



Exploring Factors Influencing Alignment Between Curriculum Standard and English Exam Content

Xiaomeng Li¹, Wei Xiong^{2*}

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 01 April 2024

Received in revised form: 01 December 2024

Accepted: 30 December 2024

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2024.113.18

Keywords

Factors, Alignment, Curriculum Standard, English Exam Content

ABSTRACT

The factors influencing the alignment between English curriculum standards and examination content remain inadequately understood. This study seeks to enhance understanding by examining the perspectives of English language instruction and research specialists, alongside junior English teachers within the context of Chinese junior high schools. A qualitative case study design was employed, with 15 participants selected from Chinese junior high schools. Thematic analysis of the data revealed four primary themes and their associated sub-themes: (1) the curriculum standard itself, primarily encompassing its practicality and clarity; (2) internal school factors, including sub-themes such as students' learning conditions, school support, and teachers' initiative, with the latter covering teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and cultural attitudes; (3) external factors, such as government educational policies and the cognitive and supportive role of learners' families in English learning; and (4) the nature of English examinations. Among these, students' English learning conditions emerged as the most influential factor, as indicated by all interview participants. Notably, the nature of the English examination was identified as a new primary theme, with sub-themes distinct from those highlighted in existing literature on factors influencing alignment. The themes identified in this study address a research gap, as no prior studies have examined factors affecting alignment between English curriculum standards and examination content. This new component is anticipated to stimulate further research on alignment factors within standard-based education studies.

© 2024 Ani Publishing Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In line with the global trend towards standards-based education reform, alignment studies are gaining increased attention within the education sector. The assessment of students' learning outcomes, the implementation of curriculum standards, and teacher professional development are

¹ Doctor of Education in progress, School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia, 11900.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4817-7926>, Email: xiaomengli1124@163.com

² Faculty of communication and culture, Hunan Institute of Applied Technology, 1027 Shanzhu Road, Dingcheng District, Changde City, Hunan Province, China, 415199.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2041-9848>, Email: weio628@student.usm.my

*Correspondence: weio628@student.usm.my

all closely interconnected with curriculum standards (Yu et al., 2022). Researchers such as Hamilton et al. (2008) and Porter (2002) have emphasised the importance of understanding the impact of standards-based reforms on student learning by investigating the alignment between curriculum standards, instructional content, and assessment methods. This highlights the pivotal role of assessment within the framework of standards-based educational reforms.

China also places significant emphasis on standards-based education reform. In 2001, the Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (for Trial Implementation), issued by the state, explicitly stated that curriculum standards are fundamental for developing teaching materials, guiding instruction, and formulating assessments and examination questions. These standards serve as the foundation for the state's management and evaluation of the curriculum. In 2014, the State Council of China released the Deepening the Implementation of the Reform of the Examination and Enrolment System, mandating that National Matriculation Test questions be strictly aligned with curriculum standards. In 2022, the revised compulsory education English curriculum standards were officially enacted and implemented (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Standards-based education reform centres on aligning curriculum standards with instructional materials, including assessments, textbooks, and teaching methods (Rouffet et al., 2023). This alignment is vital for ensuring the validity and fairness of evaluations (Savage & O'Connor, 2019). In English language education, alignment holds particular significance due to the fundamental importance of fostering communication, comprehension, and critical thinking skills. However, achieving alignment between curriculum standards and examination assessments poses a complex challenge for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Numerous studies report substantial misalignment between English curriculum standards and large-scale, high-stakes English assessments (Chen & Park, 2021; Liyuan, 2020; Yiwei et al., 2019). Such misalignment can distort assessment accuracy, encourage inappropriate curriculum practices, and ultimately detract from educational goals (Atuhurra & Kaffenberger, 2022). Despite these issues, there is limited research investigating the underlying factors that lead to misalignment. This paper aims to examine the complex factors influencing alignment between English curriculum standards and examination content, delving into the challenges, nuances, and approaches that facilitate this alignment. Our objective is to clarify how educators can better equip students with the essential skills and knowledge needed for both academic achievement and broader success. At the core of this discussion lies a critical question: How can we ensure that the requirements outlined in the curriculum standards are accurately and effectively represented in the assessments undertaken by students?

China's Compulsory Education System

China's revised compulsory education English curriculum standard, implemented in 2022, primarily serves the compulsory education sector. China's basic education system encompasses 12 years of schooling, comprising six years of primary education, three years of junior high school, and three years of senior high school. After completing junior high school, students who meet the standardised scores on the Grade 9 exit examination proceed to senior high school, while those who do not meet these scores are directed to secondary vocational and technical schools (Wu, 2015). The six years of primary education and three years of junior high school form the basis of China's "nine-year compulsory education" programme. This study focuses specifically on junior high school (Grades 7 to 9) and the requirements of the junior English curriculum.

Literature Review

English Curriculum Standard

The English curriculum standard acts as a foundational framework for the assessment of English, the creation of textbooks, and the delivery of classroom instruction. China has two distinct English curriculum standards: one designed for the nine-year compulsory education programme (comprising six years of primary education and three years of junior high school) and another for senior high school. This study focuses on the former, which is applied to junior high school education across mainland China. First introduced in 2011 and updated in 2022, the compulsory education English curriculum standard places a strong emphasis on core competencies, prioritising academic quality while integrating the processes of teaching, learning, and evaluation (Zou et al., 2024).

Research on curriculum standards in China primarily focuses on formulation, implementation, and core competencies. This study specifically examines the alignment between curriculum standards and their implementation, an area gaining increasing attention as theory is applied in practice. For example, Pak et al. (2020) offer insights for educational leaders addressing alignment between teaching and standards. Atuhurra and Kaffenberger (2022) assess the alignment of curriculum standards, assessments, and teacher instruction in English and mathematics. Massell and Perrault (2014) highlight the critical role of alignment in standards-based reform, while Chen and Wei (2015) investigates alignment in junior middle school chemistry teaching. Despite this, few studies have explored factors influencing curriculum standard implementation from an exam perspective.

Alignment Studies

Alignment is fundamental in standards-based education, playing a key role in validating assessment results and informing accountability decisions. Scholars such as La Marca (2001), Rothman (2004), Koretz and Hamilton (2006), and Haertel and Herman (2005) highlight its significance. Alignment is widely applicable across education, spanning instructional practices and curriculum research, and should integrate content standards, assessments, textbooks, and classroom instruction (Porter et al., 2007). It promotes reflective thinking by offering a structured approach to addressing discrepancies (Porter et al., 2007).

Alignment is typically classified as vertical and horizontal, or internal and external (Porter, 2002; Porter et al., 2007). Horizontal alignment takes place within a single level of government, while vertical alignment spans across different levels, including government, schools, and classrooms (Porter et al., 2007). Internal alignment focuses on the consistency between assessment papers and curriculum standards (Polikoff et al., 2011), whereas external alignment concerns how this relationship is perceived and evaluated by stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and those involved in assessments.

High-Stake English Exams in China

The Junior English Exit Exam, developed in 1980, is coordinated by provincial education departments and based on curriculum standards issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE). It is designed for Grade 9 students, also known as zhongkao, and is one of the key entrance exams in China, alongside the gaokao and the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) (Liu, 2010).

After nine years of compulsory education, students take this exam, which assesses their English proficiency and influences their future educational paths (Song, 2023). High-achieving students may enter regular senior high schools, while others are directed to vocational schools (Wu, 2015). Research indicates that high-stakes tests, like the Junior English Exit Exam, have a significant washback effect on educational practices (Sultana, 2018; Tsang & Isaacs, 2022). This study focuses on the impact of the Junior English Exit Exam.

Factors Influencing Alignment

Numerous factors affect alignment, including the curriculum standard itself, internal school factors, and external influences. The design of high-stakes exam content is a key mechanism for effectively implementing curriculum standards (Lijing & Yunpeng, 2022). The alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessments (CIA) essentially reflects the implementation of curriculum standards (Pak et al., 2020). The factors influencing alignment are, in essence, those that affect the implementation of the curriculum standard. This study examines the formal curriculum and the factors that influence its implementation.

Fullan (2011) identified three key groups of factors influencing curriculum implementation: the characteristics of the innovation, the characteristics of the adopting unit, and external factors. Expanding on this, Snyder et al. (1992) outlined four categories comprising 15 factors. Liangfang (1996) categorised these factors into five main areas: the characteristics of the curriculum program, communication and collaboration between developers and implementers, organisational and leadership roles of educational authorities and school leaders, teacher training, and support from external factors. Ma et al. (2009) grouped the factors into three levels, identifying nine specific factors. Analysis of these frameworks reveals three main categories: internal factors, external factors, and the influence of reform characteristics. This study will investigate the factors affecting the implementation of the English curriculum standard in China from these perspectives.

Internal factors within schools, particularly those related to teachers, are crucial in the successful implementation of curriculum standards (Karakus, 2021). Teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and cultural perspectives significantly shape how curriculum standards are translated into practice. In the context of educational reforms, teachers' knowledge becomes even more critical, as each reform introduces new demands. The extent to which teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge is a key determinant of the success of these reforms (Karakus, 2021). Teacher beliefs significantly influence their responses to and implementation of reform-based curricula. For example, Roehrig et al. (2007) identified four key beliefs that impact the enactment of the English curriculum: the transmission of knowledge, efficiency, maintaining curriculum rigor, and preparing students for success in examinations. Zembylas (2005) describes teacher beliefs as convictions shaped by personal experiences, emotions, and evaluations, with cognitive components playing a crucial role in their formation. Teacher culture, as defined by Sachs and Smith (1988), refers to the values, beliefs, and behavioural norms surrounding education and teaching, shaped through extensive professional practice.

Effective curriculum reform requires not only changes in educational materials and methods but also a shift in the underlying curriculum value system, representing a transformation in curriculum culture. Despite various reforms, China's basic education system remains rooted in an exam-oriented approach, largely due to its cultural foundations. Examining these issues from a cultural perspective is essential, as it underscores the complexity and challenges of curriculum reform. Therefore, this study seeks to explore factors influencing the implementation of

curriculum standards from the teachers' perspective. While previous research has explored factors influencing alignment between educational components like curriculum standards and instruction, few studies have focused on large-scale, high-stakes exams. The factors affecting alignment between curriculum standards and exam content remain underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the alignment between the junior English exit exam and the curriculum standard.

Conceptual Framework of the Current Study

The study of alignment between curriculum standards inherently pertains to their implementation, which forms part of large-scale educational reform influenced by various factors. To explore these influences, this study will be guided by Fullan's change theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple dimensions impacting educational change, particularly in relation to assessment. Fullan (2007) change theory posits that educational change is non-linear and complex, characterised by unpredictability and uncertainty. Change does not follow a straightforward path from initiation to institutionalisation, with a range of factors interacting at each stage. Fullan also asserts that "change is learning," where learning arises as an adaptive response to the challenges of change. Building on this framework, numerous scholars have examined factors affecting educational reform, categorising them into internal factors, external factors, and the characteristics of the reform programme itself. Accordingly, this study will investigate the factors influencing the implementation of the English curriculum standard in China from the perspective of assessment.

Methodology

Sample

This study employs the interview method to explore the factors influencing the alignment between the junior English curriculum standard and the Junior English Exit Exam. To achieve this, purposive sampling is utilised to select participants with specific characteristics relevant to the study. Purposive sampling focuses on individuals who possess knowledge and experience pertinent to the phenomenon being investigated (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach allows the researcher to identify and select participants who are well-informed about the topic under study. In this study, interview participants include junior English teachers responsible for Grade 9 students (as these students will sit the Junior English Exit Exam the following year) and English language research and instruction specialists involved in the design of the exam content. For junior English teachers, participants must meet specific criteria: they should be familiar with the interpretation of the curriculum standards and have experience using previous Junior English Exit Exam papers annually to help students prepare. English language research and instruction specialists, who play a key role in the Chinese education system as "gatekeepers," directly contribute to the design of high-stakes exams like the Junior English Exit Exam and the National College Entrance Examination.

These specialists are typically based in educational institutions or schools, with at least six years of teaching experience. They are relatively few in number, with top schools having one or two specialists, and some working in Provincial Institutes of Educational Testing and Research. Following the identification of the participant characteristics, nine individuals were selected for the interviews: six junior English teachers and three research and instruction specialists. The

participants represent schools from three regions of China: Gansu (a less developed province), Jiangsu (a developed province), and Guizhou (a developing province). While various researchers suggest different guidelines for the number of participants (Lowe et al., 2018), the final count should be based on data saturation, which occurs when information becomes repetitive (Francis et al., 2010; Naeem et al., 2024). In this study, data saturation was achieved with 9 participants. Participant details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Details of Interview Participants

Teacher Codes	Qualification	Teaching Experience
T-1	Grade 9 Junior English Teacher with Intermediate Title	5 Years
T-2	Grade 9 Junior English Senior Teacher	15 Years
T-3	Grade 9 Junior English Senior Teacher	10 Years
T-4	Grade 9 Junior English Teacher with Intermediate Title	5 Years
T-5	Grade 9 Junior English Senior Teacher	12 Years
T-6	Grade 9 Junior English Teacher with Intermediate Title	6 Years
T-7	English Language Research and Instruction Specialist	20 Years
T-8	English Language Research and Instruction Specialist	15 Years
T-9	English Language Research and Instruction Specialist	18 Years

Data Collection

Prior to the interviews, consent was obtained from the administration of each selected school. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, dissemination of findings, their rights, the option to withdraw, benefits, and the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016). Participants were provided with materials verifying the researcher's identity and signed informed consent before the interview. Due to time and space constraints, online interviews were conducted, with a rehearsal session to ensure participants understood the questions. Each formal interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded, using open-ended questions to prevent researcher bias (Brubacher et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data and is considered foundational for learning other qualitative analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves generating themes, analysing patterns within the data, and uncovering underlying meanings (Byrne, 2022). The process begins with reading and re-reading the full dataset to become familiar with it. Next, codes and themes are generated, followed by defining and naming the themes, and ultimately, the creation of the report.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed multiple data sources, investigators, and member checking strategies for data triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data was gathered from junior high school Grade 9 teachers in various roles and English language instruction specialists. Multiple investigators, including two English language experts, independently analysed the same interview data, with subsequent comparison of findings (Patton, 2014). Finally, member checking was conducted to gather feedback from participants on

the preliminary findings, ensuring the accuracy of the interpretation of the interview data (Maxwell, 2013).

Findings of the Study

After conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researchers coded and analysed the data for emerging themes using the six-phase analytical process of thematic analysis by Clarke and Braun (2017). This analysis revealed five major themes with corresponding sub-themes: (1) the curriculum standard itself (practicality and clarity), (2) internal school factors (learners' English learning situation, school support, teachers' initiative), (3) external factors (educational policies, learners' family cognition and support for English learning), (4) the nature of English exams. The most influential factor, identified by all participants, was learners' English learning situation. Figure 1 below illustrates the factors and sub-factors influencing alignment.

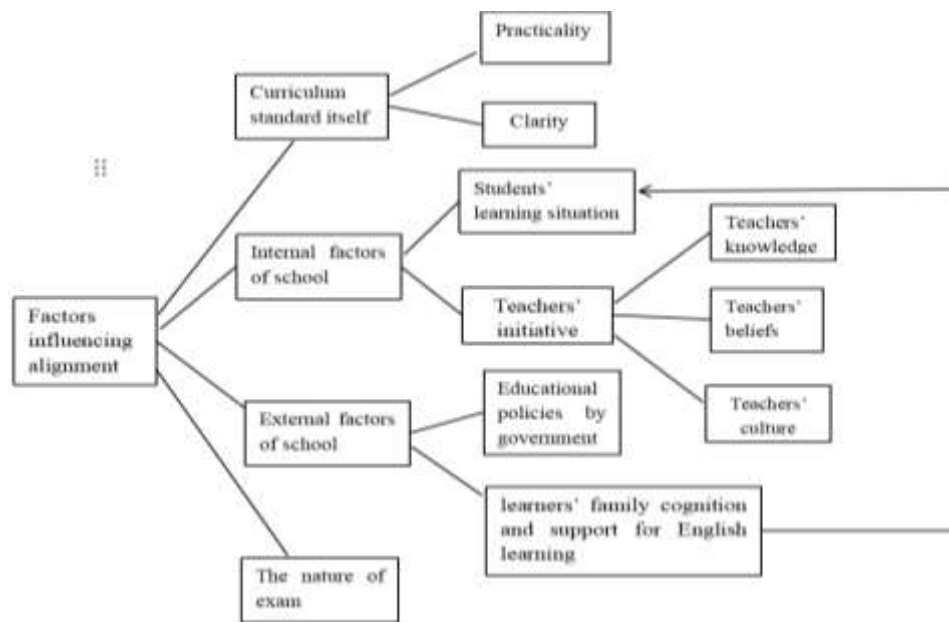


Figure 1: Factors and Sub-Factors Influencing Alignment

Curriculum Standard Itself

The clarity, comprehensibility, and practicality of curriculum standards directly influence how educators interpret, perceive, and implement these standards. Interview data reveals that certain aspects of the curriculum standards lack clarity, and a noticeable gap remains between the standards and their practical application. As articulated by T-2,

In this case, I think these requirements in the curriculum standards may be a little challenging for our children here. It is quite difficult to expect them to reach a certain level by the end of primary school and another level by the end of junior high school.

The participant noted that the requirements in the curriculum standard are challenging, making it difficult for both teachers and students to achieve the final goals outlined due to limited

class hours and the constrained English learning environment at school and home. T4 also emphasised this issue,

Personally, I feel that the establishment of the goal system in curriculum standard seems to be a blind spot for front-line teachers. We know it exists, but we're not quite clear on the specifics.

As mentioned by the participant, certain aspects of the junior English curriculum standard are clear, but others, such as the unit education blueprint, are ambiguous and lack sufficient detail for frontline teachers to implement effectively. The clarity of the statements in the curriculum standard directly impacts its implementation. If these statements are unclear, the alignment between the curriculum standard and its implementation activities, such as exam content design, instruction, and textbook compilation, will be negatively affected.

Internal Factors of School

Based on the interview data, the internal factors influencing the alignment between the curriculum standard and the junior English exit exam content include students' learning situations, school support, and teachers' initiative. The analysis revealed that, in designing the exit exam content, priority is given to the varying learner situations across different regions. In less developed areas, such as Gansu, students tend to have a weaker academic foundation and lower cognitive levels. As a result, the exit exam content is designed with lower difficulty, which may lead to a misalignment with the curriculum standard. In contrast, more developed regions, with richer educational resources and higher student cognitive levels, tend to design more challenging exam content, creating a further disconnect between the exit exam content and the curriculum standard. As explained by T-1,

The examination questions in our region are relatively simple. We formulate our own questions independently because we take into account the weak foundation of our students...

Similarly, T-2 clarified that,

I think the main reason for the possible misalignment lies in the students' actual English proficiency and abilities. According to the curriculum standards, students should have a vocabulary of 3000 words upon completing junior high school. But in reality, our students may not reach that level upon graduating from junior high school.

Based on teachers' responses, it is evident that designing the junior English exam content requires not only adherence to the curriculum standards but also consideration of students' actual learning conditions across different regions. The learning situation of students plays a critical role in the design process. In implementing the curriculum standards, a gap often exists between the stipulated requirements and the reality of students' learning environments, with students' learning conditions acting as a barrier to alignment. School support, defined as the creation of a conducive environment for teachers to understand and apply the curriculum standards (e.g., through exam content design, lesson planning, and instruction), also influences alignment. Additionally, teachers' initiative in engaging with the curriculum standards affects their interpretation and, consequently, the alignment between the curriculum and its implementation. Data from the study reveals that teachers' initiative is influenced by three factors: their knowledge, beliefs, and culture, all of which significantly impact alignment. Teachers' knowledge refers to a deep understanding of both the curriculum standards and the English subject matter, while their beliefs represent their perspectives and opinions during the process of curriculum implementation.

As explained by T-2,

The teacher's personal initiative is crucial. Specifically, if a teacher is not familiar with the curriculum standard, he won't know what the new curriculum standards require them to teach students. They may continue to stick to the previous approach, focusing on grammar and vocabulary. Some teachers may even neglect aspects like pronunciation, let alone high-level thinking and cultural awareness.

One participant noted that teachers' initiative plays a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of curriculum standards. Teachers' initiative refers to their internal motivation to engage with the curriculum standards, which enables them to develop a deeper understanding of these standards. English language and instruction specialists T-7, T-8, and T-9 emphasized the importance of teachers' knowledge in English language and their understanding of curriculum standard implementation, particularly in the area of assessment. As T-7 explained,

In addition to being familiar with the curriculum standards, crafting exam questions also requires an understanding of testing principles. I wasn't very knowledgeable about testing when I first started. So, I relied on experience and referred to some teaching materials. ...

T-9 also expressed a similar viewpoint regarding the importance of teachers' knowledge,

The curriculum standards are relatively easy to grasp, but without an understanding of testing principles, crafting exam questions can become chaotic, lacking in structure....

The first key point is that all English language and instruction specialists emphasize the importance of understanding curriculum standards, which they consider foundational knowledge. However, they place greater emphasis on testing knowledge. While they have some understanding of testing, there is a need for deeper knowledge. The interview data reveals that, due to their frequent involvement in formal exam question design, English language and instruction specialists generally have more experience and a better understanding of testing knowledge compared to regular teachers. The second point highlights the insufficient pre-service training and weak motivation for in-service learning. Some educational research officers possess low assessment literacy, which can be attributed to factors such as a lack of systematic learning, misconceptions, and insufficient theoretical awareness. Moreover, participants also expressed negative beliefs regarding the challenges encountered during the implementation of the curriculum standards. A prevailing sense of passive helplessness was evident, with many participants feeling that teachers alone are unable to resolve these issues. As T-6 noted,

It seems like breaking through this situation is really challenging, and we feel incapable of helping them.... Teachers can only guide them by imparting study methods and knowledge they have acquired...

In the process of implementing curriculum standards, despite the various external factors that may influence teachers, these factors must ultimately be filtered through teachers' decisions and judgments before affecting classroom teaching. The degree of implementation and other related concerns are directly tied to teachers. Teachers' understanding of curriculum reform, particularly their beliefs about it, plays a pivotal role in the successful implementation of curriculum standards. Additionally, participants highlighted the influence of teacher culture, which is shaped by an exam-oriented mindset. This mindset emphasizes developing skills and knowledge aimed at preparing students for exams. As T-4 mentioned,

...Many aspects of school organization and institutional development are also designed to enhance students' exam-taking abilities or skills.... Through long-term practice, the majority of middle school teachers are able to grasp some basic content or techniques related to exam preparation. Gradually, a widely accepted

and shared cognitive framework on how to deal with exams emerges within schools.

Based on the interview data, it is evident that the exam-oriented mindset significantly impacts the implementation of English curriculum principles. The aim of the English reading curriculum is to enhance students' core competencies, which necessitates assessment methods, approaches, and content that align with its objectives. Without this alignment, achieving the curriculum's goals becomes challenging. When discussing the English curriculum standard, most teachers highlighted the contradiction between the curriculum's objectives and current exam practices, expressing concerns about the potential impact on the Junior English Exit Exam. As a result, teachers strongly associate the implementation of the English reading curriculum with exams, admission rates, and other related factors.

Regarding school support, participants emphasized that schools offer various training programs on curriculum standards, including those held in other provinces, to improve teachers' understanding and practical application of the standards. Teacher research groups regularly meet to discuss teaching methodologies, and experienced teachers mentor newcomers. Based on participants' statements, curriculum standard training is crucial for its effective implementation. The frequency of training sessions is a key factor in helping teachers accurately grasp the core concepts and challenges of the curriculum. The more frequently teachers receive training, the more effectively they can apply the curriculum standards in their teaching.

T3 share similar ideas,

Our school's curriculum standards training is quite comprehensive. The training is categorized into several types. ... Every week, teachers gather for collaborative lesson planning sessions to discuss any issues they encounter. ...

The effective integration of centralized training with collaborative, practical exploration among teachers is crucial for helping them understand and embrace the objectives of the curriculum standards. This approach fosters the development of an implementation pathway that aligns with both the school's goals and teachers' needs. However, many of the surveyed teachers report that the short-term theoretical training they receive only offers a basic overview of the new curriculum's fundamental concepts and design principles, without addressing specific strategies for its implementation. As a result, teachers are often left to implement the new curriculum without sufficient preparation. While they may feel obligated to adopt the curriculum due to administrative mandates, there is a lack of emotional buy-in, as they do not fully support its implementation.

External Factors Influencing Alignment

Frequent changes in educational policies are part of the government's efforts to effectively implement curriculum standards, which can facilitate better alignment between the curriculum and exit exam content. Additionally, the support and understanding of learners' families also play a significant role in influencing the alignment between curriculum standards and exam content. As T-5 noted, the impact of educational policy changes on this alignment is noteworthy,

...Their understanding of the curriculum standards might differ, resulting in uneven levels of question difficulty.

Educational policy changes aim to enhance the alignment between curriculum standards and their implementation by centralizing educational resources and facilitating more discussions

among exam paper design experts. This collaborative approach helps deepen their understanding and interpretation of curriculum standards, thereby promoting alignment between the curriculum and exam content. However, these policy changes can also have negative effects on alignment, as highlighted by T2,

... However, many administrative departments still evaluate based on the standards of Junior English Exit Exam.... many teachers find themselves in a dilemma: while advocating for new approaches on one hand, they end up resorting to old methods to cope with the examinations on the other hand...

In an educational setting focused on preparing students for standardized entrance exams, the junior English Exit Exam (JEEE) plays a critical role in shaping instructional priorities. Teachers are evaluated based on their students' performance, which leads them to prioritize exam readiness. Interviews reveal that balancing new curricula with standardized testing requirements influences teaching practices. Teachers are most likely to adopt methods that align with exam score goals and the preferences of key stakeholders. Additionally, T-4 emphasized the impact of family cognition and support on the alignment between curriculum standards and exam content,

What you are talking about is that our objective environment...They don't really care about the purpose of learning English is, such as gaining another perspective on the world. Moreover, due to limited exposure, in addition to receiving English knowledge from teachers at school, parents don't actively enhance their children's English abilities in their free time.

According to the participant, when families have a strong understanding of the importance of English learning, they actively engage in enhancing their children's language skills outside of school, leading to an improvement in students' English proficiency. In an environment where this support is prevalent, exam content can be better aligned with the curriculum standards, incorporating higher-order cognitive skills that reflect the actual capabilities of the learners. Therefore, the level of family support and understanding directly affects students' learning outcomes, which subsequently influences the alignment between the curriculum standards and the content of English exams.

Nature of Exams

The degree of alignment with curriculum standards is also influenced by the nature of the exams. The Junior English Exit Exam is a pass/fail assessment designed to ensure that 50% of students qualify for admission to senior high school based on the current enrollment rate. To accommodate the majority, the exam questions must be neither too difficult nor too easy, aiming for an even distribution of students passing and failing. As emphasized by T-6, this approach is central to maintaining fairness and balance in the exam outcomes.

The junior English exit exam is passing in its nature. Of which the most difficult questions in the exit exam may account for about 20%. The ratio of medium difficulty questions, difficult questions, and simple questions is typically 7:2:1.

As T1 expounded,

In junior English exit exam, the aim is to ensure that almost 80% of the students can pass the exam. On the other hand, I think they try to make most people secure admission to high school.

According to the interview data, the structure of the exam contributes to discrepancies with the curriculum standards. Given that the Junior English Exit Exam is designed as a pass/fail test, exam designers must consider students' learning levels and aim to maintain a specific enrolment

rate. As a result, the distribution of question difficulty is adjusted to ensure an equitable outcome, which can lead to misalignment and divergence from the original curriculum standards.

Discussion

Factors Influencing Alignment

The findings from the interviews revealed four key factors influencing the alignment between the Junior English Curriculum Standard and the reading questions in the JEEE. These include the curriculum standard itself, internal school factors, external school factors, and the nature of the exam. While the first three factors align with the findings of [Farrell et al. \(2017\)](#) the current study differs in two significant ways. First, it introduces an additional factor—the nature of the English exam—not emphasised in the aforementioned studies, and the sub-dimensions of these factors vary slightly. Second, drawing on [Fullan \(2011\)](#) interpretation of change theory, the study acknowledges that curriculum standard implementation is a complex and uncertain process, influenced by various context-specific factors at each stage. This context-based variation helps explain the differences between studies. [Hargreaves \(2004\)](#) highlights the importance of context in educational change, further suggesting that the factors affecting curriculum standard implementation can vary depending on the specific context. Additionally, while Fulmer's change theory offers a broad explanation of the factors influencing curriculum standard implementation across all stages, the current study focuses solely on one aspect—exam content. As such, the influencing factors may differ based on the context and stage of implementation, which will be further discussed in the following sections.

Curriculum Standard Itself

The interview data in this study reveal that the clarity and practicality of the Junior English Curriculum Standard are inadequate. Specifically, the standard represents an ideal that is difficult to achieve, with a disconnect between its theoretical framework and its actual implementation. These findings echo those of [Atuhurra and Kaffenberger \(2022\)](#), who noted that there is room for improvement in making curriculum standards more coherent. According to their research, this misalignment arises from poorly structured and organised standards, which fail to align with the needs of students in the classroom. Many countries have set overly ambitious curriculum standards that are not commensurate with the pace at which children learn. [Junhua \(2015\)](#) expressed a similar view, highlighting that parts of the curriculum standards remain unclear. Teachers' lack of understanding of these standards is partly due to their generality and lack of actionable guidance. While teachers may conceptually identify with the new curriculum, their understanding of how to implement it in practice remains limited. This ambiguity in practical application contributes to teachers' resistance and complaints regarding the new curriculum. [Fulmer \(2011\)](#) emphasised that the characteristics of educational reform significantly influence its implementation, a notion also reflected in [Hongbiao \(2017\)](#) study. Yin found that while teachers found the concepts of the curriculum standard easy to accept, they struggled with translating these concepts into actionable teaching practices, leading to a low recognition of the curriculum's instrumental value.

Internal Factors of School Level

Nearly all researchers on curriculum implementation ([Farrell et al., 2017](#); [Fullan, 2011](#); [Snyder](#)

et al., 1992; Zhang & Liu, 2013) have highlighted external factors influencing its success. Interview data from this study reveal that students' actual learning situations significantly affect the alignment between curriculum standards and exam content, a factor often overlooked in prior studies focused on teachers. This is particularly evident in less developed areas, where challenges such as weak English foundations, negative attitudes towards learning English, and individual differences hinder teachers' ability to align curriculum goals with students' capabilities. Scholars like Atuhurra and Kaffenberger (2022) and Wixson et al. (2002) stress the need to address these learning conditions to better align instruction and exams with students' needs, facilitating more effective curriculum implementation.

Some scholars offer a different perspective on teacher training for curriculum implementation, arguing that while governmental training programs are essential for teacher development, they often fail to integrate effectively with teachers' prior experiences and the specific context of school environments. This critique highlights the challenges in supporting teachers' efforts to implement the curriculum effectively (Harris & Sass, 2011). Another key internal factor is teachers' initiative, encompassing their knowledge, beliefs, and culture. In this study, teacher knowledge refers to their understanding of the junior English curriculum standard and subject-specific English reading. The findings suggest that while some teachers continue to rely on outdated assessment content and lack a deep understanding of the curriculum, others demonstrate insufficient assessment literacy. This knowledge gap significantly impacts the alignment between the curriculum standard and exam content, hindering effective implementation (Erarslan, 2019).

English language and instruction specialists play a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of new curriculum standards, acting as intermediaries who guide and support English teachers in adapting to educational reforms (Pak et al., 2020). However, interview data suggests a need for improvement in assessment literacy, with specialists identifying gaps in teachers' understanding. Shaoyong (2021) notes that many teachers lack pre-service training in assessments, with some unaware of fundamental assessment principles. Kane (2013) further argues that teachers must possess comprehensive knowledge of assessment principles, particularly in large-scale, high-stakes assessments, to accurately evaluate assessment validity and address the social accountability associated with assessment outcomes. Additionally, teachers' beliefs, explored as part of their initiative, are an important factor in curriculum implementation. Negative beliefs were evident in the current study, with teachers expressing feelings of powerlessness due to the perceived inadequacy of their efforts to bridge the gap between curriculum requirements and students' learning situations. Teachers' beliefs about the curriculum play a vital role in its successful implementation, as positive beliefs can help teachers overcome challenges during the process, as noted by Clerc (2019).

Teachers' culture, shaped by values, beliefs, and norms from their educational experiences (Austin & Roegman, 2021), was found to be collaborative in this study, focusing on information and resource sharing within schools to build instructional confidence. However, inter-school communication was limited (Jin, 2020). An exam-oriented culture also emerged, with a strong focus on improving students' grades, which influenced teaching practices and aligned them with exam demands (Junhua, 2015). This culture has shaped educational leadership and pedagogy, often conflating curriculum standards with exam outcomes (Yang & May, 2023), making it difficult to achieve the junior English curriculum's goal of enhancing core competencies without aligning assessment methods with curriculum objectives.

External Factors of School

External factors influencing the alignment between curriculum standards and reading exam content are explored in two aspects: government educational policies and learners' cognition and support for English learning. Previous research (Farrell et al., 2017; Fullan, 2011; Lijing & Yunpeng, 2022; Snyder et al., 1992) has highlighted the role of external factors such as educational administrative attitudes and family support. In the current study, however, only learners' family and educational administrative factors are considered. Interview data reveals that educational policies, particularly recent changes like standardized exam content, are seen positively by participants. While frequent policy changes can negatively affect alignment (Bay, 2016), participants believe these changes will improve alignment by addressing regional discrepancies in exam content and students' learning situations. As Lacey et al. (2017) suggest, centralized standardized exam content ensures effective communication of national reform intentions to grassroots schools.

Learners' family cognition and support for English learning are identified as factors influencing the alignment between curriculum standards and exam content. According to interview data from teachers, parent-teacher dialogues reveal that most parents view English learning as unnecessary, while a small proportion consider it a tool for communication. The former group tends to neglect their children's education and English learning, providing limited opportunities for language use, whereas the latter offer resources such as storybooks and compact discs to facilitate independent learning. Similar findings are noted in Junhua (2015) study, which highlights that most parents lack a deep understanding of English learning, often equating proficiency with high exam scores. This score-centric view contrasts with the evaluation methods outlined in the curriculum standards. In such a context, teachers struggle to incorporate the new curriculum standards into assessment practices, resulting in misalignment or deviation from the intended curriculum framework.

Nature of English Exams

The nature of the English exam is identified as a factor affecting the alignment between the junior English curriculum standard and exam content, a dimension not explored in previous studies (Aron-Salvacion, 2023; Farrell et al., 2017; Fullan, 2011). This new perspective arises because, unlike these studies that cover various stages of curriculum implementation, this study specifically examines the junior English exit exam. According to interview data, the exam functions primarily as a pass-fail mechanism, with its pass nature outweighing its selection role. As approximately half of students must enter senior high school, the exam content is designed to be accessible to the majority, with difficulty levels carefully controlled at a ratio of 8:1:1, as noted by Yiwei et al. (2019). This structure leads to discrepancies in the cognitive levels of the exam questions, especially in relation to the curriculum standards' requirements for application and analysis.

Conclusion

Factors influencing alignment were explored across four key aspects: the curriculum standard itself, internal school factors, external school factors, and the nature of the exam. Each of these main dimensions contains distinct sub-dimensions. Under the curriculum standard, the sub-dimensions identified include clarity and practicality. Internal factors encompass students' learning situations, school support, and teacher initiative, which is further influenced by teacher

knowledge, beliefs, and culture. External factors include educational policies enacted by the government, as well as learners' family cognition and support for English learning.

Implications

Based on the findings, exam content designers exhibit varying and incomplete interpretations of the junior English curriculum standards. Participants believe that a uniform approach to exam content proposition results in higher-quality exams compared to independent proposals. Therefore, the junior English exam content proposition team should be unified to ensure the consistency and quality of the exam papers. Educational departments should place greater emphasis on the selection and training of exam content designers, focusing not only on teaching experience but also on their understanding of curriculum standards and testing knowledge. Designers should be selected for their deep comprehension of the curriculum standards and their ability to accurately apply these concepts. Providing professional training will further enhance their test-setting capabilities.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of providing more specific and actionable descriptions of certain aspects of the curriculum standards, along with examples, to make them clearer for implementation. The research also reveals that students' learning situations represent the greatest barrier to alignment, yet these situations can provide valuable insights for exam content design. School decision-making departments should strengthen their analysis of students' learning conditions to address regional disparities. Additionally, fostering inter-school cooperation and establishing learning organizations will help promote professional growth. Creating a positive atmosphere that encourages open communication, trust, support, and knowledge-sharing is crucial in enhancing teacher beliefs, culture, and knowledge, thereby contributing to a more effective implementation of curriculum standards.

Limitations and Future Research

The participants in this study were junior English experts with extensive experience in compiling English papers; however, the sample size was relatively small, which limits the generalizability of findings. Including a broader range of experts from various regions in China could enhance the applicability of the results. Several recommendations for future research emerge from this study. One suggestion is to examine English instruction in the classroom to identify additional factors affecting alignment. While this study focused on curriculum standards implementation from the perspective of assessment practices, examining instructional practices is essential to gain a more comprehensive understanding of alignment factors in the EFL context. Additionally, future studies could collect quantitative data to explore the relationships between the four factors identified here. Quantitative analysis would validate these relationships, offering theoretical support and enhancing the robustness of findings.

References

- Aron-Salvacion, J. (2023). Book Review: "Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction". In. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7606170>
- Atuhurra, J., & Kaffenberger, M. (2022). Measuring education system coherence: Alignment of curriculum standards, examinations, and teacher instruction in Tanzania and Uganda. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 92, 102598. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2022.102598>

- Austin, T., & Roegman, R. (2021). Satisfaction, preparedness, and implementation: Teacher culture and climate in magnet school conversions. *Education and Urban Society*, 53(8), 855-885. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124521996680>
- Bay, E. (2016). Developing a Scale on "Factors Regarding Curriculum Alignment". *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(5), 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.1114/jets.v4i5.1305>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brubacher, S. P., Powell, M., Skouteris, H., & Guadagno, B. (2015). The effects of e-simulation interview training on teachers' use of open-ended questions. *Child abuse & neglect*, 43, 95-103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.02.004>
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & quantity*, 56(3), 1391-1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>
- Chen, B., & Wei, B. (2015). Examining chemistry teachers' use of curriculum materials: in view of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. *Chemistry Education Research and Practice*, 16(2), 260-272. <https://doi.org/10.1039/C4RP00237G>
- Chen, J., & Park, A. (2021). School entry age and educational attainment in developing countries: Evidence from China's compulsory education law. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 49(3), 715-732. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2020.12.004>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The journal of positive psychology*, 12(3), 297-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Clerc, C. (2019). *English teachers' beliefs and curriculum implementation in Switzerland: The case study of lower secondary schools in a French-speaking region* University of Southampton]. <http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/id/eprint/438641>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1140378606>
- Erarslan, A. (2019). Factors affecting the implementation of primary school English language teaching programs in Turkey. *The Journal of Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(2), 7-22. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jltl/issue/46605/567589>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Farrell, L., Bourgeois-Law, G., Ajjawi, R., & Regehr, G. (2017). An autoethnographic exploration of the use of goal oriented feedback to enhance brief clinical teaching encounters. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 22, 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-016-9686-5>
- Francis, J. J., Johnston, M., Robertson, C., Glidewell, L., Entwistle, V., Eccles, M. P., & Grimshaw, J. M. (2010). What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. *Psychology and health*, 25(10), 1229-1245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440903194015>
- Fullan, M. (2007). Change theory as a force for school improvement. In *Intelligent leadership: Constructs for thinking education leaders* (pp. 27-39). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6022-9>
- Fullan, M. (2011). *The six secrets of change: What the best leaders do to help their organizations survive and thrive*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1059037282>

- Fulmer, G. W. (2011). Estimating critical values for strength of alignment among curriculum, assessments, and instruction. *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics*, 36(3), 381-402. <https://doi.org/10.3102/1076998610381397>
- Haertel, E. H., & Herman, J. L. (2005). A historical perspective on validity arguments for accountability testing. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 104(2), 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-7984.2005.00023.x>
- Hamilton, L. S., Stecher, B. M., & Yuan, K. (2008). Standards-Based Reform in the United States: History, Research, and Future Directions. *Center on Education Policy*. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=b03dbf67ea34016ce51c3b9fde7381e7e3fba077>
- Hargreaves, A. (2004). Inclusive and exclusive educational change: Emotional responses of teachers and implications for leadership. *School leadership & management*, 24(3), 287-309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1363243042000266936>
- Harris, D. N., & Sass, T. R. (2011). Teacher training, teacher quality and student achievement. *Journal of public economics*, 95(7-8), 798-812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.11.009>
- Hongbiao, Y. (2017). Does curriculum reform necessarily require core competency? . *Global Education*, 363(10), 73-80. <https://www.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJF&dbname=CJFDLAST2017&filename=WGJN201710007&uniplatform=OVERSEA&v=hJgteDvdPmgOcbeGP5CHJ-Q6X2-BwUA2fsRoB4ODf3i1zD1Wcy92zdxpCICq2GPa>
- Jin, X. (2020). *A Study on Alignment of Classroom Teaching ,Academic Examination and Curriculum Standards in Mathematics of Junior High School* [Dissertation, <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJF&dbname=CJFDLAST2021&filename=1020656903.nh>]
- Junhua, D. (2015). *The Study on Status and Affecting Factors of English Curriculum Implementation in Primary School* [Doctoral dissertation, CNKI Publishing House. <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJF&dbname=CJFDLAST2015&filename=1015407678.nh>]
- Kane, M. T. (2013). Validating the interpretations and uses of test scores. *Journal of educational measurement*, 50(1), 1-73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jedm.12000>
- Karakus, G. (2021). A literary review on curriculum implementation problems. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 9(3), 201-220. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v9i3.3983>
- Koretz, D., & Hamilton, L. S. (2006). Testing for accountability in K-12. *Educational measurement*, 4, 531-578. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP20060030.html
- La Marca, P. M. (2001). Alignment of standards and assessments as an accountability criterion. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 7(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.7275/ahcr-wg84>
- Lacey, A., Cornell, D., & Konold, T. (2017). The relations between teasing and bullying and middle school standardized exam performance. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 37(2), 192-221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431615596428>
- Liangfang, S. (1996). Reflections on the Current Three-Year Teacher Training Program. *Journal of East China Normal University*, 3, 47-51. <https://link.oversea.cnki.net/doi/10.16382/j.cnki.1000-5560.1996.03.008>
- Lijing, S., & Yunpeng, M. (2022). Research on the implementation of compulsory education

- curriculum standards. *Curriculum, Teaching Material, and Method*, 42(10), 28-35. <https://link.oversea.cnki.net/doi/10.19877/j.cnki.kjcj.2022.10.007>
- Liu, Q. (2010). The national education examinations authority and its English language tests. *English language assessment and the Chinese learner*, 29-43. <https://www.routledge.com/English-Language-Assessment-and-the-Chinese-Learner/Cheng-Curtis/p/book/9780203873045>
- Liyuan, C. (2020). *Alignment between Curriculum Standards and reading questions in National Matriculation English Test (2018-2019)* [Dissertation for doctoral degree, China CNKI Publishing House. <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD202101&filename=1020763000.nh>
- Lowe, A., Norris, A. C., Farris, A. J., & Babbage, D. R. (2018). Quantifying thematic saturation in qualitative data analysis. *Field methods*, 30(3), 191-207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X17749386>
- Ma, Y.-p., Yin, H.-b., Tang, L.-f., & Liu, L.-y. (2009). Teacher receptivity to system-wide curriculum reform in the initiation stage: a Chinese perspective. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10(3), 423-432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9029-9>
- Massell, D., & Perrault, P. (2014). Alignment: Its role in standards-based reform and prospects for the Common Core. *Theory into Practice*, 53(3), 196-203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.916956>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach: An interactive approach*. sage. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1027476839>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1002921860>
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2022). *Notification on the issuance of the compulsory education curriculum plan and curriculum standards*. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-04/21/content_5686535.htm
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2024). Demystification and actualisation of data saturation in qualitative research through thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 16094069241229777. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241229777>
- Pak, K., Polikoff, M. S., Desimone, L. M., & Saldívar García, E. (2020). The adaptive challenges of curriculum implementation: Insights for educational leaders driving standards-based reform. *Aera Open*, 6(2), 2332858420932828. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420932828>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage publications. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1191064204>
- Polikoff, M. S., Porter, A. C., & Smithson, J. (2011). How well aligned are state assessments of student achievement with state content standards? *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(4), 965-995. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211410684>
- Porter, A. C. (2002). Measuring the content of instruction: Uses in research and practice. *Educational researcher*, 31(7), 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031007003>
- Porter, A. C., Smithson, J., Blank, R., & Zeidner, T. (2007). Alignment as a teacher variable. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 20(1), 27-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08957340709336729>
- Roehrig, G. H., Kruse, R. A., & Kern, A. (2007). Teacher and school characteristics and their influence on curriculum implementation. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*:

- The Official Journal of the National Association for Research in Science Teaching*, 44(7), 883-907. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20180>
- Rothman, R. (2004). Benchmarking and Alignment of state standards and assessment. In *Redesigning accountability systems for education* (Vol. 38, pp. 96). <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1022679125>
- Rouffet, C., van Beuningen, C., & de Graaff, R. (2023). Constructive alignment in foreign language curricula: an exploration of teaching and assessment practices in Dutch secondary education. *The Language Learning Journal*, 51(3), 344-358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2025542>
- Sachs, J., & Smith, R. (1988). Constructing teacher culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(4), 423-436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569880090404>
- Savage, G. C., & O'Connor, K. (2019). What's the problem with 'policy alignment'? The complexities of national reform in Australia's federal system. *Journal of Education policy*, 34(6), 812-835. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1545050>
- Shaoyong, Y. (2021). Problems in English Teaching and Research in Primary and High Schools and Countermeasures. *Tianjing Education*, 35(2), 34-35. <https://doi.org/CNKI:SUN:TJJA.0.2021-35-016>
- Snyder, J., Bolin, F., & Zumwalt, K. (1992). Curriculum implementation. Dalam P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum*. In. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company. <https://adams.marmot.org/Record/b17133907>
- Song, J. (2023). *Assessing for learning in middle school English language classrooms in China* [University of Glasgow]. <https://doi.org/10.5525/gla.thesis.83632>
- Sultana, N. (2018). Investigating the relationship between washback and curriculum alignment: A literature review. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/Revue canadienne des jeunes chercheurs et chercheurs en éducation*, 9(2). <https://cjc-rcc.ualgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/53107>
- Tsang, C. L., & Isaacs, T. (2022). Hong Kong secondary students' perspectives on selecting test difficulty level and learner washback: Effects of a graded approach to assessment. *Language Testing*, 39(2), 212-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02655322211050600>
- Wixson, K., Fisk, M., Dutro, E., & McDaniel, J. (2002). *The Alignment of State Standards and Assessments in Elementary Reading*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242114618>
- Wu, Y. (2015). The examination system in China: The case of Zhongkao mathematics. Selected regular lectures from the 12th International Congress on mathematical education, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17187-6_50
- Yang, R., & May, L. (2023). Understanding and Implementing Learning-Oriented Assessment: Evidence From Three Chinese Junior High School EFL Teachers. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 46(2), 308-325. <https://doi.org/10.1515/CJAL-2023-0210>
- Yiwei, Z., Zhijian, S., & Yueting, W. (2019). A Study on the Alignment Between Shanghai's Junior High School English Academic Exams and Curriculum Standards: An Analysis of Test Items from 2006 to 2018. *Education and Examination*(05), 59-65. <https://link.oversea.cnki.net/doi/10.16391/j.cnki.jyks.2019.05.009>
- Yu, J., Li, C., & Li, G. (2022). Alignment between biology curriculum standards and five textbook editions: a content analysis. *International Journal of Science Education*, 44(14), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2022.2119621>

- Zembylas, M. (2005). Beyond teacher cognition and teacher beliefs: the value of the ethnography of emotions in teaching. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18(4), 465-487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390500137642>
- Zhang, F., & Liu, Y. (2013). A study of secondary school English teachers' beliefs in the context of curriculum reform in China. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(2), 187-204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505940>
- Zou, F., Zhiyu, C., Qiucheng, L., Rou, L., Sitong, S., Jiaying, Z., Renli, Z., Siqiong, Z., & Xiaohua, Z. (2024). Analysis of China's English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education from the Perspectives of Self-regulated Learning. *Gipan*, 6(1), 5-18. <https://doi.org/10.3126/gipan.v6i1.68121>