

Research on Content Validity of English Reading Comprehension Test in Xizang Middle School Entrance Examination under the Background of New Curriculum Reform from 2019 to 2025

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Abstract: As the core competency-oriented curriculum reform advances, the educational value of the English section in the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE) has become increasingly evident in both nurturing students' development and guiding teaching practices. The content validity analysis of reading comprehension questions in the 2019–2025 HSEE for Xizang demonstrates how regional assessments align with curriculum standards. Through examining the presentation formats, genres, themes, and linguistic features of these questions, this study evaluates their quality, explores their instructional guidance role, and contributes to enhancing regional English education quality while establishing competency-based teaching models.

Keywords: Content validity; Junior high school academic level examination; Reading comprehension; Compulsory education curriculum standards

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1. Preface

As a pivotal component of the Chinese High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao) English test, reading comprehension serves as a key instrument to assess students' core competencies including language proficiency, cultural awareness, and critical thinking^[1]. The quality of its test items directly impacts the reliability and validity of the assessment. For decades, academic research has primarily focused on aligning reading test validity with curriculum standards^[2]. Internationally, a well-established theoretical framework for reading test validity has been developed, encompassing multidimensional studies on test design, cultural contexts, and individual differences^[3]. The Xizang is an important ethnic area in China, and its educational development has distinct regional and cultural characteristics. Under the background of the new curriculum standards, there has been a lack of systematic research and in-depth analysis on whether the structure of the Xizang high school entrance examination English reading comprehension questions has been adjusted, what changes have occurred in the content of the questions, whether they meet the requirements of content validity, and what impacts these changes have brought to regional English teaching.

This study examines the 2019–2025 English reading comprehension test papers from the Xizang's high school

entrance exams. Using longitudinal analysis, we systematically examine the test items' content, structural features, and assessment functions. The research reveals the overall trend in the development of these reading comprehension questions, evaluates their alignment with curriculum standards and content validity, and provides theoretical support and practical references for optimizing English reading instruction, improving test design methods, and cultivating students' reading abilities.

2. Theoretical basis

This paper expounds the validity theory and the framework of language test task characteristics respectively, which provides the theoretical basis for the research.

2.1. The concept of validity

Test validity, also known as validity, refers to the extent to which a test successfully achieves its intended purpose. Different linguists have proposed their own definitions of validity. Bachman (1996) proposed that validity is the most important indicator for developing, interpreting, and using language tests. Generally speaking, validity indicates to what extent a test captures the content intended by its designers, making it the most crucial aspect of language testing. Specifically, there are many evaluation criteria for test items, with discrimination, difficulty, reliability, and validity being the most common ^[4]. It serves as a key indicator for assessing test quality. Regarding how to evaluate content validity in tests, many scholars have proposed their own perspectives and developed analytical frameworks based on different question types. However, the most influential framework remains Bachman & Palmer's Test Task Theory, as it not only describes existing tests but also aids in test design and provides a basis for hypotheses in language testing research ^[5].

2.2. Framework of language test task characteristics

The content validity analysis is grounded in the test task characteristics framework proposed by Bachman and Palmer, focusing on the key components of the English reading comprehension section in the Xizang's high school entrance examination. This theoretical framework, developed from the essence of language testing tasks, decomposes test structures into five dimensions: "contextual features", "test rule features", "input features", "expected response features", and "input-response relationships". This comprehensive approach evaluates the alignment between language usage contexts and task requirements. In practical implementation, given the unique textual characteristics and response formats of reading comprehension tests, the study primarily examines two dimensions: "input features" and "expected response features" ^[6]. These dimensions assess the reading materials' performance in content coverage, linguistic complexity, and task design rationality, thereby evaluating the test's actual effectiveness in assessing students' language proficiency.

Bachman and Palmer propose that the test task feature framework can be used to compare the actual usage scenarios of target language with test tasks, thereby assessing the authenticity and validity of test content. Since the reading comprehension section of the high school entrance exam is primarily evaluated through text presentation and response performance, the analysis focuses on two aspects: "language input features" and "expected response features". In line with the requirements of the "Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)", the study examines whether the test content aligns with and adheres to the standards in terms of text design and response requirements ^[7].

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Analysis of the presentation form of English reading comprehension in the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

From 2019 to 2025, the format of reading comprehension materials in the Xizang's high school entrance exams have

remained predominantly text-based, with occasional use of combined text-table materials. The overall structure has shown relative stability with minimal variation. Statistical analysis reveals that among the 21 reading materials over seven years, text-only materials accounted for 81% (17 items), while combined text-table materials made up 19% (4 items). These latter two types appeared in 2020 (B item), 2021 (A item), and 2024 (A item), respectively. Notably, these four combined materials primarily featured text with tables, without incorporating multimodal texts containing visual elements such as images or charts.

From a macro perspective, the emergence of tabular-text integrated materials follows a triennial cycle, predominantly appearing in Sections A and B while remaining absent from the more challenging Section C. This design balances instructional objectives with assessment functions, maintaining exam fairness and comparability while progressively guiding students to adapt to diverse discourse formats. It enhances their ability to identify, filter, and synthesize cross-textual information. This “steady yet evolving” proposition strategy not only demonstrates rationality and prudence in exam design but also supports the continuous improvement and standardization of regional English assessment.

3.2. Genre analysis of English reading comprehension in the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

Genre refers to a communicative event with distinct structural characteristics, defined by specific purposes and procedures in language use. According to the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)”, junior high school graduates should understand and master the following text types, as outlined in the table below.

The 2019–2025 English reading comprehension test in Xizang’s high school entrance exams feature an overall pattern dominated by expository texts, supplemented by narrative and practical writing, with news reports as occasional embellishments. This demonstrates a proposition characteristic of “core stability with diversified expansion”. According to statistics, among the 21 reading materials across seven years, expository texts account for the largest proportion at 10 pieces (48%), appearing in all years, particularly showing a clustering trend from 2020 to 2023. Narrative texts comprise 5 pieces (24%), mainly appearing in 2019, 2024, and 2025 in intermittent patterns. Practical writing makes up 4 pieces (19%), predominantly in sections A and C, concentrated in 2020, 2021, 2024, and 2025. News reports, the least frequent genre with 2 pieces (9%), serve as periodic supplements appearing in 2022 and 2023.

From a temporal perspective, the genre distribution has evolved from homogeneity to diversification and then to structural stabilization. In 2019, exam questions were predominantly single-genre, focusing on expository and narrative writing. After 2020, examiners began intentionally incorporating new genres like practical writing and news reporting. By 2022, a hybrid format combining expository and news reporting emerged, marking the peak of genre diversity. From 2024 to 2025, a ternary structure appeared: practical writing/expository + narrative + expository/practical writing, signaling the maturation of the exam system. This evolution achieved a dynamic balance between genre breadth and reading difficulty.

3.3. Analysis of the English reading comprehension topics in the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

The 2019–2025 reading comprehension test questions for the Xizang’s high school entrance exams align with the three thematic domains outlined in the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition): “Human and Self”, “Human and Society”, and “Human and Nature”^[8]. The diverse range of topics demonstrates the emphasis on developing students’ comprehensive cognitive abilities and core competencies.

In terms of distribution patterns, the “Human and Society” category dominates, covering diverse areas including daily social interactions, social phenomenon manifestations, cultural comprehension levels, and educational topics. This category emphasizes assessing students’ social cognition and cultural awareness, highlighting themes of value guidance and cultural identity. It demonstrates the “cultural characteristics” corresponding to the cultural consciousness and values education outlined in curriculum standards. This imbalance in score distribution somewhat distorts the test’s role in guiding students’ scientific literacy and ecological awareness, hindering the development of a comprehensive natural perspective

and sustainable development consciousness. Future test design should maintain overall balance and comparability while moderately increasing the weight of the “Human and Nature” theme. Incorporating topics like environmental protection, energy utilization, ecological civilization, and sustainable development into reading materials can enhance students’ linguistic understanding and value cognition regarding nature and technology. This approach also helps students develop an ecological awareness of “harmonious coexistence between humans and nature” through reading, achieving deep integration between English teaching and ecological civilization education.

3.4. Analysis of vocabulary in English reading comprehension of the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

From 2019 to 2025, the vocabulary volume in the English reading comprehension section of the Xizang’s high school entrance exams exhibited cyclical fluctuations without a clear upward or downward trend. Statistical analysis revealed variations in both total and per-text vocabulary across years. For instance, in 2020, Text A contained 297 words, while the three reading passages combined 681 words, averaging 227 words per text, indicating a moderately high overall level. In contrast, Text B in 2023 contained only 115 words, with the total vocabulary amounting to 459 words, averaging 153 words per text, representing a lower value. Overall, the per-text vocabulary typically ranged between 150–200 words, meeting the reading volume requirements for junior high school as stipulated in the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)”. This aligns well with the language load and competency standards.

To ensure the fairness and scientific rigor of examinations, future test design should implement standardized adjustments to vocabulary size and distribution patterns. In teaching practice, differentiated vocabulary instruction and progressive training should be strengthened. This helps students develop strategies to handle texts with varying lexical loads, thereby better supporting the development of English reading competence oriented toward core competencies.

3.5. Analysis of the vocabulary of English reading comprehension in the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

The vocabulary selection for the 2019–2025 middle school English reading comprehension test in Xizang demonstrates well-calibrated control, largely complying with the lexical scope standards of the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)”^[9]. All words excluded from the official vocabulary list are classified as unfamiliar terms. Statistical analysis of seven-year test data reveals an overall low unfamiliarity rate averaging 1.50%. This ratio reflects prudent language input difficulty control, with most assessment items remaining within students’ existing vocabulary. The absence of excessively dense unfamiliar words prevents comprehension barriers, thereby ensuring the test’s validity and fairness.

By year, the new word rate in 2019 was 1.71%, with 9 new words, making it the year with the highest proportion of new vocabulary. Although the 2023 rate exceeded the average, only 8 new words were included, remaining within a reasonable range. Compared to 2020 and 2024, where the rates were 1.02% and 1.03% respectively, the 2020 and 2024 test papers demonstrated more standardized vocabulary selection, aligning with the curriculum standards and making reading more accessible for students.

Overall, the Xizang high school entrance exam English reading comprehension has achieved the goal of “appropriate difficulty, reasonable quantity, and compliant distribution” in the setting of new vocabulary, demonstrating a fairly appropriate grasp of the characteristics of language input. However, it is also reminded that the test setters should pay attention to whether the distribution of new vocabulary across different passages is even, and whether there are any local accumulation or imbalance. In teaching, it is necessary to strengthen the coverage of vocabulary corresponding to the “Curriculum Standards”, helping learners to have a more sufficient ability to recognize and understand the vocabulary in articles when actually facing them, and to cope with various reading tasks and make corresponding lexical transfer and application. Targeted practice should be conducted on new vocabulary and confusing words to achieve a two-way docking between assessment and teaching.

3.6. Analysis of the readability of English reading comprehension in the middle school entrance examination in Xizang from 2019 to 2025

The readability of English reading comprehension questions in the 2019–2025 middle school entrance exams in Xizang was assessed using the Flesch readability formula, followed by a graded analysis based on international standards. Overall, the average readability scores showed significant annual fluctuations, with difficulty levels progressing from “easy” to “fairly easy” to “standard”. This alignment with the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)” requirements for tiered reading ability development in junior high schools demonstrates that the exam questions effectively address teaching objectives, students’ cognitive patterns, and language acquisition pathways.

The 2019 and 2020 test papers averaged 81.00 and 81.97 in readability, both rated as ‘easy’. The texts featured relatively simple language and clear sentence structures, effectively reducing students’ reading anxiety. These materials primarily aim to help students develop basic reading strategies, build a solid foundation for language comprehension, and establish a strong starting point for English reading.

In 2021 and 2023, the readability scores dropped to 73.73 and 76.07 respectively, indicating a ‘relatively easy’ level. This aligns with the phased objectives outlined in the curriculum standards: ‘enhancing comprehension and guiding strategy application’. Such design facilitates students’ transition from mechanical reading to active textual meaning construction, while also preparing them for developing higher-order reading skills. The average readability of the, 2024 and 2025 exam papers further declined to 64.20, 60.87, and the corresponding “standard” difficulty levels, respectively. The overall language complexity of the texts increased significantly, with the assessment focus shifting from language comprehension to language reasoning and comprehensive understanding. This phase of test design demonstrates a comprehensive evaluation of junior high school graduates’ English reading abilities, aligning with the curriculum standards’ requirements for “real-text comprehension” and “subsequent learning continuity”. It further reinforces the implementation of the subject’s educational objectives.

Overall, the test questions demonstrate a reasonable progression in readability across years, with the difficulty level gradually aligning with the objectives of the final assessment in junior high school. This reflects a well-structured approach in language input control, student cognitive development stages, and curriculum standards. This ensures that students at different levels can achieve continuous reading skill improvement within a stable language difficulty range, thereby enhancing the appropriateness and scientific rigor of regional examinations.

4. Summary

This study, grounded in the “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)” and Bachman-Palmer’s Test Task Theory, conducts a diachronic content validity analysis of the 2019–2025 Xizangan Autonomous Region High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao) English reading comprehension questions. It systematically examines six dimensions: material presentation, genre, thematic scope, vocabulary density, new vocabulary load, and readability. The findings demonstrate that the test items generally align with the curriculum standards’ pedagogical objectives, featuring stable question structures, standardized language input, comprehensive assessment content, and well-rounded evaluation functions. These characteristics provide substantial instructional feedback value for teaching improvement.

In conclusion, this research not only provides evidence-based support for improving the quality of English reading test items in regional high school entrance exams, but also offers actionable pathways for innovating English teaching in ethnic minority regions. Future studies could incorporate more empirical teaching data to further explore the relationship between test item design characteristics and instructional adaptability, thereby promoting the continuous integration and development of English assessment systems with classroom practices in basic education.

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