 anomalous	joyful	overrated	unusual	believable
4 colloquial	scientific	important	informal	mysterious
5 vivacious	lively	inattentive	troubled	vast
6 ancillary	adaptable	additional	temporary	fragile
7 calamitous	tragic	envious	dangerous	indecisive
8 dowdy	pervasive	curious	fashionable	unkempt
9 petulant	cooperative	confused	moody	aggressive
10 comely	average	arrogant	attractive	amused



# Watch this space

Things to look out for in the coming months



## New exam skills titles from Oxford

Junior Oxford *ESSENTIAL* Listening (for average ability students) and Junior Oxford *ADVANCED* Listening (for more able students), each a three-level series combining skills focus with exam-style practice. Also in for 2015 is *New Junior Thematic Anthology*, with three levels comprising a rich and varied range of texts.



Oxford *ESSENTIAL* Exam Skills and Oxford *ADVANCED* Exam Skills.

Comprehensive skills coverage for HKDSE Papers 1–4, featuring user-friendly course units and up-to-date, authentic HKDSE mock tests.



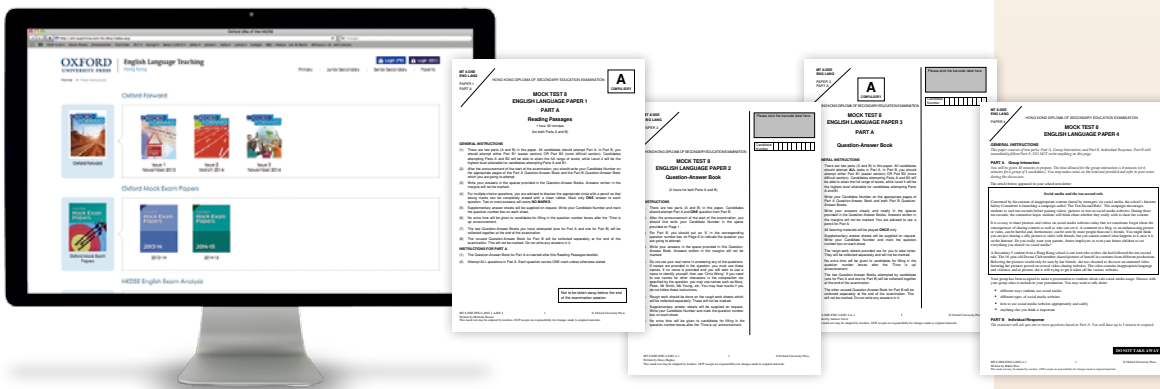
## Downloads

New HKDSE Mock Test

Unseen Mock Test 8 has been uploaded to our website.

Teachers can download the new mock test from

<http://www.oupchina.com.hk/elt/free-resources/>



## In the next issue of Oxford Forward

- Reflections on the 2015 HKDSE English Language Exam
- More news, interviews and students' activities

Look out for the next issue of *Oxford Forward* in June 2015

## Word Play (Answers)

### Heinous homonyms

- |                      |                   |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 won one            | 2 ate eight       |
| 3 flee flea          | 4 pairs pears     |
| 5 threw through      | 6 heel heal he'll |
| 7 bald balled bawled | 8 seas seize sees |

### Scintillating synonyms

- |               |                |              |
|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1 cruel       | 2 enthusiastic | 3 unusual    |
| 4 informal    | 5 lively       | 6 additional |
| 7 tragic      | 8 unkempt      | 9 moody      |
| 10 attractive |                |              |