The Impact of Curriculum Standard Interpretation Competence on Teaching Objectives Design among Primary School English Teachers

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Abstract: *The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) require primary school English teachers to translate competency-oriented requirements into concrete, observable teaching objectives, yet classroom studies still report objectives that are vague, fragmented or mechanically mapped onto individual texts. This paper argues that such weaknesses are rooted in teachers' curriculum standard interpretation competence (CSIC). Drawing on a narrative synthesis of 21 studies published between 2023 and 2026, it conceptualizes CSIC as four dimensions—concept cognition, content extraction, transformational application and reflective improvement—and proposes four criteria for the quality of teaching objectives: standard-based extraction, integration of the four core competencies, standardized formulation, and unit-lesson logical coherence. It then traces a three-stage mechanism whereby content extraction supplies the input, transformational application mediates the conversion, and reflection closes the feedback loop. Because each recurring design weakness maps onto a specific interpretive deficit rather than onto a general lack of teaching experience, improvement should target how teachers read the Standards rather than how they write objectives. Implications are drawn for classroom practice, school-based teaching research, teacher education and curriculum policy support.*

Keywords: *curriculum standard interpretation competence; teaching objectives design; core competencies; primary school English teachers; English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)*

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) (hereafter "the Standards") marks a paradigm shift in school English education in China from a knowledge-based orientation to a core competency orientation. As the programmatic document for national curriculum implementation, the Standards requires teachers to design whole-unit teaching and to construct a hierarchical system of objectives that connects unit objectives, discourse objectives and lesson objectives (Ministry of Education, 2022). Its realization therefore depends on how teachers read, interpret and transform the document. Zou (2017) discusses the tools and methods for aligning competency indicators with instructional design and argues that teachers need to master the core skills of analyzing curriculum standards and converting competency indicators into teaching objectives.

Research, however, continues to report a gap between the Standards and instructional design, and recent studies show that teachers' interpretation competence has become a key bottleneck. Yi and Chen (2023) point out that the objectives set by some teachers are vague and lack operability, and that teaching processes deviate from the competency orientation; both problems are directly related to a shallow interpretation of the concepts in the Standards. Ye's (2026) survey of compulsory education English teachers in Zhejiang Province found that although teachers recognize the importance of the Standards, their independent reading and independent implementation remain insufficient. Cheng and Zhou (2025), drawing on classroom observation, note that "teaching objectives mechanically correspond to individual discourse texts", which reflects a rigid rather than holistic understanding of curriculum concepts.

These findings suggest that the quality of teaching objectives design is closely associated with teachers' curriculum standard interpretation competence: teachers must transform abstract curricular requirements into concrete, observable and measurable objectives. Although this connection is widely

acknowledged in theory, it has rarely been examined as an explicit relationship, and interpretation competence itself remains loosely defined. This study synthesizes research published between 2023 and 2026 to address three questions: How can curriculum standard interpretation competence be conceptualized? What criteria can be used to judge the quality of teaching objectives design? Through what mechanism does interpretation competence shape objective design?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Curriculum Standard Interpretation Competence

The theoretical basis for understanding interpretation competence can be traced to Shulman's (1986) concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which emphasizes teachers' ability to transform subject knowledge into forms that learners can understand. Interpreting curriculum standards can be regarded as a specialized form of this transforming ability: it requires teachers to convert a policy document into teachable content. Namanyane and Shaoan (2025), in their study of PCK in the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in China, point out that curriculum and policy reform requires teachers to re-examine their pedagogical content knowledge so that it aligns with the Standards.

Recent research has increasingly focused on the challenges that arise when curriculum standards are implemented at the classroom level. Feng's (2024) study of the implementation of the 2022 Edition Standards in J City, S Province, identified several obstacles: policy objectives and standards are formulated at a macro level, practical recommendations for teachers are not specific enough, and curriculum evaluation criteria are not sufficiently operational. These findings highlight the gap between the text of the Standards and teachers' practice.

Ye's (2026) survey of compulsory education English teachers in Zhejiang Province examined teachers' reading of the Standards and analyzed their motivation, the causes of the current situation and their practical demands. The study proposes a whole-chain training model covering pre-service preparation, in-service training and post-training transfer, and argues that the competence to implement curriculum standards must be developed continuously rather than through isolated training sessions.

2.2 Teaching Objectives Design under Core Competencies

Research published between 2023 and 2026 has identified persistent problems in the design of instructional objectives. Cheng and Zhou (2025), based on their observation of primary school English classrooms, identified several "new problems" arising from teachers' misunderstanding of the Standards:

First, mechanical correspondence to individual discourse texts. Some teachers treat each discourse in a unit as an independent object of teaching and design an isolated objective for it, rather than regarding it as an integral part of the unit. Cheng and Zhou argue that objectives should be designed for the unit as a whole, and that lesson objectives should be derived from the corresponding sections of the unit.

Second, rigid application of the activity-based approach to English learning. Some teachers design objectives by mechanically assigning them to the three activity types (learning and understanding, applying and practicing, transferring and creating), rather than treating the activity-based approach as a pedagogical principle for designing cognitively sequenced activities.

Third, fragmented design based on the four core competency dimensions. Some teachers mechanically divide their objectives into four categories: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. Cheng and Zhou caution that "if the four aspects of core competencies are forcibly separated to design teaching objectives, it will lead to fragmentation of teaching content and procedures".

Liu's (2024) master's thesis on the whole-unit instructional design of primary school English identified further problems: "insufficient attention to students' thinking quality and learning ability in the design of objectives" and "weak correlation between unit objectives and lesson objectives". The study attributes these problems to "teachers' inadequate textual interpretation competence" and "weak content integration ability aligned with the Standards".

2.3 The Gap Between the Standards and Instructional Design

International research on standards-based education offers an additional perspective. Namanyane and Shaoan (2025) highlight that teachers' PCK is central to aligning practice with the Standards, and argue that the 2022 curriculum reforms require teachers to continuously examine and reconstruct their pedagogical knowledge.

Curriculum transformation theory helps to explain why the Standards often fail to translate into effective instructional design. A formal curriculum becomes a taught curriculum only through teachers' interpretation: teachers' interpretation competence determines the quality of the "teacher-understood curriculum", which in turn shapes the "teacher-implemented curriculum". As Feng's (2024) implementation study points out, the lag in teachers' curriculum conceptions and the insufficiency of teachers' individual capacity are key factors affecting the implementation of the Standards.

Although existing studies have examined the implementation of curriculum standards and the design of teaching objectives, research on the relationship between the two remains limited in three respects. First, few studies treat interpretation competence as an independent variable that predicts the quality of objective design. Second, existing accounts of interpretation competence lack operational definitions, which makes systematic analysis difficult. Third, the mechanism through which interpretation competence affects design quality has not been fully explored. The sections that follow address these three gaps in turn.

3. Method

This study adopts a literature research approach, using narrative synthesis to integrate findings reported separately in studies of curriculum standard implementation and studies of teaching objectives design. Literature was located in CNKI, Wanfang Data, Web of Science and Google Scholar by combining three blocks of search terms: curriculum standard interpretation (curriculum standard*, standards implementation, 课标解读), teaching objectives design (teaching objective*, instructional objective*, 教学目标设计), and population (primary school English, primary English teacher*, 小学英语教师). The publication window was set to 2023–2026, the period following the promulgation of the 2022 Edition Standards; a few earlier or foundational works were retained where later studies build directly on them.

Studies were included if they (a) concerned English teaching in Chinese compulsory education, with primary school English as the primary focus; (b) addressed either teachers' interpretation or implementation of curriculum standards or the design of teaching objectives; and (c) reported identifiable methods, findings or examples rather than opinion alone; studies confined to secondary or tertiary English education were excluded. Twenty-one publications were retained, comprising journal articles and master's theses, together with the 2022 Edition Standards itself and one international study of Chinese English teachers' pedagogical content knowledge; all are listed in the References. Analysis proceeded in three steps: each publication was read for statements about how teachers interpret the Standards; statements about problems in objective design were extracted and coded; and the two sets of codes were compared iteratively until a stable structure emerged, reported in Section 4. Because the synthesis draws on published findings rather than primary data, the structure and mechanism proposed here are hypotheses rather than tested conclusions, a point to which Section 6 returns.

4. Findings from the Literature Synthesis

4.1 The Conceptual Structure of Interpretation Competence

The synthesis of recent literature indicates that the competence to interpret the Standards comprises four interrelated dimensions. Concept cognition refers to teachers' grasp of the core concepts of the Standards, in particular the four dimensions of core competencies, namely language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. Content extraction refers to the ability to identify specific teaching requirements from the Standards. Transformational application refers to the ability to convert those requirements into concrete teaching decisions. Reflective improvement refers to the ability to evaluate and revise one's own instructional design against the Standards.

This structure closely parallels the process model proposed by Shang (2024) for physical education

teachers' capacity to transform curriculum standards, namely understanding the standards, internalizing them, translating them into instructional design, and reflecting on practice; the present study adopts this sequence and re-specifies each stage for primary school English. It is also consistent with Ye's (2026) finding that teachers need support across pre-service preparation, in-service training and post-training transfer, and with Feng's (2024) identification of insufficiently specific practical recommendations and insufficiently operational evaluation criteria as barriers to capacity building.

4.2 Quality Criteria for Teaching Objectives Design

The literature published between 2023 and 2026 suggests four criteria for judging the quality of teaching objectives. Standard-based objective extraction requires that objectives be derived from the Standards, from the textbook content and from the analysis of students. Core competency integration requires that objectives reflect the four dimensions comprehensively rather than separately. Standardized formulation requires that objectives be specific, observable and assessable. Unit-lesson logical coherence requires that unit objectives, discourse objectives and lesson objectives form a hierarchical and mutually supportive system.

Cheng and Zhou (2025) provide more specific criteria: objectives should be designed for the unit as a whole rather than for isolated discourse texts; the activity-based approach should guide the design of activities rather than serve as a scheme for classifying objectives; and the dimensions of core competencies should be integrated rather than fragmented. Liu's (2024) thesis on whole-unit design adds that objectives should attend to thinking quality and learning ability rather than to language knowledge alone.

Wang (2024) analyzed the whole-unit teaching designs produced by novice primary school English teachers in Yanji City and found recurring problems such as the absence of a curriculum standard analysis stage and the substitution of lesson objectives for unit objectives, both of which are rooted in teachers' weak awareness of reading and interpreting the Standards. Yang (2023) further shows that after the promulgation of the new Standards, primary school English teachers display an unclear understanding of teaching objectives and weak awareness of instructional design at the cognitive level, and unclear extraction paths and poorly standardized formulation at the design level.

4.3 The Mechanism Linking Interpretation Competence to Objective Design

A synthesis of recent studies reveals a three-stage mechanism linking interpretation competence to the design of teaching objectives.

First, content extraction supplies the necessary input: if the requirements of the Standards cannot be identified accurately, teachers cannot design objectives aligned with them. Feng's (2024) implementation study found that core objectives are formulated at a macro level and that practical recommendations for teachers are not specific enough, both of which make extraction more difficult.

Second, transformational application constitutes the core mediating process. Cheng and Zhou (2025) observed that teachers' mechanical correspondence to discourse texts and rigid application of the activity-based approach reflect weaknesses in transformation: teachers understand the concepts but cannot convert them into appropriate objectives.

Third, reflection provides the feedback loop through which objectives are gradually improved. Liu (2024) traced the roots of design problems to inadequate text interpretation ability and weak content integration ability, which indicates that reflection and revision are not yet sufficient in teachers' practice.

Two studies illustrate what competent transformation looks like. Xu (2024), using Unit 1 My Day from the PEP Grade 5 Volume 2 textbook, sets out a design path in which teachers study the unit content, construct a blueprint of the unit's educational value, identify the competencies the unit can develop, and standardize the formulation of objectives. Zhang (2023) points out that most primary school English lessons remain knowledge-based and unbalanced across the competency dimensions, with teachers emphasizing vocabulary and sentence patterns while giving little consideration to cultural infiltration, thinking training or the cultivation of learning habits.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of the Findings

The analysis above suggests that interpreting the Standards and designing teaching objectives are not two separate tasks, but the two ends of one transformation chain: what teachers extract from the Standards shapes what they can state as objectives, and how they transform and reflect on those extracts shapes whether the objectives are observable, measurable and competency-oriented. The four dimensions identified in Section 4.1 correspond closely to the four quality criteria in Section 4.2, which indicates that each recurring weakness in objective design can be traced to a specific deficit in interpretation rather than to a general lack of teaching experience. This correspondence also explains why the same problems, namely mechanical correspondence to individual discourse texts, rigid application of the activity-based approach, and fragmentation along the four competency dimensions, reappear across studies conducted in different regions and with different teacher groups. Improving objective design therefore requires intervention at the stage of interpretation rather than only at the stage of writing. The implications below are organized at three levels: the individual teacher, school-based teaching research, and teacher education and policy support.

5.2 Implications for Teachers' Own Practice

5.2.1 Close-reading protocol

Teachers should move from selective reading to a structured three-step protocol: overview reading (curriculum nature, philosophy, objectives, content, academic quality standards and implementation suggestions), matching reading (aligning unit discourse with the corresponding theme category, theme cluster, sub-theme and level-specific objectives), and checking reading (verifying the drafted objectives against the academic quality standards).

5.2.2 Behavioral-objective formulation

Teachers should state objectives with students as the subject and include a behavioral verb, a behavioral condition and a performance criterion (e.g., "In context, students can fluently use English to exchange views with peers on how to spend a meaningful weekend"), replacing vague mental verbs such as perceive, understand and master.

5.2.3 Unit-education blueprint first

Before writing objectives, teachers should construct a unit blueprint that clarifies the theme, the sub-themes, the educational value of each discourse and the progressive lesson objectives, which reduces the mechanical one-to-one mapping between objectives and separate discourse texts.

5.2.4 Objective–activity–assessment alignment

Each objective should be matched with at least one activity at the learning-and-understanding, applying-and-practicing, or transferring-and-creating level, together with an observable assessment point; assessment criteria should target specific learning points rather than generic praise such as Excellent or Good.

5.2.5 Differentiated and layered objectives

Objectives should be tiered (basic, intermediate, advanced) to accommodate diversity within a class, reflecting the Standards' expectation that every student progresses from their own starting point.

5.3 Implications for School-Based Teaching Research

5.3.1 Standard–unit–lesson objective matrix

Schools should provide teachers with a "standard–unit–lesson" objective matrix so that unit objectives, discourse objectives and lesson objectives form a coherent and progressive system, preventing lesson objectives from substituting for unit-level objectives.

5.3.2 Standard-referenced collective lesson preparation

School-based teaching research groups should institutionalize "standard-referenced" collective lesson preparation, peer review of objective statements, and a school-level repository of exemplar unit

objectives by grade.

5.4 Implications for Teacher Education and Policy Support

5.4.1 Whole-chain, tiered teacher development

Teacher education should run through pre-service study of curriculum standards, induction training, in-service tiered training (novice, mid-career and lead teachers), and post-training transfer, with follow-up evaluation to close the loop.

5.4.2 Learning communities and professional autonomy

Building professional learning communities, granting teachers autonomy in translating the Standards into instruction, and supporting action research on the standard-to-objective transformation are more sustainable than one-off lecture-based training.

5.4.3 Guarding against pseudo-interpretation

Teacher educators should explicitly address three recurrent pitfalls: listing the four core competencies as separate objective items, fragmenting unit assignments across lessons, and outsourcing learner analysis to generative AI, all of which produce the appearance rather than the substance of standard implementation.

6. Conclusion

This study synthesized research published between 2023 and 2026 to examine how primary school English teachers' competence in interpreting the 2022 Edition Standards shapes their design of teaching objectives. Three conclusions can be drawn. First, curriculum standard interpretation competence can be conceptualized as four dimensions, namely concept cognition, content extraction, transformational application and reflective improvement, running from understanding the Standards to revising one's own design against them. Second, the quality of teaching objectives design can be assessed against four criteria, namely standard-based extraction, integration of the four core competencies, standardized formulation, and unit-lesson logical coherence; deficiencies in these criteria correspond systematically to weaknesses in the four interpretation dimensions. Third, interpretation competence influences objective design through a three-stage mechanism: content extraction supplies the input, transformational application mediates the conversion, and reflection provides the feedback loop through which objectives are gradually aligned with the Standards.

Theoretically, this study brings two separate lines of inquiry, curriculum standard implementation and teaching objectives design, into a single explanatory chain, and proposes an operational structure that later studies can measure and test. Practically, it suggests that efforts to improve teaching objectives should begin with how teachers read the Standards: strengthening the extraction of standard requirements, providing tools that make the standard-unit-lesson transformation explicit, and building school-based and system-level support that sustains reflection rather than one-off training.

Two limitations should be acknowledged. As a literature-based analysis, this study synthesizes secondary findings rather than primary data, so the proposed structure and mechanism remain hypothetical until they are tested empirically. In addition, the reviewed literature is situated almost entirely in the context of Chinese compulsory education, which limits the transferability of the conclusions to other educational settings.

Future research can proceed in three directions: developing and validating a scale of curriculum standard interpretation competence for primary school English teachers; testing the proposed mechanism with questionnaire data, objective texts and classroom data through regression or structural equation modeling, with teaching experience, school location and teaching research support examined as moderators; and conducting intervention studies in which standard-referenced collective lesson preparation or targeted training is evaluated for its effect on the quality of objective design. Addressing these questions would turn the conceptual chain proposed here into evidence for teacher education and curriculum policy.

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