The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about speech-making

Putonghua pronunciation: ti2
Cantonese pronunciation: tai4
Meaning: title, topic, subject, write

Teacher 出題目 (chu1 ti2 mu4 = out/give-subject-eye = sets questions) for test/exam. Stupid student’s answer 難題萬丈 (li2 ti2 wan4 zhang4 = depart-from-title-ten-thousand-yards = is completely irrelevant).

Speaker delivers 專題演講 (zhu1n1 ti2 yan3 jiang3 = special-topic/theme-perform-talk = talk on special topic). Audience raise 問題 (wen2 ti2 = ask-subject = questions/problems). Speaker says resolving 難題 (nan2 ti2 = difficult-problems/dilemmas) “沒問題!” (mei2 wen4 ti2 = “Doesn’t-pose-any-problem!”)