Languages – HSC Continuers transcript

(Duration: 31 minutes 09 seconds)

Welcome to this languages video, which will look at HSC examinations in Continuers courses. Please be aware that this video supports the following Continuers courses only – Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek and Spanish. As we go through this presentation, examples have been provided in English. You will need to rework these examples into the language you are studying.

The HSC examination will have 2 parts, the oral examination and the written examination. The oral examination will be held earlier than the written examination – in August or September, on a Saturday. To access the date of your oral examination, search for ‘HSC orals exam timetable’ and this will take you to NESA’s timetable for all oral examinations for languages. The oral examination is worth 20 marks and consists of a 10-minute conversation between you and the examiner.

The written examination is worth 80 marks and includes sections for listening, reading and writing. HSC examinations are designed to find out how much you know about the subject matter. It's important to see them as your chance to shine.

So, let's take a closer look at the oral examination. As mentioned, the oral examination is worth 20 marks and takes the form of a 10-minute conversation, although it might help to think of it more as an interview. Think of the examiner as a person interviewing you about yourself. Your role is to respond with as much relevant information as you can. The examiner is not the person who will mark your exam. He or she is only a facilitator to engage you in conversation. You cannot communicate in English. If you don't understand the question, you might say something like “I'm sorry, could you please repeat the question” and this has to be said in the target language. You will be asked questions about the individual, yourself and your personal world. Your responses will relate to you and your world so you will find that no 2 examinations are the same. The amount of questions asked is not an indication of how the examination is going. It all depends on the depth and breadth of your answers, which we will look at a little bit later.

Here are some of the topics you **may** be asked about:

* family, friends
* relationships
* daily routine
* home and accommodation (including household chores and your neighbourhood)
* education and school (including your opinions on school rules, uniforms, school subjects, workload, relationships at school with friends and teachers, reasons for subject choices, schoolies or post HSC celebrations)
* future education plans (including study or taking a break from study)
* leisure, free time activities
* how to manage study and leisure
* sport
* outings with friends
* interests such as internet use, social networking, cooking and fashion, dress codes
* young people's behaviour such as alcohol and learning to drive
* part-time jobs, pocket money
* past, current and future travel
* exchanges to a country which speaks the language you are learning
* other trips.

You will find all the topics listed in your syllabus document. You will be asked questions on the prescribed syllabus topics as they relate to your personal world. Keep your answers anonymous, for example, don't provide full names of people or your school name. During the oral examination you can expect:

* to be questioned on a number of topics
* to be questioned on past, present, future and hypothetical events
* for the level of question difficulty to increase from lower order to higher order within each topic approached.

The examiner will stick to questions based on your personal world. You will not be asked anything like, “What breed of cats do you prefer?”. This question is too specific and students at Continuers level are not expected to know about breeds for example. However, the questions will increase in the level of difficulty with a simple question on a particular topic slowly climbing to questions, still on the same topic that require a more sophisticated response. So let's take a look.

Think of it as a spiral working from a wide base, up into a more targeted point. Let's look at an example. We look at this in English, but imagine it in the language you're studying. The examiner might start off with a broad question such as “Which subjects are you studying at school?”. You answer with “I study French, Japanese, History, English and Mathematics.” As you can see, it's a simple question which only requires you to recall information. Next, the examiner might follow up with a question which narrows in on details, such as “Why did you choose to learn Japanese and French?” A sample answer might be “I chose these two languages because I find the 2 cultures very different. I think that speaking an Asian language and a European language would really give me a multicultural perspective of the world”. In this question you are required to justify your reasons for doing a particular thing. In this case, studying 2 languages. You can see that linguistically this question is more challenging. Next, the examiner may ask an even more targeted question such as “Do you plan to continue studying these languages when you finish your HSC?”. A sample answer would be, “Definitely, I plan to study public relations and these two languages would help me to communicate and to understand different cultures. I can't wait to know more”. This question is asking about your future plans. It requires both the conditional and future tenses. Whilst this is just an example, it illustrates how the examiner will move from simpler to more complex questions within any given topic.

You might ask yourself, how can I prepare for this? Remember, the oral examination is about your personal world, so let's look at some of the things you could consider. These are just examples to get you started. Think about your hobbies. Think about your free time activities, what you like and don't like, who you spend your free time with. Be prepared to talk about your family, who's in your family, how you would describe each family member and how do you all get along. Can you talk about school, for example, which subject you're studying and why, which teacher is your favourite? Do you like to wear a uniform? Where do you live? Do you live in a house or a flat? In the city or the country? What do you like about your neighbourhood? Would you prefer to live somewhere else? Do you play a sport? Which one do you play? Why do you play this sport? You will be asked about things that have happened, so you can use the past tense. For example, where have you travelled? What did you do there? You'll also be asked about your future plans, so make sure you can express yourself in the future tense. You may also be asked about having a job and what you spend your money on. You could also be asked about what qualities are important. For example, what qualities are important in a good friend?

Think about what you are all about. What you do, what you like, what you don't like, what your plans are, and so on. Then plan for the vocabulary and grammatical structures you need to express these in the target language. Learn to use a range of tenses so you can describe past, current and future experiences. Learn the vocabulary that applies to your life experiences in your personal world and build your own personal sentences. Prepare descriptions, preferences, opinions and justifications for all possible scenarios. Write down correct sentences that you can apply to any of the topics to be assessed. And then think about how you can use them across different topics. Plan thoroughly, and make note of, and practise the structures and vocabulary you might use. Keep a checklist to ensure you are using a broad range of language skills without being too repetitive. On the screen is an example of a simple plan that you might like to use to brainstorm and then add language such as grammar, opinion, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions and sentence starters, to check you’re covering a variety of language structures and vocabulary.

Practise responding to questions from different people’s perspectives, for example, in the third person, “My mum thinks that I will be a great musician one day”. When responding, respond with sophistication of vocabulary and sentence structure, for example, use relative clauses such as “My science teacher is a person who I like very much”. Use a variety of conjunctions to link sentences and ideas. This will show that you have organised your thoughts to reply in a logical manner, for example ‘because’, ‘however’. Sequence and structure your ideas using words and expressions such as ‘first of all’, ‘usually’, ‘then’, ‘finally’. Use sentence starters, such as ‘in fact’ and ‘actually’, to sound more natural and authentic. The examination is designed to test how well you manipulate language. In other words, it's about how well you respond on the spot, by putting the sentences together spontaneously. This means you will not be able to rote learn slabs of information. If you do, the examiner will divert you from what you have prepared and change the course of the conversation. However, this does not mean you can't prepare.

Prepare vocabulary on the topics and build on sentence structures, and how you might use them in different scenarios. Make sure you know your verb tenses, your time markers your adverbs and adjectives because you will need them. In your answers, include both depth and breadth. Let's take a look at the difference.

Depth. Depth is when your response explores the how, the why and to what extent? How do you add depth? To add depth to your responses, provide explanations and justifications of ideas and opinions. For example, explain a preference or weigh the pros and cons so you can make a considered judgement or offer balance of opinion.

Breadth. Breadth means talking about specific examples in greater detail. How do you add breadth? In your answers avoid listing, but explore further aspects of a particular event, idea or situation, such as what happened, where it happened, when it happened, who was involved. A further comment on how you feel or felt or how other people feel or felt about the situation is another good way to add breadth.

To develop confidence and fluency, speak the language you're learning as much as possible, in class and in informal situations with classmates when studying, and so on. Expose yourself to the language, listen to podcasts, watch TV programs, movies and the news, use online games and apps. Give yourself a question and record a spontaneous 2- minute answer to it. Listen to the recording to identify areas you can develop, such as pronunciation, fluency, and content. Ask your teacher for feedback and for help. Find a partner to have a 10-minute conversation with once or twice a week and ask each other questions. This will help you think on the spot in the target language. Give each other feedback on your responses. You must use the language. You must make mistakes and learn from them. Even in English we make mistakes. The goal is not perfection, but being able to communicate as best you can is.

Some final words of advice in preparing for your oral examination. Learn and practise the language you know you will need. Ensure you have a good night’s sleep the night before and a healthy breakfast on the day. During the exam, don't worry if you make mistakes, just keep going, like you would in a normal conversation. And don't forget to ask for clarification in the target language if necessary.

Let's move on to the listening component of the examination, which is the first section in the written examination, and is worth 25 marks. Time management is essential. You must allow 25 to 30 minutes to complete this section before moving on to the rest of the written examination. This is very important because no one will come to tell you that it's time to move on. So if you don't allocate your time carefully, you might end up eating into the time that you need for the reading and writing sections.

In the listening section, there will be approximately 8 questions. Read the questions first so you know what you're listening for. You will hear the text twice. Listen for the gist and main ideas and don't worry about a word you don't understand. Usually the meaning of the text is not dependent on one single word. There will be a pause after the first reading. Take notes. You must learn the art of note-taking and to listen for key information. Use the right-hand margin. It’s there for you and what you write there, will not be marked. Listen to the second reading and answer the question. There will be another longer pause before the next question is read out. Transfer all the relevant information from the margin into the answer space, otherwise it will not be counted. You are allowed a dictionary in the written examination, including the listening section. Use it wisely. Only look up words which are essential to your response, if you need to. Answer all questions. Five-mark questions are more difficult, but all candidates should be able to gain some marks. Avoid leaving any blanks. Make an educated guess based on your understanding of the text as a whole. Persevere, answer all questions to the best of your ability.

The best way to prepare for the listening section of the examination is through practice. Listen to past HSC papers and attempt the questions. These can be found on the NESA website with audio files and answers so you can correct them yourself. Working through past papers will help you learn how to listen for key information that each question requires. Become an efficient note-taker because this will help you with your timing for the exam. Attempt practice questions from the department's website. You’ll need to navigate to your language and then to the Continuers course. Immerse yourself in the language. When watching films, news, and so on, note what vocabulary is new. Look it up. You may be able to get the meaning from the subtitles. Practise note taking and dictionary use. This will be very useful during the exam. Keep a vocabulary list for each of the topics. Add to your list regularly and refer to it when needed. Learn it. Learn verb conjugations and revise them often. Use the verbs in context as many times as possible.

We will now explore the reading part of the examination, which is worth 40 marks. The reading section consists of 2 parts. Part A is worth 25 marks and Part B is worth 15 marks. Part A. It focuses on reading comprehension. And you will answer questions in English. You will have 2 texts written in the language you are learning. You will be required to answer questions based on these 2 texts. All questions must be answered in English. There is usually at least one question worth 5 marks where you will have to show global understanding as well as details. Answer as clearly and as fully as you can. You will be assessed on the extent to which you demonstrate capacity to understand general and or specific aspects of text, summarising or evaluating, capacity to convey the information accurately and appropriately.

Remember, the greater the value of the question, the greater the level of difficulty. As the level of difficulty increases, you will find that the first comprehension is easier than the second. Look for key vocabulary and ask yourself, what is the question asking me to do? Do I need to justify? Do I need to contrast? Look at the value of the question and manage your time. Finally, use your dictionary wisely. Don't waste time looking up unnecessary words. See if you can interpret the meaning of the word or phrase from the context, and if not, then look it up.

At the start, read the title of each text and read the questions. Then read the text. But having read the title and the questions, you will already have some idea of what the text is about. Use a highlighter to underline keywords in each question. Get the gist of the text only using a dictionary if needed. Be guided by the mark allocation for each question. Make sure you look at the value of the question and manage your time accordingly. Don't spend too much time on a question that is only worth 1 mark and remember, the greater the value of the question, the greater the level of difficulty. You're not awarded marks for how well you express your response in English. As long as your response is clear and includes all the relevant information, you will receive the allocated marks. When writing your responses, keep in mind that the questions, particularly the earlier ones, often follow the order of the text. Different questions should not be answered using the same information. If you find yourself repeating the same information in another question, it's most likely that you have overlooked or missed other important information.

The amount of space provided for you to write in is a guide to the length of your response. Remember to expand your responses where required. For example, give reasons to justify your opinion and support your answers by clearly linking your response to evidence from the text. And finally, attempt every question. Look out for keywords that will alert you to complex questions. For example, ‘explain’ requires you to clearly demonstrate what and why. ‘Justify’ requires you to give reasons for your response based on the text. ‘Compare’ requires you to make a comparison between, for example, situations, people or attitudes. Always consider what the question is asking you to do. This list is not exhaustive. For the full list of keywords, search for ‘Glossary of keywords for the HSC’ and you will see the full list. Make sure you understand the requirements of each.

Reading Part B is worth 15 marks and focuses on your ability to comprehend a stimulus text and respond to it in the target language. Remember, you must respond to the stimulus. This is not just a writing task, even though it may look like one. The question will be phrased in English for a response in the target language. The question will specify the audience, purpose and context of your response, including the text type, such as an email or letter to the editor. Make sure you also use the correct register. Will you use formal or informal language? You will be required to respond to questions, statements, comments, or specific information in the stimulus text. It may help to underline this first. Cross check any words or phrases you need to look up in the dictionary. For example, if you look up a word like ‘match’, make sure you have used the correct translation. You don't want to be talking about a fire lighting match, if you mean a match of cricket. Keep within the word limit. If you greatly exceed the suggested length, you risk the chance of making more mistakes and/or becoming repetitive. You will also use time that could be better spent on another section of the paper. You are marked on the relevance of ideas, information, or opinions in response to the stimulus, and on the accuracy of your vocabulary and sentence structures.

To prepare for the reading section, work through their reading sections of past papers from the NESA website. Attempt practice questions on the Department of Education website. When you complete a practice Part B task, practise editing your own response before asking your teacher for feedback. Learn to plan your Part B writing tasks and stick to the plan. This will avoid repetition and show a clear flow of ideas. Develop a sound vocabulary base and learn to recognise as many keywords, characters and structures as possible. Develop a bank of common expressions that can be used in different contexts. Only use a dictionary with moderation. Underline or highlight the keywords and information in texts.

And now, let's look at the last section of examination, the Writing section, which is worth 15 marks. There will be 2 questions which you must answer. The first question is worth 5 marks and requires a shorter response. You can see the response length for each language on the screen. The second question is worth 10 marks and requires a longer response, and once again you can see the lengths on the screen. Markers assess your writing according to strict marking guidelines, such as how well you write a text which is appropriate in context, purpose and audience, demonstrate the relevance of your information and ideas, structure and sequence your information and ideas, and demonstrate control of a range of language structures in vocabulary in the language you are studying. To prepare for this section of examination, ask for your teacher’s help to select some writing tasks. Practise planning. Planning is an essential part of writing. It allows you to sequence your ideas and to address the question. Regular planning will also give you confidence in your ability to produce a cohesive and planned text. Write and submit your task to your teacher for feedback. Rewrite your task, taking into account the feedback. Writing improves with repetition. Do not leave it till too late to get the required confidence. Finally, write a journal in the target language 3 times a week and write SMS messages and emails to your friends in the language you are studying.

Before we finish, I'd like to draw your attention to 2 of the websites I've mentioned. Firstly, the Department of Education has a dedicated website section for Stage 6 languages. You will find information and resources for a range of Continuers courses, including advice on approaching the HSC, sample speaking questions and sample listening, reading and writing practice tasks. Secondly, the NESA website includes your syllabus and exam packs for your course, including past HSC examinations, marking criteria which will help you get a sense of what markers are looking for and what is required of you. HSC markers’ feedback from previous exams. This feedback is designed to guide preparation for future examinations and feedback includes an overview of the qualities of better responses. With a little bit of effort and practice each day you can build your language skills for success in the HSC. Seek help from your teacher. Build support networks with your peers and reward yourself for your progress and achievement.

On behalf of the Languages and Culture team at the New South Wales Department of Education, I wish you all the best for your HSC and your future.

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