



Designing Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)-aligned language curriculum for K-10 learners in the Philippines

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Abstract

This study was conducted to design a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) -aligned English Language curriculum for K-10 among the Association of Christian Schools Colleges and Universities (ACSCU) members in the Philippines. The study includes findings from the three phases of data gathering methods: curriculum consultation, analysis of documents, and focus group discussion with English language teachers and curriculum developers in selected private schools in the country. The findings guided the researchers in formulating a framework for the PISA-Aligned English language curriculum.

Keywords: PISA-aligned curriculum, language curriculum design, language teaching, PISA Framework

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1. Introduction

This study was conducted to design a PISA-aligned English Language curriculum for K-10 among the Association of Christian Schools Colleges and Universities (ACSCU) members in the Philippines. The result of the PISA in 2018 triggered many educators, parents, and politicians in the Philippines to examine why the country performed very low in science, mathematics, and language. The public clamor is to improve the country's

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performance and ensure that the curriculum content is aligned with the demands of the PISA. In 2021, recognizing their vital role as one of the education providers in the Philippines, the national and regional leadership of the ACSCU planned to contribute to the Department of Education's (DepEd) efforts to improve the quality of basic education curriculum and address the demands and challenges of the PISA Framework by developing a project to design a PISA-aligned curriculum for Language, Science, and Mathematics.

Designing a PISA-aligned curriculum will not only improve the teaching and learning of the English language curriculum in the country and possibly aid in the improvement of the country's performance and ranking in the PISA, but it will also allow Filipino learners to develop global and multicultural competencies.

Best practices in language teaching in the Philippines

The three main English language teaching methods used in the Philippines are task-based language teaching (TBLT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and communicative language teaching (CLT). This is evidenced by memoranda, circulars, and Department of Education orders. Among the three, the CLT remains the most popular ELT framework in the Philippines (Karami & Zamanian, 2016).

The Task-Based Language Teaching aims to develop the three elements of learning a second language, drawn from the three dimensions of performance espoused by Skehan's (1996). These are complexity, accuracy, and fluency. On the contrary, the CLT approach places a greater emphasis on teaching the language as a communication tool without paying much attention to form or structure (Karami & Zamanian, 2016).

In the 1990s, Filipino language teachers were allowed to contend with the prevalence of native-speaker norms in the classroom with the introduction of the World Englishes paradigm. However, as interest in Philippine English research increased, variety started to be considered as the goal of English language instruction (Karami & Zamanian, 2016). The use of the Philippine English approach in Philippine English Language Teaching has several benefits. One is that, whether they are aware of it or not, language teachers are already using the variety. The use of Philippine English in classroom instruction was believed to reduce feelings of intimidation and fear for both teachers and learners in the classroom. Despite all the benefits offered by the existence of a Philippine variety of English, it has been argued that due to the lack of comprehensive codification of the variety, grammar books, and other teaching resources, using this variety as the standard for ELT in the Philippines may not be practical or appropriate.

Challenges to English language teaching

This article gives an overview of the past and present challenges to English language teaching in the Philippines. Since it was initially acknowledged as a separate field of research within the field of education, teaching the English language has been subjected to a wide range of issues and challenges. Based on local and worldwide research conducted in the 21st century, several issues and challenges have been associated with language instruction. Language instruction is an expansive and expanding responsibility for educators (Deyrich & Stunel, 2014).

In light of globalization and significant population growth, there is an increase in demand and need for skilled and effective language instructors. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that some conflicts and difficulties will arise as a result of these unprecedented changes to the education system. In addition, Deyrich and Stunel (2014) observed that there had been an increase in linguistic and cultural heterogeneity across the globe, as well as the growth of English as a lingua franca and that the emergence of emerging digital systems of knowledge creation has become the most important factor in reevaluating and realigning the curriculum and content standards in the education system.

In the study of Madrunio and Plata (2016), the curriculum was assessed by language experts. The analysis indicated that curriculum reform in ELE showed a (1) mismatch among the curriculum elements; (2) lack of a clear target for ELE; (3) a misconception that grammar and usage skills were necessary for English competency.

With the enactment of RA 10533, or the Enhance Basic Education Act of 2013, the Philippines began its path to transforming the education system. One of its purposes is to declutter the curriculum so that students can master the outlined competencies (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013). However, the K–12 curriculum implementation demonstrates that this objective has not been met, as teachers struggled with delivery and students failed to fulfill curriculum standards year after year.

In a press release, Senator Win Gatialian, chairman of the Senate Committee on Basic Education, Arts, and Culture asserted the congested nature of the curriculum, causing teachers and students to feel overwhelmed. He suggested initiating a curriculum revision to provide "students more time to ponder and teachers more time to educate" (Senate, 2020).

The K-12 language curriculum was also examined by language experts. It was found that it required improvement in terms of (1) specificity of aims and competencies, (2) coherence among the competencies in terms of prerequisites, (3) integration of 21st-century learning and language teaching principles (Barrot, 2018).

Alata (2018) examined the implementation of selected secondary schools of the outcomes-based curriculum. Students were the main performers or stars of the classroom, while teachers are facilitators of learning. Despite the outcomes-based curriculum's enormous potential for success, its implementation proved difficult due to time and resource limitations, a lack of facilities, and uncertainty about how well the planning was going.

As a result of the pandemic, numerous issues that were formerly unimportant are now becoming apparent obstacles for English language instructors (Tarrayo *et al.*, 2021). On the same note, the DepEd acknowledged that the curriculum's competencies had to be reduced to the most necessary ones. DepEd issued the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) in May 2020 to satisfy learners' educational needs during the COVID 19 pandemic. Despite the constraints of learning delivery, DepEd mandated that these MELCs served as guidance for teachers in addressing the educational requirements of students. It is also important to consider how resources in the learning environment enable or constrain the development of language skills of learners (Bernardo, 2023).

The Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, and Universities (ACSCU), upon the initiative of Wesleyan University – Philippines, has conducted a capacity training workshop for language teachers in accordance with the provision of RA 10533, allowing for the localization and contextualization of the K to 12 Curriculum. Currently, there are no data or studies conducted on this topic.

PISA curriculum framework

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international study about the academic achievement of 15-year-old students. It is administered every three years, and it started in the year 2000 with the following tests in Reading, mathematics, science, problem-solving, and financial literacy. It is now participated in by more than 70 countries. The test is widely known and influential in educational policy and funding. It is closely watched by policymakers and educators.

Several features make PISA unique. First is its policy orientation, as it is used by participating countries to inform pedagogical and policy recommendations. Second, is its concept of “literacy,” defined as students’ capacity to apply knowledge and skills, to analyze, to reason, and to communicate effectively as they solve problems in varied situations. Third is its relevance to lifelong learning. PISA highlights students’ ability to apply their knowledge in new situations. Its regularity is also an advantage.

The PISA 2018 survey focused on reading, mathematics, and science. Global competence was also assessed as an innovative domain. Financial literacy was an

optional assessment. PISA assesses students' reading performance through questions involving various processes (aspects), text formats, and situations.

Statement of the Problem

This qualitative descriptive study aimed at designing a PISA-aligned K-10 English curriculum for learners in the Philippines. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the best practices in language teaching in the Philippines?
2. What are the issues and challenges in language teaching in the Philippines?
3. What curriculum design framework can be used to develop a PISA-aligned language curriculum for K-10 learners in the Philippines?

2. Method

This qualitative exploratory study includes three phases as data gathering methods: curriculum consultation, analysis of documents, and focused group discussion with English language teachers and curriculum developers in selected private schools in the country.

Phase 1: Curriculum consultation - A national consultation with English language teachers, department chairpersons, principals, and curriculum experts among protestant schools in the country to discuss several issues, problems, opportunities, and challenges in teaching the English language in the Philippines.

Phase 2: Analysis of curriculum and related documents - As shown in Figure 1, the researchers conducted an analysis of important curricula and other related documents for the study, such as (1) K-12 English Language Curricula prescribed by DepED, sample lesson plans developed by teachers, and results of the curriculum consultations conducted with Language experts and curriculum experts.

The proposed PISA-aligned English language curriculum is also a product of curriculum benchmarking with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in the United States of America and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The countries that used these curricula were ranked higher in the PISA.

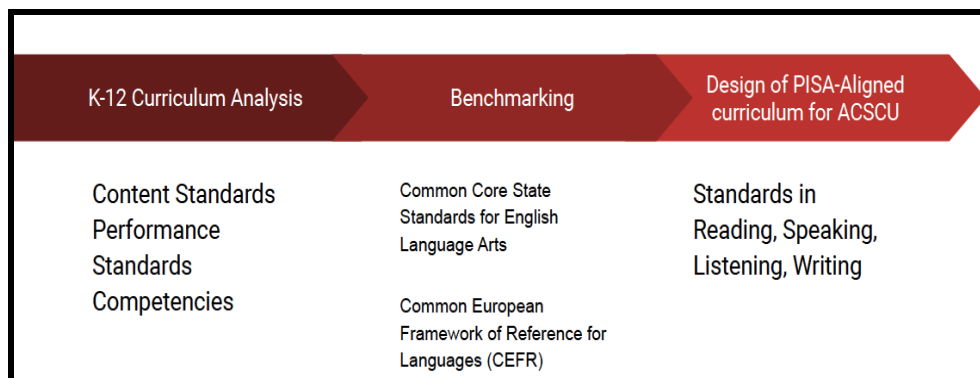


Figure 1. Analysis of the PISA-aligned English Language Curriculum

Phase 3: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) - An FGD was conducted with a selected group of English language teachers and curriculum developers to discuss best practices in teaching and learning English in the K-12 Curriculum. During the FGD, the PISA Language Framework was discussed, and the challenges in implementing it were presented and discussed.

The result of the curriculum consultation was reviewed and analyzed qualitatively to understand the different issues, problems, challenges, and opportunities of implementing the English language curriculum among the ACSCU schools. During the consultation, retrieval, and review of the Zoom video were done to ensure data was accurately gathered and encoded. Guided by the research questions, the researchers summarized the results into three categories: (1) issues and problems, (2) challenges, and (3) opportunities. Some important remarks, observations, and suggestions were included and reported in the final results to support the data interpretation results.

Thematic analysis was also done to analyze the result of the FGD transcripts. Since the conduct of the FGD was designed to supplement the results of the curriculum consultation, thematic analysis was employed to develop a cluster of categories related to the study's research questions. The use of thematic analysis enabled the researchers to see patterns and understand the current problems, issues, challenges, opportunities, and best practices in the teaching and learning of the English language among Christian Protestant schools in the Philippines.

3. Results

The findings suggested that technological resources, congested and impractical curriculum competencies, imbalance distribution of tasks, traditional assessment, classroom motivation, and language barriers all contributed to the complexity of teaching.

Participants in the focus group discussion from ACSCU schools frequently raised the issue of a lack of technological tools for teaching the language. The majority of schools, colleges, and even universities were obliged to find quick fixes to continue operating due to the abrupt shift to flexible learning. The necessity to invest in and seek the assistance of technology was a difficulty for some schools because the pandemic resulted in a very different classroom environment than before, even though these institutions did not have the same resources and support networks. To maintain operations throughout the pandemic, the Commission on Higher Education initially required universities and colleges to buy a Learning Management System (LMS) to manage the online learning environment properly. Few participants indicated that they continued to rely on textbooks and other ineffective materials in the online learning environment. They relied more on online resources; however, good materials are often expensive.

Curriculum overload was another issue mentioned by teachers. Decluttering the curriculum to allow pupils to demonstrate and practice the necessary competencies is one of the intended K–12 aims (Enhanced Basic Education Act, 2013). The K–12 curriculum's implementation, however, shows that this goal has not been achieved, as teachers continue to have delivery issues and students repeatedly fall short of curricular requirements. Participants in the FGD voiced concern that the present curriculum's limitations may limit their ability to be creative when creating assessments and activities. Additionally, they show how the amount of administrative work negatively affects their lesson planning, which is crucial for developing comprehensive, context-based teachings.

Assessment and competencies mismatch was also indicated as a concern. Students do not achieve or develop the competencies as planned in the curriculum. Teachers would often adjust the timetable and provide more drills and scaffolds. One participant shared, *“There are often carry-over lessons. We do not meet the expected competencies. Assessments are difficult to implement.”*

Nine language teachers stated having difficulty motivating students to engage in the classroom. This is because they lack knowledge of effective teaching strategies to engage learners. One teacher recounted:

I believe that one of the obstacles I experienced was figuring out how to persuade my pupils to stay with me during the entire lesson, as there were moments when they simply wandered around the classroom. I observed that they have a rather short attention span, so in order to keep their attention during the lesson, I made sure to keep them busy with a lot of work that we did in a relatively short amount of time.

Nine participating teachers identified the difficulty of speaking English as one of their issues in both their reflection papers and FGD. Effective communication helps the sender to articulate feelings and thoughts. If English is not the speaker's first language, it may be challenging for them to effectively convey their message or, in the case of a teacher, to teach the lesson (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). These challenges could be seen as communication impediments. To teach English, one must possess a strong grasp of the language. The language must be understandable to the intended audience (Gallaway & Rose, 2015; Jenkins, 2014).

4. Discussion

Focus group discussion and workshop exercises centered on how English language teachers managed activities, assessments, and evaluations in their classes during the pandemic. The FGD involved 30 Filipino language teachers. The PISA-aligned Language curriculum's performance standards for a certain competency were found to be the most difficult to actualize and contextualize. Communication skills, platform adaptation (online, hybrid), and learning assessments were identified as the main challenges to teaching.

The results of the Focus Group Discussion identified several challenges that should be considered in designing PISA Aligned Curriculum in the language in the Philippine context. The results in Table 1 indicate that the K-12 curriculum needs to be revisited and decongested in terms of the content and performance standards aligned with the real-life context of learners. This is supported by various education conferences (ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 and the United Nation's Call for Education for All). They are also based on the experiences of the various language teachers from the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, and Universities in the Philippines.

Table 1. *Challenges to English language teaching*

Challenges to English language teaching	Number of responses
Curriculum overload	5
Availability and utilization of technology	8
Instructional planning	7
Assessment and competencies mismatch	9
Inappropriate teaching strategies	10
Language barriers	5

The results of the group discussion and consultations with English Language teachers showed that while there are common contents and skills in every English language curriculum, there is still a need to align our current K-12 English Language Curriculum with the PISA Language Framework. According to them, the goal of the curriculum should not only focus on learning the structure of language but on learning how to apply the English Language in everyday life. The results of the study led to the development of the *curriculum design framework* that was used in the development of the proposed PISA-aligned English Language Curriculum. The curriculum design framework is shown in Figure 2.

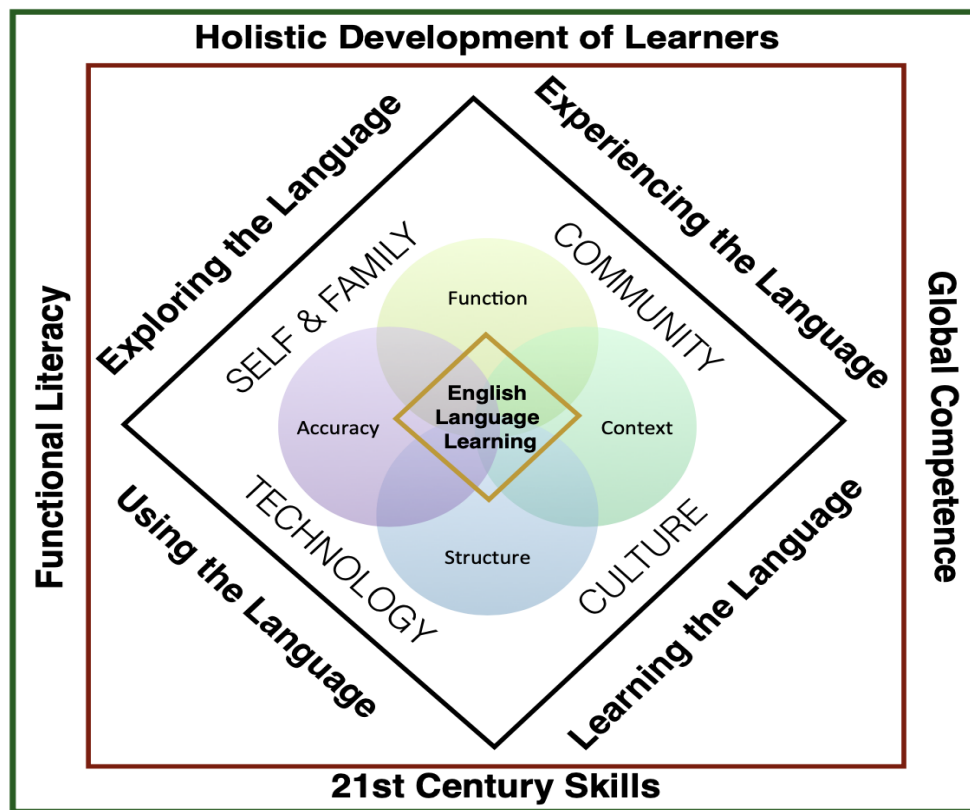


Figure 2. Proposed Curriculum Framework for PISA-Aligned English Language Curriculum

The results of this study show three main curriculum design elements to consider in developing a PISA-aligned curriculum. These elements are shown in Figure 2.

1. **Content** - The content focuses on four areas:

- a. **Function:** Refers to what a learner can do with the language at a given stage. Functions are specific language-based tasks normally performed in the course of daily life
- b. **Context refers to the settings or situations where a particular function may occur.** It is not enough for students to master the contents of the English Language curriculum. The PISA-aligned English Language curriculum places the learning of the language in the contexts of personal, family, community, professional, cultural, and technology.
- c. **Structure:** Refers to the structure of the English language. These are the content standards and performance standards that the learners are expected to learn from the current English language curriculum, and the expectation of the PISA on the level of language competence expected for the students to learn. The content includes the macro-skills of the language. It also includes the contents such as grammar, structures and various types of texts, and the development of vocabulary.
- d. **Accuracy:** The degree to which student performance is correct structurally and socio-linguistically. This will be helpful in designing assessment tools and in identifying learning benchmarks.

2. **Context** - The PISA-aligned English Language curriculum places the learning of the language in the contexts of personal, family, local, national, and global issues and challenges. This element also allows every learner to

- a. Experience the language in the context of how it is used every day in a community life context.
- b. Learn the language critically and creatively to develop global and multicultural competence
- c. Explore the beauty of the language as part of cultural literacy
- d. Use the language to communicate effectively

Placing the learning of language in proper personal and social contexts also enables the learners to understand the culture embedded in the language meaningfully and allows the learners to use the language effectively in communicating ideas and information about different issues and challenges they encounter. It makes the English language learning process more personalized for all learners.

3. **Challenge** - The third element allows the learners to be engaged in meaningful learning activities and projects that combine the other two elements: content and context. This allows the learners to creatively learn and master the different language macro skills and develop global competencies through different activities and projects. It encourages more collaboration among the learners in accomplishing different learning tasks and learning outcomes.

The challenge is to guide every learner to develop 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, innovation, communication, and collaboration. It is also expected that learners using this curriculum will develop global and multicultural competencies, contributing to the holistic development of every Filipino learner.

Applying these three design elements, the proposed PISA-aligned English Language Curriculum will only include *Performance Standards* based on the four major macro-skills in the language (1) listening, (2) speaking, (3) reading, and (4) writing. Performance standards are broad statements of skills, values, and knowledge that all learners should master and develop. Standards are more descriptive. Thus, it provides more opportunity for the learners to master the language in various contexts and response to different challenges. Learning competencies are more specific than standards, and they are more prescriptive. In the proposed curriculum, the different local schools and teachers are encouraged to develop curriculum learning competencies and instructional objectives that are relevant and responsive to the context of the learners.

The use of performance standards will allow schools and teachers to contextualize and localize the K-12 English Language Curriculum. This is a major contrast with the K-12 curriculum that prescribes all the learning competencies that must be learned by the students. Focusing on *Performance Standards* that are descriptive rather than prescriptive allows every teacher to apply constructivist approaches and strategies for teaching. It gives more opportunities for both the teachers and the learners to creatively learn the English language in a more meaningful way.

In their study, Karami and Zamanian (2016) highlight the need to empower teachers to make decisions on instructional development and pedagogical decisions as they are in tune with the sociolinguistic realities of the school. In the proposed PISA-aligned curriculum framework, teachers are also empowered as content experts who will contextualize and localize the K-12 English Language Curriculum. Teachers are not seen as passive implementers of a curriculum that is passed down by policymakers and language experts. They are encouraged to develop curriculum learning competencies and instructional objectives that are relevant and responsive to the context of the learners.

5. Conclusions

The findings of the study suggest that technological resources, congested and impractical curriculum competencies, imbalance distribution of tasks, traditional assessment, classroom motivation, and language barriers hinder language teachers from delivering quality instruction and students from experiencing meaningful learning. The PISA-aligned curriculum for Language will not only improve the teaching and learning of the English language curriculum in the country and possibly aid in the improvement of the country's performance and ranking in the PISA, but it will also allow Filipino learners to develop global and multicultural competencies. Along with relevant and timely professional development for language teachers, the proposed curriculum design will improve the quality of student outputs and raise the competence and confidence of teachers and students, who are the key success stakeholders in delivering the instruction. Teacher training on the PISA framework should be conducted so that teachers will be equipped to redesign the existing K-10 language curriculum and align it with the PISA framework. After redesigning the curriculum, instructional materials development should be facilitated in order to help teachers translate the PISA-aligned curriculum to classroom instruction.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, and Universities (ACSCU) and the Wesleyan University of the Philippines for the opportunity to conduct the study.

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