

# K-5 Literacy Education: A Comparison between American Common Core State Standards and Chinese National Curriculum Standards

Haiyan Zhang<sup>1,\*</sup>, Jianjun Yin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Foreign Studies, Nantong University, Nantong, 226009, Jiangsu, China

<sup>2</sup>College of Education and Human Development, Jackson State University, Jackson, 39217, MS, USA

\*Corresponding Author: [hldhaiyan@ntu.edu.cn](mailto:hldhaiyan@ntu.edu.cn)

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**Abstract** Literacy education is the most important part in school education and its efficiency determines the students' achievements in their future education and career. In 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released, which aimed to provide common standards for K-12 public school students in the whole country to improve the educational quality in the U. S. The goals of language literacy in CCSS were illustrated from four dimensions: standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language, which was from the micro-perspective of language learning. In CCSS, English Language Arts Reading is emphasized and the teaching aims, teaching contents, language skills, and the function of new technology was proposed to guarantee the quality of the literacy education. In 2011, Chinese National Curriculum Standards (NCS) was released. The goal of NCS for language learning was designed based on three dimensions: knowledge and ability, process and methods, and emotion, attitude, and values, which was from the macro-perspective of language learning. This paper introduced the background of the implementation of the two curriculums, compared the components and goals between the American CCSS and Chinese NCS, as well as the characteristics of each curriculum to try to find out the implications for each other.

**Keywords** K-5, Literacy education, American Common Core State Standards, Chinese National Curriculum Standards

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the curriculum in the USA was designed and implemented by each state; in another word, each state had its own curriculum. As a result, the problems were obvious, that was the non-comparison between the educational quality in different states, and the students' abilities in every aspect were awry too much. In 2001, in

order to improve the quality of education for all students, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Reform was implemented by Bush Government, which intended to close the achievement gap between high and low achieving students, and minority and non-minority students along with the advantaged and disadvantaged students [1]. NCLB had provided for an increased focus on students that have traditionally performed at low levels [2]; however, states being allowed to develop their own standards, test score proficiency levels, and statistical measurement formulas under Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) [3], which made some schools lower their standards or exclusive the scores of the minority students to avoid the punishment. In the 2009 Programs for International Student Assessment (PISA), U.S. 15-year-olds had an average score of 500 on the combined reading literacy scale, which was lower than that of 5 OECD countries and lower than that of 8 countries and other education systems [4]. This result made American people begin to reflect their education and problems caused by NCLB.

On June 2, 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released [5]. The goal of National Common Core Curriculum (NCCC) workgroups was to create a system of standards that focused on a consistent end result, unlike the current system of standards, which differ from state to state. With a cross curriculum emphasis, these core curriculum standards staircase growing text complexity, an increased use of technology for sharing information and concepts, and a content-rich curriculum which assures smoother grade-to-grade progression. Initially, national experts formed workgroups that fleshed out the national standards. Now, state level workgroups are in the process of developing working documents for their state and school districts with the overall goal of implementation by 2014 [6]. As specified by Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors Association (NGA), the Standards are (1) research and evidence based, (2) aligned with college and work expectations, (3) rigorous, and (4) internationally benchmarked [7].

Chinese language education has a long history, which is an important way for the inheritance and transmission of 5,000-year-long Chinese culture. In 2001, Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education was implemented [8], which was the first time the term “syllabus” was replaced by “curriculum”, and in 2011 the new curriculum was released to solve the shortcomings of the 2001 version. In China, syllabus or curriculum was designed and implemented by Ministry of Education, not by each province, which was totally different from state-led curriculum in USA, therefore its uniqueness appeared; that was, curriculum in the whole China must have the same goals, demands, criteria and evaluations for each school to provide every student equal opportunities to enter university. In fact, the whole country stepped at the same pace greatly affect the development of Chinese education, because in some fast developed provinces, the present teaching materials and evaluation couldn't meet the need of students; however, in some underdeveloped provinces, the teaching materials and evaluation were too high for most of the students there. The National Curriculum guarantees the educational equality among all the students, at the same time it neglects the students' personal development in different learning environments.

## 2. Components of the two Standards

The Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects K–5 includes seven strands- reading standards for literature k–5; reading standards for informational text k–5; reading standards: foundational skills k–5; writing standards k–5; speaking and listening standards k–5; language standards k–5; standard 10: range, quality, and complexity of student reading k–5. It also includes three appendices. Appendix A contains supplementary material on reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language as well as a glossary of key terms. Appendix B consists of text exemplars illustrating the complexity, quality, and range of reading appropriate for various grade levels with accompanying sample performance tasks. Appendix C includes annotated samples demonstrating at least adequate performance in student writing at various grade levels.

Chinese NCS adopts nine-year-through design, which means that the design from grade one to grade nine are consistently as a whole, and composed of four parts - part one is the preface, in which some directing points of the reform of language curriculum are proposed, such as the features, basic educational concepts and design concepts; part two is the curriculum goals, which can be divided into whole goal and stage aims; part three is the suggestions on implementation, which can show the operation and humanity of the new curriculum, including the suggestions on teaching, evaluation, teaching materials compiling, development and implementation of the curriculum resources; part four is the appendix, including the suggestions on the excellent poems

and articles, extra-curriculum reading materials, grammar and figures of speech, basic characters in knowing and writing, as well as the commonly used characters in Chinese language teaching in compulsory education.

## 3. Goals in two Standards

The goals of language literacy in American CCSS are illustrated from five dimensions, standards for reading, fundamental reading skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Each dimension includes several detail demands. This is the micro- perspective study of language learning. The CCSS emphasize language per se, as well as the four skills in language learning. As for standards for reading, it includes key ideas and details, craft and structure, integration of knowledge and ideas, and range of reading and level of text complexity. As for reading standards: fundamental skills, it includes print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency. Standards for writing include text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing. Standards for speaking and listening include comprehension and collaboration, presentation of knowledge and ideas. Standards for language include conventions of standard language, knowledge of language, vocabulary acquisition and use. The goals for each grade are illustrated clearly from the above perspectives.

The goal of Chinese NCS for language learning is designed based on three dimensions: knowledge and ability, process and methods, and emotion, attitude, and values, including not only whole goals, but also stage aims. Among them, the cultivation of students' emotion, attitude and value is the most important and should be the utmost of all these goals. Therefore, the design of Chinese NCS was from the macro-perspective of language learning. Language is an embodiment of culture. The goals in NCS are to equip students with knowledge, impart culture, and form good personal and world values. The whole goals in Chinese NCS are mainly illustrated from ten perspectives, building of patriotism, aesthetics, personality, cooperative spirits, active personal attitude and positive values; the escalation of cultural taste, not only knowing Chinese culture, but also respect culture in other countries; building Chinese language learning confidence, forming good language learning habits and approaches; developing thinking ability, like creativity and imagination, and learning scientific thinking styles; having the ability to do inquiry learning, applying language in practice; grasping Chinese pinyin(Chinese phonetic alphabet) , Putonghua (mandarin Chinese), 3500 commonly used Chinese characters, and writing Chinese characters neatly and fast; having the ability to read by oneself, and mastering many reading strategies; having the ability to express oneself clearly and logically; having the basic ability of oral communication; having the ability of using dictionary, searching and

organizing information. The stage aims are combined by different demands on every two grades, for example, grade one and two, grade three and four, and grade five and six. Each stage goal include goals from five perspectives, knowing and writing Chinese characters, reading, sentence writing, oral communication, and comprehensive learning (discussion based on in-class and out-of class reading, oral or drawing expression of one's inner thinking, organizing interesting language activities with the help of teachers, solving problems with language knowledge, practicing type Chinese characters with keyboard).

## 4. Characteristics of the two Standards

### 4.1 American CCSS

#### 4.1.1. Indo-European Language System

English belongs to Indo-European language system. The inflection and derivation play an important part in word building, as well as the correct pronunciation of the words, which is the reason why the syllable teaching and phonemic awareness raising is so important in American CCSS. The demands like "spell untaught words phonetically, drawing on phonemic awareness and spelling conventions" in grade 1; "a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page; b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters; c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print; d. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet" for kindergarteners.

#### 4.1.2. Students' Problem-solving Ability

American students have higher practical ability. The American CCSS blend information search ability with media application skills to prepare students for future college study and career adaption in a technological society. Students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms. Compared with Chinese NCS, which haven't the demand of inquiry reading with the help of library and internet until students are at grade 5 and 6, American CCSS ask the students to participate in shared searching and writing projects even when they are at kindergarten. This characteristic can show why American students are so good at project-based inquiry learning. The teacher seldom tells them what they should do; most of the knowledge is just concluded by students themselves. Ability increasing is more important than knowledge accumulation.

#### 4.1.3. Shared Responsibility for Students' Literacy Development

The K-5 standards include expectations for reading,

writing, speaking, listening, and language applicable to a range of subjects, including but not limited to English Language Arts (ELA) class. This division reflects the unique, time-honored place of ELA teachers in developing students' literacy skills, and recognizes that teachers in other areas must have a role in this development [6]. This characteristic can show that the American teachers should be responsible for the students' literacy development, no matter what subjects they teach. These shared responsibilities are beneficial for students' literacy development. The language skills they learned in ELA class can be used in their other classes flexibly, especially for K-3 students, since most of the courses were taught by their class teachers.

#### 4.1.4. Building Knowledge Systematically

Building knowledge systematically in English language arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade that, over time, will form one big picture. The CCSS demand that there should be an adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period within a grade level, then the knowledge children have learned about particular topics in early grade levels should be expanded and developed in subsequent grade levels to ensure an increasingly deeper understanding of these topics. The building of knowledge systematically have different measures to evaluate children's understanding of the knowledge. When they are at the early grades, they should participate in rich, structured conversations with an adult in response to the written texts that are read aloud, orally comparing and contrasting as well as analyzing and synthesizing. However, when children are at the higher grades, they will generally be expected to read these texts independently and reflect on them in writing.

#### 4.1.5. Adults or Peer Guidance

In American CCSS, adults or peer guidance plays an important role in students' language learning in the whole elementary school. For example, in the part of "Production and Distribution of Writing", adults or peer can not only help students' in their writing skills, like asking questions or giving suggestions, planning, revising, editing, rewriting, trying a new approach, but also in using technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing. Without adults or peer guidance, it's difficult to see the students' achievement in writing. The functions of adults or peer in language learning are co-workers, just like Vygotsky's scaffolding. With these scaffolding, the students' language can improve fast in this small language world. Chinese NCS seldom mention adults and peer guidance in students' language learning. In real world, parents are greatly involved in students' language learning, but the parents' roles are seldom scaffoldings, but monitors, to monitor whether the students have finished their homework, or even whether they have worked out every question correctly. All these limited the development of students' initiative.

## 4.2. Characteristics of Chinese NCS

### 4.2.1. Sino-Tibetan Language System

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language system, which determines the totally different spoken and written forms from English. This characteristic makes knowing and writing Chinese characters the prerequisite of Chinese language learning, because the written form must be learned separately, in another word, Chinese students have to learn one more system than American students do. This is the reason why knowing and writing Chinese characters are placed at the beginning of the curriculum, to emphasize its importance and difficulty. At grade 3 and 4, the students are asked to write calligraphy, and try to feel the beauty of the Chinese characters. Calligraphy is traditional Chinese culture inherited thousands of years ago, and need to be passed on from generation to generation. All these determined writing is so important in Chinese NCS.

### 4.2.2. The Importance of Affective Factors

Affective factors not only appear in reading part, but also in writing part. In the part of teaching suggestions, there are two demands which also emphasize the importance of affective factors in language teaching, one is “paying attention to the correct guidance in emotion, attitude, and value”, and the other is “training the holy moral and healthy aesthetics to form right values and active life attitudes, which are the most important, not additional part of Chinese language teaching, and emphasizing the function of good modeling”. From these two demands, it’s easy to find out that Chinese language teaching is connected with aesthetics. Chinese pay attention to the influence of modeling, therefore, the Chinese language teaching materials would choose the good man, good deeds to play the function of modeling. In Chinese NCS, the selection of teaching materials is oriented to the governmental policy, to advocate the positive deeds and traditional Confucianism, and neglect the negative emotions and feelings.

### 4.2.3. The Emphasis of Communicative Competence

“When communicate with the others, the students should behave politely and naturally” and “have confidence in expression, discuss actively, and express what they are interested in”, those are the demands for grade 1 and 2 students. The Chinese NCS requires that the students should learn Chinese language, as well as Chinese culture. Politeness and natural communication is just one part of Chinese culture. Since language is embodiment of culture, it plays the function of transmitting the culture.

### 4.2.4. Recitation of Excellent Poems and Articles

75 Chinese excellent ancient poems are compulsory for students to be recited in elementary school, as well as some recommended poems and articles by textbook compiler and teachers. In China, there was a great poet in Tang Dynasty, named Du Fu, who once said, “Studies ten thousand volumes,

starts writing like bright”. This is the reason why Chinese students are asked to recite so many excellent poems and articles in their language learning. In Chinese tradition, people believe that in order to be good at language production in the future, recitation is the best way for language accumulation. The more you remember in your head, the fluently you can use them in the future. Excellent poems and articles are good examples for students to recite.

### 4.2.5. Strategy Training

Strategy training, especially the training of reading strategies, is emphasized in each stage in NCS. For example, “learn to read silently, without finger pointing”, “learn to read silently, and ask questions about what they don’t know in the text”, “learn skimming and scanning to grasp the general idea of the text”, “read silently with some speed, and no less than 300 characters per minute”, “learn to skim and collect information according to personal need”, all these reading strategies are good for the improvement of the students’ reading comprehension, just as Houtveen et al. [9] found that students who were trained in the use of reading strategies had substantially better reading comprehension results than those who were not trained, and this is just what American CCSS neglect.

### 4.2.6. Suggestions on the Implementation of the Chinese NCS

In Chinese NCS, there is a part which are the suggestions for implement NCS in elementary schools. Suggestions are from four aspects- suggestions on the teaching material compiling; the development and implement of curriculum resources; teaching; and evaluation. These suggestions can guide for teachers with different language teaching abilities to implement the curriculum more efficiently, and help the students reach the demands of the NCS when they graduate from elementary schools, and make a good preparation for high school study.

### 4.2.7. Chances to Know Ancient and Foreign Cultures and Works

Chinese NCS provide chances for students to know excellent Chinese culture, as well as foreign culture and works, which can broaden students’ horizon, and have a comprehensive understanding towards the outside world, which is what American CCSS neglects. For example, in Chinese NCS, students are suggested to read books like Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales, Grimms’ Fairy Tales, and Aesop’s Fables, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, Golgi’s Childhood, and Ostrovsky’s How the Steel Was Tempered. Some Foreign history books and non-fiction stories are also recommended.

## 5. Conclusions

Cross-national studies offer perspective and relationships

in educational efficiency that go beyond the league tables and avoid the importation of knowledge from one nation to another [10]. As for American CCSS, it is the first trial of national standards. Therefore, it unavoidably has some problems in the design of standards. Though Chinese NCS was issued in 2011, the national curriculum standards have existed in China for nearly 30 years, and every several years the new version will appear based on the old ones to better meet the needs of the society and human development. The comparison between American CCSS and Chinese NCS in components, goals and characteristics provides an international view in understanding the two standards. Each standard has its specific demands and characteristics because of different language system, educational concept and learning environment. No standard is perfect, only when compared with the others, can it realize its own shortcomings and make some improvements. The more communication, the better the standards would be.

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