

Curriculum Intent Vs. Examination Reality: A Washback Study of English Assessment in Mizoram

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Abstract

Assessment plays a crucial role in shaping teaching and learning, influencing both instructional methods and student engagement. This study examines the alignment and discrepancies between the English curriculum prescribed by the Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE) and the question designs of the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) and Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) examinations. Using a qualitative research approach, document analysis was conducted to identify alignments and discrepancies between curriculum objectives and examination formats. Findings indicate that while the HSLC and HSSLC examinations largely align with curriculum goals, discrepancies also exist in key areas. Listening comprehension and speaking skills are not explicitly tested, limiting students' ability to develop well-rounded communication skills. Additionally, translation skills, though mentioned in the curriculum, are not assessed. Positive washback effects include enhanced reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, but negative washback arises from the lack of focus on listening, speaking, and feedback mechanisms. To make assessments more effective, the study recommends adding listening and speaking tasks, translation exercises, and structured feedback. These changes would better match the curriculum and help students in Mizoram improve their English skills.

Keywords: Assessment, washback effect, English curriculum, alignment, discrepancies.

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Introduction

Assessments strongly influence teaching and learning, shaping what teachers emphasize in lessons and how students participate. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is termed ‘washback’ or ‘backwash’, and it is a term now commonly applied in linguistics (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Teachers often design their lessons based on the content of end-of-term assessments, adjusting their teaching methods to ensure students are well-prepared for these tests. This alignment means that classroom activities, assignments, and discussions primarily focus on topics likely to appear in the examinations. As a result, students may spend more time practicing test-related skills rather than exploring subjects in depth or developing critical thinking abilities (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). While testing can sometimes hinder learning by promoting rote memorization and test-oriented teaching, it can also create a productive and positive environment by encouraging goal-driven learning and reinforcing key skills (Hughes, 2002). The overall impact of testing depends on factors such as question design, assessment format, and alignment with curriculum objectives.

Alderson and Wall (1993) suggest that tests can have a positive washback effect if they encourage students to focus more on the lessons and prepare thoroughly. For example, an oral proficiency test is introduced to enhance the teaching of speaking skills. Positive washback occurs when the objectives of the curriculum and that of the subsequent test coincides. When the curriculum and the test objectives match, students are more likely to focus on the right areas, and teachers can tailor their instruction to better meet the needs of the test. This alignment helps create a learning environment where both teaching and assessment are in harmony, leading to more meaningful learning experiences. Negative washback happens when test content or format focuses too narrowly on language skills, limiting both teaching methods and learning opportunities (Taylor, 2005).

The secondary school assessment system in Mizoram is managed by the Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE), which conducts board exams for Grade 10 and Grade 12 students. These examinations are high-stakes as they mark the completion of school education for the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) and the Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC). The results of these examinations play a key role in assessing students’ academic performance and future opportunities. The higher the stakes of a test, the stronger its impact on teaching and learning. High-stakes examinations influence how students study and how teachers teach, as both focus on achieving good results. In Mizoram, MBSE examinations are crucial for students’ academic progress, thus increasing the pressure to perform well. As a result, teachers often focus on exam-related topics and may ignore subjects or skills not to

be tested - like listening and speaking. This can help students improve in reading and writing but may also limit their overall language development, making it harder for them to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

The impact of exam-oriented teaching and learning highlights the importance of analysing question design in high-stakes assessments. Since students and teachers often tailor their learning strategies based on exam formats, the structure and content of these assessments play a crucial role in shaping language proficiency. If examinations primarily test reading and writing while neglecting listening and speaking, students may lack essential communication skills needed for higher education and professional settings (Alderson & Wall 1993).

A study by Zhao (2023) emphasises that a narrow focus on exam preparation leads to challenges in real-world interactions. Therefore, a critical examination of question design can help identify gaps in assessment that contribute to these limitations. When examinations evaluate a well-rounded set of language skills, they encourage more complete language development, equipping students with the skills needed for both academic and professional success. Analysing the alignment between curriculum objectives and content of examination is essential to understanding how assessments influence teaching methods, student engagement and long-term language proficiency.

Rationale of the Study

Assessments play a crucial role in shaping teaching and learning, with their impact largely dependent on factors such as test design and alignment with curriculum objectives. In the context of Mizoram, the MBSE examinations serve as high-stakes assessments that significantly influence how teachers teach and how students prepare. However, while these examinations assess core language skills, there is limited research on whether they comprehensively reflect the curriculum objectives.

By examining the alignment between the English curriculum objectives and the question designs in these examinations, this study seeks to identify both alignments and discrepancies. It also aims to determine the potential washback effects of these assessments, whether positive or negative, on teaching practices and student learning outcomes. Understanding these effects is essential for improving the effectiveness of assessments. It will also help in ensuring that students receive a well-rounded language education and in addressing potential gaps in the current examination system.

Objectives

1. To examine the alignments and discrepancies between the aims and objectives outlined in the English Curriculum prescribed by Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE) and the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) English question design.
2. To examine the alignments and discrepancies between the aims and objectives outlined in the English Curriculum prescribed by Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE) and the Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) English question design.
3. To determine their potential washback effects.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach through document analysis to evaluate the alignment between the MBSE-prescribed English curriculum and the question design of the School Leaving Certificate examinations (HSLC and HSSLC) as well as discrepancies between the two. By comparing official curriculum documents with the prescribed question formats set by MBSE, the study aims to identify both alignments and discrepancies.

Findings

Findings on Objective No. 1: To examine the alignments and discrepancies between the aims and objectives outlined in the English Curriculum prescribed by MBSE and the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) English question design.

Alignments

- i) Curriculum Objective 1 (Listening and Comprehension): This objective is covered in Writing (Section B), Grammar (Section C), and Literature (Section D) but lacks focus on listening skills.
- ii) Curriculum Objective 2 (Independent Inquiry & Thinking): This objective can be observed in Reading (Section A) and Literature (Section D) but could include more structured reflection.
- iii) Curriculum Objective 3 (Social Communication & Skills): This objective is addressed in Writing (Section B), Grammar (Section C), and Literature (Section D) but lacks real-world applications like discussions or role-plays.

- iv) Curriculum Objective 4 (Reasoning & Articulation): The objectives specified in this is strengthened through Reading (Section A), Writing (Section B), and Literature (Section D) by developing logical thinking and structured responses.
- v) Curriculum Objective 5 (Competence in English Registers & Language Use): The competence mentioned is found in Reading (Section A), Writing (Section B), Grammar (Section C), and Literature (Section D), ensuring exposure to different forms of English.
- vi) Objective 6 (Cultural & Linguistic Competence): This is addressed in Literature (Section D) but could be expanded to other sections for a broader cultural perspective.
- vii) Curriculum Objective 7 (Vocabulary & Reference Skills): The skills in these objectives are developed through Reading (Section A), Writing (Section B), and Grammar (Section C), though grammar could emphasize dictionary and thesaurus use more.
- viii) Curriculum Objective 8 (Creativity & Expression): This is found to be encouraged in Reading (Section A) and Literature (Section D) but could be improved in grammar and writing exercises.
- ix) Curriculum Objective 9 (Self-Learning & Independent Study): This objective is promoted in Writing (Section B) and Grammar (Section C) but lacks peer review and self-editing opportunities.
- x) Curriculum Objective 10 (Organization & Editing Skills): The aimed- skills are strengthened through Literature (Section D) but could include more structured feedback activities.

Discrepancies

The HSLC question design does not fully achieve its intended objectives in several key areas-

- i) Listening skills (Curriculum Objective 1) are not directly tested which limits students' from developing strong listening abilities.
- ii) Independent thinking (Curriculum Objective 2) is present but lacks structured opportunities for students to engage in reflective thinking and express their ideas critically.
- iii) Social communication (Curriculum Objective 3) is not effectively incorporated as real-world applications such as group discussions debates or interactive tasks are missing from the assessment.

- iv) Reasoning skills (Curriculum Objective 4) could be strengthened by including more analytical questions and providing structured feedback to help students refine their logical thinking.
- v) Cultural competence (Curriculum Objective 6) is addressed mainly through literature-based questions but it does not fully explore diverse cultural contexts that could enhance students' understanding of global perspectives.
- vi) Vocabulary development (Curriculum Objective 7) is included in the assessment. However, it does not focus enough on using dictionaries or learning new words independently which are important for long-term language skills.
- vii) Creativity (Curriculum Objective 8) could be better integrated into the examination particularly in writing and grammar tasks to encourage students to think imaginatively and express themselves more freely.
- viii) Self-learning (Curriculum Objective 9) is another area that needs improvement as there are limited opportunities for peer review self-editing and independent exploration of language skills. Encouraging these activities would help students become more autonomous learners.
- ix) Organization skills (Curriculum Objective 10) are assessed to some extent. However, students would improve more with structured feedback on organizing their thoughts effectively in written responses.

Findings on Objective No. 2: To examine the alignments and discrepancies between the aims and objectives outlined in the English Curriculum prescribed by MBSE and the Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) English question design

Analysis of HSSLC Question Design in Relation to MBSE Curriculum Aims and Objectives

Alignments

- i) Curriculum Objective 1(Listening and Comprehension): The skills in this objective is tested in Section A and Section C, through comprehension passages and literature questions.
- ii) Curriculum Objective 2 (Confidence and Proficiency in Language Skills): Reading, writing, and literature tasks in Section A, B and C help students communicate clearly and confidently in both academic and social settings.
- iii) Curriculum Objective 3 (Participation in Discussions and Presentations): Writing tasks in Section B help students organize their thoughts

- iv) Curriculum Objective 4 (Understanding Text Organization): Comprehension exercises, writing tasks, and literature study in Section A, B and C help students understand how different parts of a text fit together.
- v) Curriculum Objective 5 (Identifying Main Points and Details): Activities like note-making, summarizing, and answering literature questions in Section A, B and C train students to recognize key ideas and supporting details.
- vi) Curriculum Objective 6 (Using English in Different Contexts): Exposure to different text types, writing formats, and literary styles in all the sections improves students' ability to use English in various situations.
- vii) Curriculum Objective 7 (Developing Advanced Language Skills) : Reading comprehension, essay writing, and literature analysis are tested in Section A, B and C which enhance reasoning, inference-making, and critical thinking skills.
- viii) Curriculum Objective 8 (Translation Skills): Although there are no questions found that test this skill directly, comprehension and writing activities improve language clarity, which helps with translation.
- ix) Curriculum Objective 9: Independent Thinking and Inquiry (Section A, Section B, Section C) – Discursive reading, opinion-based writing, and literature responses encourage students to think critically and express their ideas.
- x) Curriculum Objective 10: Literary Appreciation and Creativity (Section A, Section B, Section C) – Reading literary texts, writing creatively, and analysing poetry and prose help students appreciate literature and develop their creativity.

Overall, the HSSLC English examination supports the curriculum objectives by helping students improve their language skills, reasoning, creativity, and independent thinking, making their learning more meaningful.

Discrepancies

The HSSLC English examination aligns well with the Higher Secondary English Curriculum objectives, with no major discrepancies. However, some objectives are not directly addressed. They are discussed below:

- i) Listening comprehension (Curriculum Objective 1) is indirectly supported through reading tasks in Sections A and C but is not explicitly tested.
- ii) Translation skills (Curriculum Objective 8) are also not directly included in any section, as comprehension and writing tasks focus on analysis and composition rather than language translation.

- iii) Oral participation (Curriculum Objective 3) is encouraged through writing tasks in Section B, but direct assessment of discussions and presentations is missing.

Although these discrepancies are minor, adding translation exercises and oral activities could strengthen the alignment between the curriculum objectives and the examination.

Findings on Objective No. 3: To determine their potential washback effects

The HSLC and HSSLC English question design is likely to generate several positive washback effects. The potential benefits are outlined below:

- i) It helps students develop their reading, writing, and comprehension skills. This makes communication easier in both academic and social settings.
- ii) The examination helps students think critically by including reading passages, literature analysis, and opinion-based writing, which improve reasoning skills.
- iii) It also encourages creativity and a love for literature by introducing different types of writing like stories, poems, and essays. These tasks inspire students to express their ideas in creative ways.
- iv) Writing exercises also build confidence by teaching different writing styles and language use. This prepares students for real-life communication and helps them share their thoughts clearly in both school and daily life.

On the other hand, there are indications that the discrepancies found between the objectives in the curriculum and the subsequent examinations may lead to negative washback effects. The possible negative washback effects are outlined below.

- i) Since listening comprehension is not tested, students may not develop strong listening skills which are essential for effective communication in both academic and real-life settings. When a skill is not assessed, teachers and students often give it less importance which leads to weaker proficiency in that area.
- ii) Similarly, the absence of speaking assessments such as group discussions or presentations, limits opportunities for students to practice oral communication, which is a key part of language fluency.
- iii) The curriculum includes translation skills, but they are not part of the examinations. As a result, students may lack motivation and structured practice to improve their bilingual abilities.
- iv) Since there is little focus on feedback and revision, students may not get enough practice to improve their writing skills. This could make it more difficult for them to organize ideas clearly and create well-structured responses.

Addressing these issues by incorporating listening tasks, speaking exercises, and translation activities would create a more balanced assessment system that supports overall language development.

Conclusion

The MBSE English examinations for HSLC and HSSLC have a strong impact on how students learn and how teachers teach. They help students improve their reading, writing, and thinking skills. The examinations also encourage creativity and help students understand literature better. These positive effects make learning more meaningful and prepare students for real-life communication.

However, some important skills are not fully tested. Listening and speaking are not included, so students may not develop strong communication skills. Translation is mentioned in the curriculum but not tested, which may limit bilingual abilities. Also, students do not get enough practice in revising and improving their writing.

To make the examinations more effective, listening and speaking tasks should be included, translation exercises should be added, and more focus should be given to feedback and revision. These changes would help students develop a well-rounded understanding of English and prepare them better for the future. Implementing these changes would create a more balanced assessment that aligns better with the curriculum objectives. By testing a wider range of language skills, students would gain a more comprehensive understanding of English which will improve their ability to communicate effectively in both academic and real-life situations. A well-rounded examination system would not only enhance students' language proficiency but also encourage deeper learning, creativity, and independent thinking. Strengthening assessment practices in this way would ensure that students are better equipped for higher education and future career opportunities.

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