

2020 has truly been a year of great change because not only has Singapore been growing accustomed to a “new normal” but my life as a student has been profoundly changed. At the end of last year, my school moved to a new campus, in a new neighbourhood, which means there was a lot to get used to in unfamiliar surroundings etc. I also had the honour of taking a national exam in these conditions. As a student in the Integrated Programme, I only needed to take two subjects, Higher Chinese and Malay Special Programme (3rd language). The results do not matter in my next educational institution, but I want to do well all the same, which is why I was very worried about the COVID-19 influence. The Ministry of Education had announced changes in syllabus to many of the theory-based subjects due to the circuit-breaker period where online learning took place instead, but there were no changes to the language subjects. The Singapore Examinations and Assessments Board (SEAB) that sets our exams are well known to be unpredictable as well, hence the difficulty level and topics were all big question marks. No one knew whether COVID-19 would be tested as well, but it was not going to be easy trying to digest medical vocabulary in Chinese.

The way the national exam was held was very exciting. My school has more than 300 students taking the Higher Chinese exam. One of its components, the oral examinations, was held in the end of June. We did have some inkling of what it would be like after seeing our seniors do it last year but given a new campus and restrictions for health and safety, we did not know what to expect. Out of the 5 days when the exam was held, I did it on the first day. We were dismissed two hours earlier, at 12.30 for lunch and then needed to report at 1.45 because the exam would formally begin at 2.30pm. The waiting room was thankfully air-conditioned, which was slightly unexpected for me because in the past there were restrictions on use of air-con to limit the indoor transmission of the coronavirus, but the room also had little other ventilation. Everyone sat in columns based on their examination room and needed to bring their thermometers other than registration and preparation material. However, I have to admit that while waiting for the waiting room to open, there were more than 40 people congregating in a very tight space along the corridor, against the safe-distancing guidelines. The teachers were also too busy. We all sat individually, hence I was not sure whether I could talk to my friends and ask them for last-minute help while waiting for my turn. Finally, when it was my turn, I had to go to the level above to step into another room for my 10 minute preparation of a 2 minute speech based on a video. There

were only 4 stations in each large room. Before I touched anything, my teacher sanitised all the touch areas of my computer, and I could only use my own pen. In the past, earphones were provided so no one could hear the video being played before their countdown started but due to COVID-19, they were not provided, and I could hear another students' video. This was a bit of an inconvenience in terms of distraction.

Finally, it was my turn to head into the exam room. The exam room was an entire classroom, which is by my estimations 8m by 10m. I calculated 14 exam rooms in total, spread across 2 levels. The entire room only had 3 people, the student, and the 2 examiners. Everyone sat in a triangle 1m apart from each other. The teachers had masks and face guards on and sanitisers on their desks while the student had 3 desks lined together, with one glass pane, sanitisers and wipes placed on them. The student could choose to remove their masks so that they could project their voices more clearly. I knew I had to be very loud, because the glass pane was a barrier to my voice and I could hear my own echo, and the teachers were sitting at quite a distance away from me. My school had prepared the protocol beforehand, so I knew what I needed to do: after I was done, wipe the pane and the desks with wet tissue provided. Then leave.

However, two very funny things happened, one during my Higher Chinese oral, one during my Malay Special Programme oral. The former was that during my every-second-is-important 2 minute speech, my mask decided to get blown by the fan above my head. Since I did not want it to get dirty as I needed to put it on again at the end, I caught it, but it distracted both the examiners and myself and lost me a few precious seconds. The latter was that during the Malay Special Programme, the examiner gave me instructions in Malay. Since it is only my 4th year learning it and she was speaking it very fast, I barely understood what she was saying, so I guessed that she was giving me instructions on the cleaning protocol. I also did not dare to respond to her other than nodding because in my nervousness I had forgotten how to say "yes" in Malay and feared that responding in English would result in marks deducted. The face guard teachers wore plus the glass pane did muffle the voices which did make it harder to hear what was being asked and I do think it would have a slight effect on my marks for articulation.