

Particles

HSK 5

Use the examples with their context and limits. Recall a sentence before reading the model. Original teaching additions accompany examples adapted from Chinese Grammar Wiki (AllSet Learning, CC BY-NC-SA); see the course reference provenance.

Final 了: change and completion in context

■ The same ending can change the lunch conversation

- A friend offers lunch after you return from the canteen. 我吃饭了。 tells them you have eaten in this situation. It changes whether another meal is needed; it does not specify how many bowls you ate.
- At home, a parent calls 吃饭了! while putting food on the table. Here the call announces mealtime. Treating every final 了 as “already finished” would reverse the intended action.

■ Locate final 了 before deciding its job

- In 我吃饭了。 , 了 follows the verb and its object at the end of the sentence. The original example below keeps that position. Final 了 can present a changed or newly relevant situation.
- Compare 我吃了三碗饭。 : 了 directly follows 吃, before the counted object. This presents the eating as carried out. Position and context both matter; an object alone does not ban final 了.

我吃饭了。

wǒ chī fàn le

Word guide: 我 – I; 吃 – eat; 饭 – meal.

■ A changed state need not be a finished action

- A visitor removes a coat: 现在不冷了。 means it is no longer cold in this situation. The sentence describes a changed state rather than a completed act of being cold.
- 要下雨了。 warns that rain is approaching; it does not report that the rain has already ended. Read the words around 了 instead of adding one English past-tense ending everywhere.

Final 了 needs its situation

After lunch: 我吃饭了。

An eating report in this conversation

A call to the table: 吃饭了!

Mealtime is announced; eating need not be finished

A visitor removes a coat: 现在不冷了。

A changed state, rather than a completed act

Position, surrounding words and context work together.

■ Negation can preserve a change

- 我没吃饭。 denies that the eating happened in the stated period. In this ordinary completed-action negative, 没 replaces the positive action report; do not mechanically append verb-了.
- A diner says they used to eat at this shop but have changed their habit: 我不在这里吃饭了。 means they no longer eat here. 不 and final 了 fit this changed situation; the sentence does not report a finished meal here today.

■ Two positions can appear together

- 我吃了三碗饭了。 can report three bowls eaten as a now-relevant total. The first 了 follows the verb; the second ends the sentence. The presence of a counted object does not force one position to disappear.
- The total still does not tell you whether a fourth bowl will follow. Ask for the relevant context instead of turning a count or particle into a guarantee that the speaker will never eat more.

■ Transfer the meaning before choosing a translation

- Change the lunch offer to a call to the table, or change eating to a weather state. Identify what is newly relevant, then check whether an action has been carried out, is approaching or is not the point.
- Compare this lesson with verb-了 and duration. The forms can work together; the practical question is what this speaker communicates here.
- Final 了 is not a universal “finished” or past-tense label. Keep its position, the surrounding words and the conversational situation together.
- A changed habit, an approaching event and a completed-action report need different English paraphrases.

■ Try it with help closed

Recall the situation: The same ending can change the lunch conversation. Decide what the speaker wanted to communicate. Close the examples. Say a Mandarin response, then write it in Chinese. Explain briefly in English what the lesson's pattern adds. Compare with the model, then change one detail and try again.

One possible response: 我吃饭了。

- My response conveys a message that fits the opening situation.
- I can explain the meaning of the pattern, rather than only naming it.
- 我没吃饭。 denies that the eating happened in the stated period. In this ordinary completed-action negative, 没 replaces the positive action report; do not mechanically append verb-了.
- A diner says they used to eat at this shop but have changed their habit: 我不在这里吃饭了。 means they no longer eat here. 不 and final 了 fit this changed situation; the sentence does not report a finished meal here today.
- I tried a second response with a name, time, place, or description changed.

Practise this pattern step by step.

Verb + 了 + Complement (le after the verb)

■ Two hours of reading is not two hours ago

- At a break, a reader reports 我看了两个小时。 The two hours measure the reading they carried out. They do not locate its starting time two hours before this conversation.
- The reader can later resume. Reporting this stretch of reading does not mean the whole book is finished or that all future reading has stopped.

■ Put verb-了 before the duration

- In the original example, 了 directly follows 看; 两个小时 supplies the duration. With a counted object, 我买了三本书。 presents a purchase of three books as carried out.
- The particle describes how the action is presented, rather than serving as a general English past tense. Time phrases and the larger sentence locate the event.

我看了两个小时。

wǒ kàn le liǎng ge xiǎo shí

Word guide: 我 – I; 看 – read; 两 – two; 个 – (measure word); 小时 – hours.

■ Change the time without changing the particle into a tense

- 昨天我看了两个小时。 locates the reported reading yesterday. 两个小时前我开始看书。 instead locates the start two hours ago; 前 makes that relationship explicit.
- In a plan, 等我看了这本书，再和你讨论。 means to discuss it after the reading is done. The reading is a future condition here; 了 does not force it into the past.

Duration differs from event time

我看了两个小时。

Two hours measures the reading carried out

两个小时前我开始看书。

Two hours ago locates the start

等我看了这本书，再和你讨论。

Reading is a future condition for discussion

A duration alone does not establish whole-book completion.

■ A current stretch can use both positions

- A friend asks how long you have been reading while you are still at the book. 我看了两个小时了，现在还在看。 reports a two-hour stretch up to now and explicitly says the reading continues.
- Compare the break report without that continuing context. Do not infer “stopped forever” from one 了 or “still doing it” from a duration alone; the surrounding statement supplies evidence.

■ Change a positive report into a negative carefully

- 我买了三本书。 reports buying three books. 我没买书。 denies buying books in the stated period; this ordinary negative does not keep verb-了 after 买.
- 我没看两个小时，只看了一个小时。 denies a two-hour duration and reports one hour instead. It does not deny all reading: the correction explicitly supplies some.

■ Identify what the quantity actually measures

- A duration answers “how long”; a counted object answers “how many”; a phrase with 前 can answer “how long ago”. Find which question the sentence answers before calculating or translating it.
- Change the report to tomorrow's plan or change two hours to one. Keep the action, quantity and time relation separate; none of these examples alone proves that an entire book was finished.
- Verb-了 presents the action as carried out within its context. It can occur in a future condition as well as a report about yesterday.
- Duration, event time and whether activity continues are separate claims that need their own evidence.

■ Try it with help closed

Recall the situation: Two hours of reading is not two hours ago. Decide what the speaker wanted to communicate. Close the examples. Say a Mandarin response, then write it in Chinese. Explain briefly in English what the lesson’s pattern adds. Compare with the model, then change one detail and try again.

One possible response: 我看了两个小时。

- My response conveys a message that fits the opening situation.
- I can explain the meaning of the pattern, rather than only naming it.
- A friend asks how long you have been reading while you are still at the book. 我看了两个小时了，现在还在看。 reports a two-hour stretch up to now and explicitly says the reading continues.
- Compare the break report without that continuing context. Do not infer “stopped forever” from one 了 or “still doing it” from a duration alone; the surrounding statement supplies evidence.
- I tried a second response with a name, time, place, or description changed.

Practise this pattern step by step.

Statement + 嘛 (obviously / you know)

■ A beginner’s mistake receives an explanation

- A new team member misses a step. A colleague says 他是新手嘛。 to present being a beginner as an understood explanation. It can support giving help, without deciding that every mistake is acceptable.
- Another colleague may still disagree about the explanation. 嘛 shows how the speaker presents the claim; it does not prove that the listener shares it or that the claim is objectively settled.

■ Attach 嘛 to the statement being presented

- The original 这很简单嘛。 presents this task as easy in the speaker’s view. 嘛 is at the end of the statement; it is not the yes/no-question particle 吗 in this example.
- Translate the conversational effect where helpful: “it’s simple, you know” may fit. A fixed “obviously” can sound too strong in some English contexts; there is no one translation for every delivery.

这很简单嘛。

zhè hěn jiǎn dān ma

Word guide: 这 – this; 很 – very; 简单 – simple.

■ Keep the speaker’s assumption separate from evidence

- If the listener replies 对我来说不简单。 , they say it is not easy for them. That response can challenge the original assumption without making the first utterance ungrammatical.
- Evidence might show that beginners need instructions; the particle itself supplies no measurements of skill or task difficulty. Discuss the reason, rather than treating 嘛 as proof.

Presenting an assumption does not prove agreement

这很简单嘛。

The speaker presents this task as easy and understood

Listener: 对我来说不简单。

The listener says it is not easy for them

这很简单吗？

A different job: ask whether the task is easy

Check the claim and response as well as the particle.

■ Compare 嘛, 吗 and 呢 in an actual exchange

- 这很简单吗？ asks whether this is easy. 这很简单嘛。 presents that judgement as understood. Changing the character changes the conversational job, even though both can be transcribed ma without tone marks.
- After giving your view, 你觉得呢？ invites the other person’s opinion. It is a follow-up on the shared topic, rather than a substitute spelling for the statement particle 嘛.

■ A reason can reassure or sound impatient

- A patient colleague may use 他是新手嘛。 to explain why help is needed. An impatient response with the same particle may sound dismissive; surrounding words and delivery matter.
- The written check can identify the stated reason. It cannot certify a kind tone from 嘛 alone or assess the actual sound of a recording that was not supplied.

■ Test the explanation in a changed situation

- If the teammate is experienced, “he is a beginner” no longer fits the stated facts. Choose a reason supported by the new situation instead of keeping the particle and repeating the old claim.
- If you do not know whether the task is easy, **这很简单吗?** can ask about it. Decide whether you are making an understood claim or requesting information before selecting the particle.
- In these statements, 嘛 presents an explanation or judgement as understood. A listener can question the assumption.
- Keep statement 嘛, yes/no 吗 and follow-up 呢 distinct; written particles do not prove agreement, evidence or tone.

■ Try it with help closed

Recall the situation: A beginner’s mistake receives an explanation. Decide what the speaker wanted to communicate. Close the examples. Say a Mandarin response, then write it in Chinese. Explain briefly in English what the lesson’s pattern adds. Compare with the model, then change one detail and try again.

One possible response: 他是新手嘛。

- My response conveys a message that fits the opening situation.
- I can explain the meaning of the pattern, rather than only naming it.
- **这很简单吗?** asks whether this is easy. **这很简单嘛。** presents that judgement as understood. Changing the character changes the conversational job, even though both can be transcribed ma without tone marks.
- After giving your view, **你觉得呢?** invites the other person’s opinion. It is a follow-up on the shared topic, rather than a substitute spelling for the statement particle 嘛.
- I tried a second response with a name, time, place, or description changed.

Practise this pattern step by step.

呢: follow-up questions and shared context

■ Your view makes room for another person’s view

- You say that the morning session suits you, then ask **你觉得呢?** The friend is invited to give their view about that shared plan. The question does not supply their opinion in advance.
- After **我午饭吃米饭。**, **你呢?** asks about the other person’s lunch in this exchange. After **我住上海。**, the same short question asks where the other person lives. The topic supplies what is left unstated.

■ Use 呢 within the question’s structure

- The original **你觉得呢?** keeps the verb 觉得 and ends with 呢. A short follow-up can use **你呢?** when the shared topic makes the intended question clear.
- **这很简单吗?** directly asks whether this is easy. Do not mechanically replace 吗 with 呢 in every yes/no question; question words, structure and context have their own jobs.

你觉得呢?

nǐ jué de ne

Word guide: 你 – you; 觉得 – think.

■ A missing object can prompt a different follow-up

- While searching for a phone, **我的手机呢?** asks where it is or what has happened to it. It asks about the missing phone, rather than requesting someone’s opinion.
- In a shoe shop, you ask one pair’s price, point to another pair and ask **这个呢?** The shared price question makes this “and this one?”; the isolated words do not decide whether you mean price, size or colour.

Shared context supplies the missing question

After **我午饭吃米饭。** → **你呢?**

Ask about the other person’s lunch

After **我住上海。** → **你呢?**

Ask where the other person lives

A missing phone: **我的手机呢?**

Ask where it is or what happened to it

呢 also occurs in statements: **我正在看书呢。**

■ Conversational does not guarantee gentle

- In a friendly planning exchange, **你觉得呢?** can sound open and conversational. The same words with an impatient tone can challenge someone to respond.
- If the topic is unclear, name it: **你觉得这个计划怎么样呢?** asks about this plan. Adding 呢 does not replace the information needed to understand the question.

■ Not every sentence with 呢 is a question

- **我正在看书呢。** is a statement about reading in progress here. It has no missing opinion or location to answer; 呢 also appears in statements beyond this lesson's main question pattern.
- Compare **你在看什么呢?** : 什么 asks what is being read. Identify the sentence's structure and situation instead of using 呢 alone as a question detector.

■ Restore the shared question before answering

- For **你呢?** or **这个呢?**, recover the previous topic and what changed: the person or item. Answer that question, rather than always translating the particle as “what about”.
- Change the topic from lunch to residence, or from shoe price to colour. The appropriate answer changes even though the short follow-up stays the same.
- 呢 can help frame a question or follow-up, but shared context supplies its missing content. It also occurs in statements.
- The written form does not guarantee politeness or identify the intended question without its surrounding exchange.

■ Try it with help closed

Recall the situation: Your view makes room for another person's view. Decide what the speaker wanted to communicate. Close the examples. Say a Mandarin response, then write it in Chinese. Explain briefly in English what the lesson's pattern adds. Compare with the model, then change one detail and try again.

One possible response: 你觉得呢?

- My response conveys a message that fits the opening situation.
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- In a friendly planning exchange, **你觉得呢?** can sound open and conversational. The same words with an impatient tone can challenge someone to respond.
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