

High School English Teacher's Core Competencies in China: A Case Study of the Teacher Qualification Examination Syllabus

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Abstract. English is becoming increasingly important in subjects during the internationalization progress. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the National English Curriculum for Nine-year Compulsory Education in China has been developing with the progress of the times and the improvement of national policies. Meanwhile, teachers' teaching ability is closely related to students' learning achievement and future development. Under this circumstance, English teachers' teaching ability and subject knowledge have attracted much attention in China. Through quantitative analysis, the main findings of this paper are as following: 1) Teaching with higher quality will lead to students' positive and sustainable development in the future, for the quality of teachers' teaching performance can literally play a decisive role in students' achievement; the most important factor that affects education and predicts students' achievement is the quality of teachers' teaching in class; 2) After it is analyzed, the core competence of senior high school English teachers in China through quantitative proportion analysis and word frequency analysis of the core contents of the syllabus is discovered. Through quantitative analysis, it is found that the emphasis of teacher assessment in the senior high school English teacher qualification examination includes both general pedagogical knowledge and English pedagogical knowledge and competence. Therefore, this paper suggests that teachers should not only have professional English pedagogical skills, but also have strong teaching-related skills (e.g., classroom management); 3) The professional motivation which is reflected in the emotional motivation characteristics of candidates doesn't seem to be fairly reflected in the exam. The results of this study have certain instructional significance for the design, implementation, reliability, and validity of the English teacher qualification examination for senior high schools in China.

Keywords: Teacher qualification examination; Teacher's core competencies; Word frequency, Teacher education.

1. Introduction

The ever-growing globalization has highlighted the unique position of English as a common language taught in many countries. In China with centuries of English teaching, English teaching has been included in the high school education framework for decades. Professional standards of high school English teachers have also developed over the years, with the current examination syllabus focusing on comprehensive pedagogical competence, general pedagogical knowledge, as well as English knowledge and pedagogical competence. According to Wang, the goals and objectives of English language teaching in China have changed through the development of China [1]. Initially, in the 1970s, the syllabus of English language learning and teaching focused on developing students' reading abilities and together with other self-learning abilities. From the 1980s, the Syllabus for Junior High Schools aimed to teach some knowledge about English and tried to improve students' communicative competence through practicing four skills- listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In the 21st century, the latest National English Curriculum for Nine-year Compulsory Education mainly emphasizes stimulating and cultivating students' interest and confidence, mainly their core competencies- Language Abilities, Learning Abilities, Cultural Awareness, and Thinking Qualities with the assistance of new roles of English teachers, which requires more competent and qualified teachers in China [1].

As is widely accepted in academia, teachers' professional competencies are strongly relevant for high-quality education and students' competence development. Guerriero claimed that the quality of teaching has a significant role in the performance of students [2]. Aaronson et al. also agreed that

higher quality teaching will result in students' positive future sustainable development [3]. Meanwhile, according to Bold et al., the quality of teachers' teaching performances has been attached to great importance to determining student achievement [4]. Moreover, Goldhaber and Anthony supported that the most significant element influencing education and predicting student results is teacher quality in the classroom [5]. In other words, selecting qualified teachers is the first step to building a solid English teaching infrastructure. In this background, looking into the examination syllabus of the High School English Teacher's Qualification in China, this study hopes to explore and profile the core competencies for high school English teaching in China by a quantitative proportion analysis of the core components in the syllabus as well as a word frequency analysis.

2. Literature Review

Since the reforms and opening-up in China, high school English teaching in China has developed for over three decades. Lee and Yuan found that for a long time in China, teacher qualification and validation were conducted at provincial levels [6]. At the same time, Yuan and Zhang claimed that the teacher shortage for language teaching and teacher education has been a serious issue in China [7]. In 2011, the new pilot paradigm for Teacher Qualification entry and exit was put in place where a national standard was applied. In 2014, more provinces were included in the new paradigm. The year 2015 saw the national-wide examination practice replacing the provincial tests. The original lifelong validity of the Teacher's qualification certificate was no longer in practice.

Under the new practice, high school English teacher's qualification examination now has three tests, namely the test on comprehensive pedagogical competence, general pedagogical knowledge, as well as on English knowledge and pedagogical competence respectively. The increasing difficulty of the exam has reduced the passing rate, which, according to Rong, is less than one-third of the total candidates (27.5% in the first two years) [8]. With ever-increasing enthusiasm to obtain the Teacher's certificate among Chinese College Students, according to Darling-Hammond, it is of growing importance to look into the core competencies [9]. In addition to that, Goe also attached great importance to knowledge requirements and extracting the skills expected of qualified teachers to perform teaching duties and apply their knowledge in professional tasks [10].

Richardson has proposed a framework for teacher knowledge, including cognitive abilities and affective-motivational characteristics [11]. Thompson also indicated that cognitive abilities and affective-motivational characteristics compose teacher competence [12]. In the context of China, according to Rong, the national teacher's qualification exam highlights general knowledge related to the teaching profession, as well as the importance of teaching competence [8]. The first test, the comprehensive teaching competence test evaluates an applicant's mastery of knowledge concerning professional attitude, pedagogical laws and regulations, professional ethics, general literacy, and teaching abilities. The general pedagogical knowledge test emphasizes knowledge mastery in pedagogy, psychology, class management, etc. The English knowledge and pedagogical competence test take pedagogical situation analysis and teaching design into consideration. With the importance of the qualification exam in improving teachers' professional competence and education quality, what is less known are the core competencies, how the core competencies are tested, and their specific weight in teacher's qualification exams?

3. Research Method

The materials of the syllabus include both descriptions of the teacher's qualifications as well as sample tests. Test questions are composed of objective questions such as multiple choices and subjective questions such as open-ended questions for case analysis. This study adopts a mixed method with quantitative and content analysis of the core test modules included in the examination Syllabus for high school English teacher's qualification (Version 2022), and a content analysis of the

high-frequency word list of the syllabus using CorpusWordParser and Weiciyun, which are tools for Chinese tokenization and work frequency extraction.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the details of each of the three tests, including the general requirements, test modules, and test structure, are illustrated below.

4.1 The Comprehensive Pedagogical Competence Test

In the comprehensive pedagogical competence test, five key modules are included: professional attitude, educational laws and regulations, professional ethics of teachers, general literacy, and basic skills. The proportion of the five modules in the test is provided in Figure 1. It is obvious that basic skills are given the most attention among the five modules, contributing almost half of the total test, followed by the professional attitude and professional ethics, with education laws and regulations ranking fifth in the test. Besides, the objective questions account for 39% of the total test score with subjective questions for 61% of the total test. In other words, the test emphasizes the critical analytical skills of candidates rather than memory-reliant knowledge.

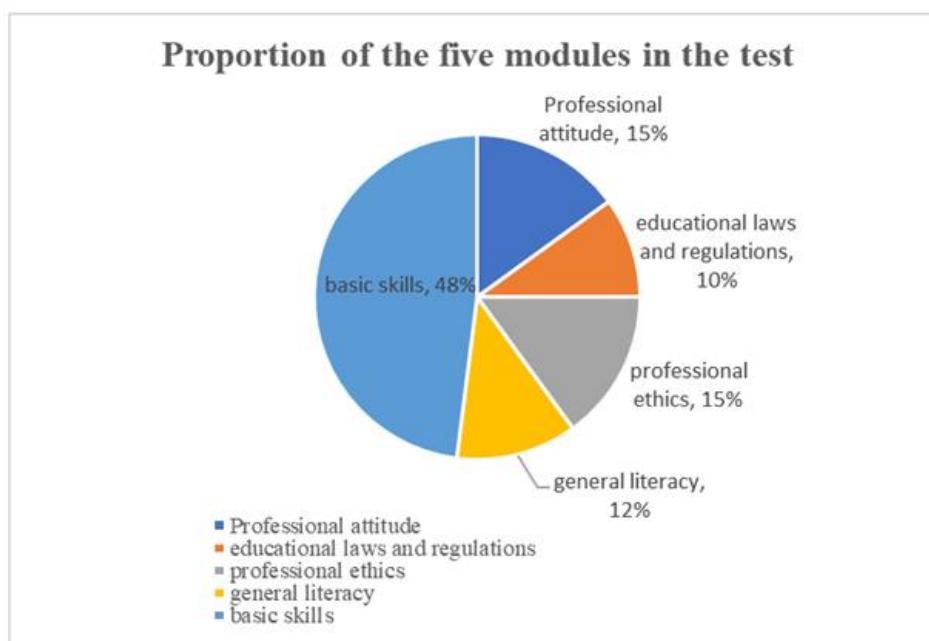


Figure 1. Proportion of the five modules in the comprehensive pedagogical competence test.

4.2 The General Pedagogical Knowledge Test

The general pedagogical knowledge test focuses on basic knowledge and theories of pedagogy and psychology, the practical skills to apply such knowledge in solving relevant issues in high school pedagogical practice, understanding the psychology of high school students, and student management methods. Altogether eight modules are proposed, which include basic pedagogical knowledge and theories, high school pedagogy, learning psychology of high school students, high school moral education, high school curriculum, high school developmental psychology, high school counseling, high school class management, and teacher's psychology. Figure 2 provides a visualization of the proportion of each module in the whole test.

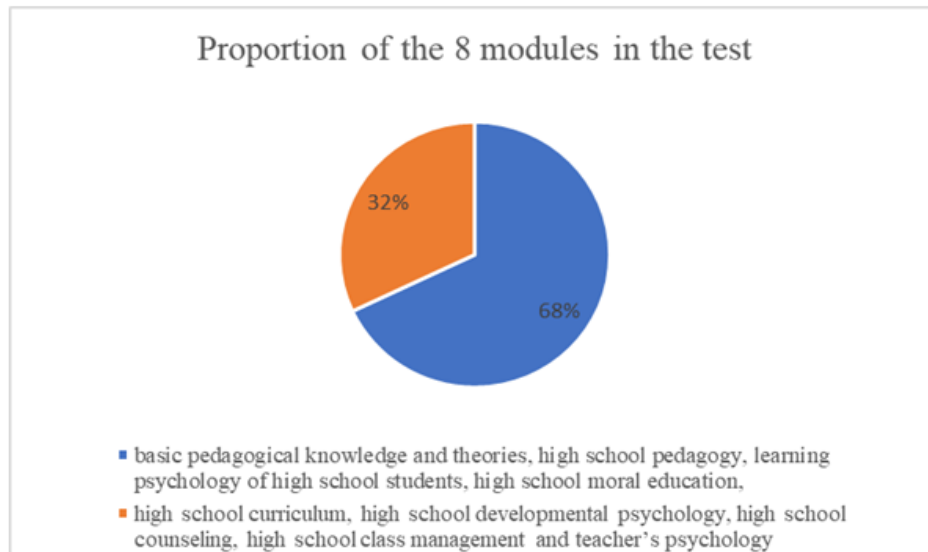


Figure 2. Proportion of the five modules in the general pedagogical knowledge and ability test.

The test syllabus divides the 8 modules into two test parts, with the first four modules in the first part (in blue) and the other four modules in the second part (in orange). It is obvious to find that the first part is given more weight in the test, accounting for 68% of the total test. Besides, the proportion of objective questions is 30% while subjective open-ended questions contribute to 70% of the test. The trend is consistent with the first test open-ended questions are the overwhelming majority in the test portfolio.

4.3 The English Knowledge and Pedagogical Competence Test

Five major test objectives are provided under this test, including English subject knowledge and ability, English subject pedagogical knowledge and ability, English subject teaching design ability, English subject teaching practice ability, and English subject teaching assessment knowledge and competence. The test paper structure, combining teaching practice and assessment, is composed of four test modules of English knowledge and ability, English teaching knowledge, teaching design, and teaching practice and assessment. Figure 3 provides the specific proportion of each module in this test.

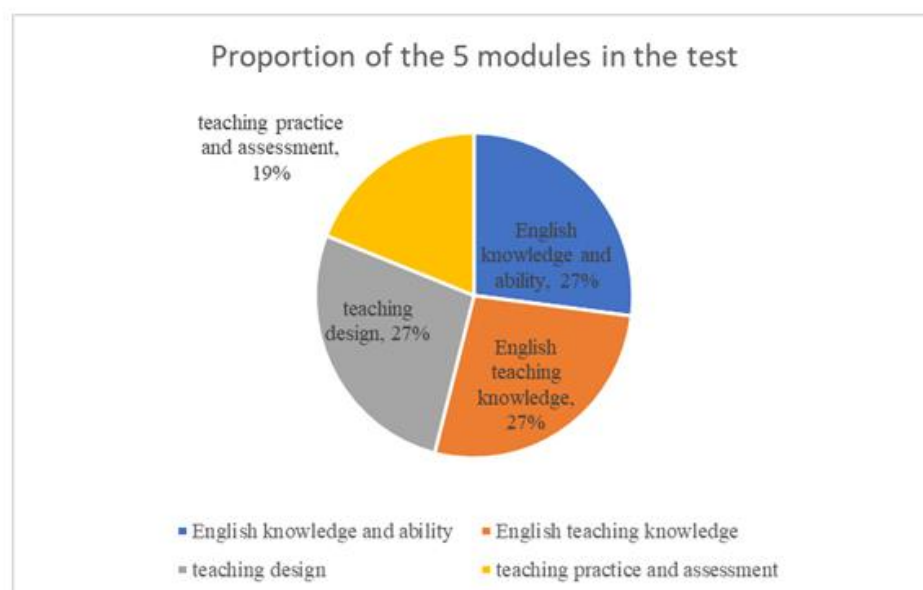


Figure 3. Proportion of the five modules in the English knowledge and pedagogical competence test.

Among the test modules, it is clear to see an equal emphasis on the first three categories of English language knowledge, teaching knowledge and teaching design, while the last two modules, teaching practice, and assessment altogether account for 19% of the total test. In other words, given that most candidates do not have sufficient teaching experience, the weight of this part is reduced in the test portfolio. The 4-6 ratio between objective questions and subjective question is in consistency with the previous two tests with subjective questions taking more weight in the test portfolio.

4.4 Word frequency result

To have a better understanding of the key concepts highlighted in the test, a word frequency analysis of the curriculum is performed. The word frequency of the test syllabus is shown in Table 1 following word frequency analysis using CorpusWordParser, a free Chinese tokenizer program, and Weiciyun, an online word frequency analysis interface.

Table 1. Top 20 high frequency word list in the syllabus.

rank	Word item	occurrence	rank	Word item	occurrence
1	pedagogy	87	11	teacher	26
2	education	67	12	language	26
3	comprehension	44	13	development	26
4	mastery	41	14	curriculum	25
5	knowledge	35	15	learning	23
6	basic	35	16	contents	22
7	students	35	17	high school students	22
8	ability	31	18	classroom	21
9	method	30	19	application	19
10	English	30	20	process	18

The results of the word frequency analysis present an explicit image of the language structure of the senior high school English teacher qualification examination syllabus. The top 10 words, including pedagogy, education, comprehension, mastery, knowledge, basic, students, ability, method, and English, emphasize not only the general pedagogical knowledge but also subject knowledge of teachers related to teachers' communicative competencies. The 10 words in the 11-20 list emphasize curriculum development, class management, as well as the practical ability of teachers in applying the knowledge in teaching performance and class management. As Richardson claimed, the core and important competencies emphasized in the exam are mainly about general pedagogical knowledge and subject knowledge [11]. In addition, Thompson found that there is little prominence given to affective-motivational characteristics in the exam [12].

5. Discussions and Implications

Based on the quantitative analysis of the proportion of core competencies required in the three tests and the content analysis based on the high-frequency word list result, several observations are made as follows. Firstly, Shulman supported previous scholars and mentioned that the teacher knowledge required in the high school English teacher's qualification in China covers both general pedagogical knowledge and subject knowledge [13]. Teachers are expected to demonstrate strong competence not only in the language to teach but also in teaching-relevant fields, such as class management, psychology, curriculum design and teaching evaluation. The word frequency result corroborates this observation as well. Secondly, the test modules include a variety of question types, including multiple choices, case analysis, writing, short questions, and judgment questions. The general trend is consistent in the three tests that subjective questions without close-ended answers constitute the majority in all three tests. In other words, instead of testing the declarative knowledge of candidates, the focus is put on problem-solving skills such as case studies. Thirdly, compared to

Richardson's findings, it seems that the professional motivation in the affective-motivational characteristics of candidates is not fairly presented in the exam [11]. Though psychological issues are mentioned in the general pedagogical knowledge test, the test highlights understanding the emotions and psychology of high school students to ensure they are mentally healthy, and they can deal with challenges properly, while professional motivation is not explicitly demonstrated in the test syllabus.

The results may shed some pedagogical light on the practice of high school English teacher's qualification exam in China in its design and implementation; meanwhile, it may help the exam reliability and validity in the future. The consistencies observed show that the test could convincingly provide strong evidence of the teaching competence of the candidates. The English knowledge and pedagogical competence test look into the subject knowledge of candidates, yet the test syllabus contents do not convincingly specify the language qualification standards for high school English teachers. The focus on affective-motivational characteristics of teachers in previous studies could also inspire the practice in China. It is hoped that a more clarified description of language competencies and elements of affective-motivational characteristics could be incorporated into the exam in China.

6. Suggestion

This research has some limitations, and one of them is that it requires additional time and data on the frequency of words in order to reduce the possibility of accidental results. In addition to that, the following limitations remain with this research:

This study only focuses on the three exam syllabuses of the senior high school English teacher qualification examination, and the conclusions drawn above are not necessarily universal, and the outcomes to which other subjects can refer are not as accurate as possible. Apart from that, the conclusions and ideas of this study should be further improved in future research according to the development of the times and national policies.

7. Conclusion

The competence possessed by teachers is one of the essential factors that determine the learning outcomes and future development of students. The quantitative analysis of the core competencies that are emphasized in the three tests is presented below with reference to the case of the high school English teacher qualification exam syllabus in China. The analysis of the high-frequency word list also reveals valuable traits concerning the effect and consistency of the core competencies that are required in the examination syllabus. The proportion of objective questions to subjective questions reflects emphasized the extent of the importance of applicants' capacity to critically analyze and solve problems. In conclusion, the study's findings assist to represent the descriptive character of the current practice of China's high school English teacher certification examinations and to identify the main abilities that are emphasized in these tests.

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