



# Preparing Students for the Internationalized World — Is Hong Kong Secondary English Curriculum Ready?

**Feifei Liu**

School of Teacher Education, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

DOI: 10.32629/jher.v3i6.1079

---

**Abstract:** To educate students for an internationalized world and knowledge-based economy, education in Hong Kong needs to keep up with internationalization of education. English's status as a global language is crucial to achieving the objective. Based on Rizvi's (2007) critique of curriculum internationalization, this paper examines the secondary English curriculum of Hong Kong as a case study and assesses the curriculum's readiness for internationalization at the policy, school, and classroom levels. The results of this study demonstrate that curriculum internationalization has had a subtle impact on secondary English curriculum decision-making, particularly at the office and school policy levels. However, because of Hong Kong's strongly engrained exam-oriented setting, internationalization adoption at the classroom level continues to be a difficult and convoluted process.

**Keywords:** internationalization of curriculum, curriculum studies, case study, Hong Kong English curriculum, international education

---

## 1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen numerous changes to society, economic development, and peoples' everyday lives in every way, particularly in the context of globalization and the quick development of a knowledge-based economy. Schools should show a willingness to evolve and equip students with the skills they need to meet the demands and difficulties of the globalized century since they play a significant role in social institutions. As a result, the curriculum design for Hong Kong, which prides itself on being a global metropolis and Asia's economic hub, should be able to meet the new challenges and continue to play a vital role in the advancement of both individuals and society (Kennedy, 2005).

In light of this, the goal of this study is to look into the policy- and school-level internationalization of Hong Kong's secondary English curriculum. The definition of the term "internationalization of curriculum" will be explored, along with the conditions for its implementation at the classroom level. A case study of a secondary school in Hong Kong is then presented in order to illustrate both the difficulties and problems of internationalizing the curriculum on a school-level.

## 2. Theoretical framework — internationalization of curriculum

During the 1990s, "the collapse of communist regimes and the increasing political hegemony of new-liberal market ideologies" established and promoted socio-economic and political change (Maassen & Cloete, 2006, p. 7). While many experts labeled the political and economic changes "globalization" (Held et al., 1999). The term "globalization" was actually first used by Theodore Levitt in his article "The Globalization of Markets" from the year 1985. In this article, he used it to describe changes in the global economy over the previous two decades, including the widespread diffusion of production, consumption, and investment worldwide. Beginning with the financial markets, internationalization gradually has an impact on a number of societal spheres, including politics, culture, daily life, and, of course, education.

In 1996, the OECD first defined the term "internationalization of curriculum" as "an attempt to introduce an "international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally or socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students" (Rizvi, 2007, p. 391). However, this definition only works to outline the objectives of internationalizing the curriculum, which is to prepare students for the internationalized world. The vague definition fails to provide guidelines or principles for education organizations about what to do and how to achieve the internationalization of curriculum.

Therefore, later in 1996, a research center of the OECD, the CERl (Center for Education Research and Innovation), conducted a survey and proposed a typology of initiatives (an inventory) for the implementation of the internationalization of curriculum. According to Rizvi (2007), most of the initiatives under the inventory can be concluded into three interrelated categories, namely, "facilitating study abroad and education exchange to broaden and enrich students' cultural experiences;

learning about other languages and cultures as a way of developing their skills of intercultural communication; and preparing them to work in the global knowledge economy" (p. 394). The inventory clearly lists the importance of foreign language and exchange programs in the process of curriculum internationalization. This inventory does improve the numerous opportunities for exchange, immersion, and communication learning at various stages of education. However, many schools equate the internationalization of the curriculum with the presence of some overseas learning programs. As Rizvi (2007) criticizes, the internationalization of the curriculum remains largely symbolic without clear elaboration about what it means.

## 2.1 Policy and school level

Based on Rizvi's (2007) critique of curriculum internationalization and the Hong Kong context, four major principles can be concluded, which will later be used as the theoretical framework to analyze Hong Kong's secondary English curriculum at both the policy and school levels.

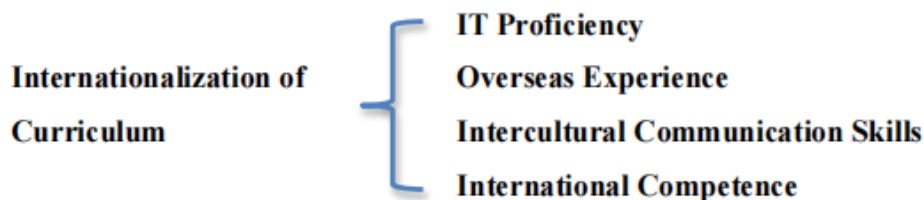


Figure 1. Internationalization of Curriculum

The very first principle is the emphasis on students' IT proficiency. There has been almost no doubt about the increasing influence of IT on the "information age" of the 21st century, and IT has greatly sped up the diffusion of internationalization without regard to region or time zone worldwide. The integration of IT has transformed the economic market and even every aspect of human life. With the help of IT and modern computers, instead of sticking to traditional ways of knowledge and information exchange, people from all around the world can get access to limitless amounts of information and easily communicate with foreigners. Thus, ideas spread without regard to geographic boundaries. Under this trend, an internationalized curriculum should equip students with IT proficiency that can promote their learning skills and autonomy, as well as provide students with abundant resources via the use of IT to suit the needs of diverse students.

The development of IT and other technologies has successfully made the world a "multicultural" country. Traditionally, students only needed to learn their own culture and values; for instance, Chinese students learned Confucius while British students learned Locke. However, in the era of internationalization, the exchange of culture and values takes place invisibly, especially for Hong Kong, which has been a colony of Britain for a century. Hence, a truly cosmopolitan education would make use of both the thinking West and East, which can "demonstrate very well the benefits of learning beyond frontiers" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 59). Therefore, based on the traditional Confucian culture and values, we should also concentrate on how internationalization affects human beings and develop a sense of global citizenship instead of limiting it to individual cultures, values, or religions. In light of this, the internationalized curriculum should promote cultural respect and intercultural communication skills.

As the origin of the definition of internationalization suggests, the economy plays a vital role. To explore the influence of the economy, it is worth noting that education has always been involved in the pervasive influence of economic theory, and the significant contribution of education to economic growth is acknowledged by economists of different persuasions (Kennedy, 2005). The economics of the globalized new century promote the idea of a "knowledge-based economy," which regards learning as the heart and emphasizes the role of knowledge and ideas in driving economic growth. As a result, in addition to the fundamental skills required for employment, students in the twenty-first century must be innovative, critical, and problem-solving in order to generate new ideas that can lead to economic growth (Kennedy, 2005). All these generic skills function to enhance students' international competence and make it possible for them to adapt to different cultures and environments to become globally mobile.

Last but not least, students learn faster and better when personal experience is possible. Opportunities should be provided for students to study abroad themselves so as to immerse themselves in the cultural context and experience the cultural differences in person. The first-hand experience can deepen the understanding of diverse cultures and provide students with opportunities to dialogue and communicate with people from various backgrounds, so as to reinforce students' respect for different cultures and their intercultural communication skills.

## 2.2 Classroom level

Rizvi's work in 2007 provided a comprehensive and critical review of the development and definition of curriculum internationalization. However, teachers cannot get practical guidelines about classroom-level implementation. Munro (2007) explores the learning topics and teaching approaches that enhance the internationalization of the curriculum. The specific requirements for learning topics and an international teaching approach are listed in Table 1 and 2 below. The requirements will also be used as a framework to analyze the classroom practice in the case study later.

**Table 1. Internalization of curriculum — learning topic**

Learning Topic is more likely to be International, if	Have a range of multicultural aspect;
	Each aspect has value within that culture for solving problems; (Students are aware of the value of each culture)
	Stress culture communication and assess information sources from other cultures;
	Students develop attitudes of tolerance, respect and international valuing.

**Table 2. Internationalization of curriculum — teaching approach**

Teaching Approach that foster Internationalization	Encourage students to think about concepts and topics from a range of culture perspectives;
	Encourage students to develop a valuing of different cultural understanding of a topic;
	Help students to recognize what is shared internationally and what is unique to each culture;
	Foster values such as tolerance rather than prejudice.

## 3. Policy level analysis

Following an examination of Hong Kong's official secondary English curriculum, it was discovered that the curriculum is well prepared at the policy level for internationalization. Early in 1999, in the document "Syllabuses for Secondary Schools: English Language," the first section, "Aims and Design of the English Language Curriculum in Hong Kong," says that "... enable one to be acquainted with the culture and conventions of language behavior of other countries." "With the advancements in information technology, such extension of knowledge and experience is even more important for the twenty-first century... (EDB, 1999, p. 3). The key words, such as culture of other countries, twenty-first century, and information technology, demonstrate that the curriculum decision makers had already realized the influence of internationalization on English language education and tried to include the influence in their curriculum practice.

In the latest Secondary 4–6 English Curriculum and Assessment Guide by EDB (2007), when introducing the rationale for the design of the curriculum, it is clearly listed that "English is the language of global communication," and English learning should aim to increase students' "cultural understanding and expand their knowledge and world-views" (EDB, 2007, p. 2). The emphasis on cultural understanding and global communication goes in line with Rizvi's (2007) argument that internationalization of the curriculum should enhance intercultural communication skills. What's more, the aim of the curriculum is to "enable every learner to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology" (EDB, 2007, p. 3). The aim corresponds with the requirement of improving students' international competence and ability to fulfill the knowledge-based economy. Additionally, there is a specific section about IT in the curriculum guide to promote interactive learning, and the government provides large funds every year for overseas study and other learning experiences. To sum up, the official curriculum documents show that the internationalization of the secondary English curriculum in Hong Kong is on the right track and has received sufficient attention at the policy level. However, just like the previous curriculum reforms ("task-based learning"), policy doesn't guarantee a successful implementation. The school-level analysis will be based on a case study of a Hong Kong secondary school where the writer worked before.

Furthermore, in Hong Kong, the initiation and development of the curriculum only includes stakeholders such as subject experts, scholars, policymakers, and the advice of some of the teachers. Students' voices are silenced throughout the process. Students' suggestions and needs are only predicted by stakeholders, with little input from their teachers, let alone themselves. In contrast, in many studies concerning the internationalization and sustainability of curriculum recently, the needs of students' co-ownership of the curriculum were mentioned as being of great importance (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021; Song, 2021; Celik, M., 2022).

## 4. The Hong Kong context and background of the case

Following an examination of the definition and requirements of curriculum internationalization, it is critical to address

the local Hong Kong context, as no understanding is possible without self-understanding (Rizvi, 2007). In Hong Kong, though several curriculum reforms have been implemented, most of the local schools still adopt an exam-based approach, which focuses on knowledge transmission and exam skills without consideration of real-life needs. Based on the writer's observations of secondary English lessons in Hong Kong schools, it is clear that traditional teaching pedagogies with the teacher at the center of the classroom remain the dominant approach. Students can seldom experience cross-curricula study and can hardly make use of knowledge learned in other contexts. Taking English learning as an example, with a focus on exam skills and grammar, students' speaking abilities are far below the standard to be used as a communication tool for other subject studies. The lack of opportunities for authentic use of the knowledge decreases students' motivation towards learning as they cannot find enjoyment and a sense of achievement in the learning process, which consistently contributes to the loss of interest in learning.

In addition, in the past curriculum reforms in Hong Kong, there were quite a lot of high-quality theories and suggestions, such as "task-based learning" and "assessment for learning." However, the reforms fail in many schools because of the traditional communication patterns of the schools, where school administrators make the decisions about the reforms and teachers are only responsible for taking the "orders." This kind of approach largely excludes teachers from the reform process, while teachers are actually the ones who have a direct connection with students and know most about their needs. What's more, sometimes, though informed about the reform decision and willing to conduct it, teachers are not supportive enough of the skills and materials they need to carry out the reform.

Under this local context, the secondary school where the case study takes place is a DSS school in Shatin. Being a DSS school, the school has more flexibility in its curriculum decision-making, administration, resource distribution, etc. As a result, despite emphasizing public examinations, the school is able to devote significant resources to developing extracurricular activities and designing curriculum in accordance with its philosophy. Additionally, the school is a band 1 school, which means that the students have high academic achievements upon entering the school, and parents' expectations are high not only in terms of academic results but also in terms of other generic skills and abilities.

## **5. School level analysis — a case study**

### **5.1 School level**

As discussed above, the school actually has lots of flexibility and freedom in its curriculum decision-making. Based on the English subject curriculum documents of the school and observation of teaching practice, it can be seen that, though not mentioned officially, the English curriculum policy of the school does include features of internationalization of curriculum. For instance, in the Grade 7 curriculum document, one of the learning objectives is to let students "explore an understanding of the human experience from a multicultural perspective" (Hustwit, 2013); similar key words addressing intercultural can also be found in curriculum documents in other grades. Furthermore, the school has lots of English extracurricular activities for the students to choose from, for instance, the Australia Exchange Program, the US Top University Trip, the German Exchange Program, the English Drama Club, and Model United Nations. The school spends a large amount of funding on scholarships for overseas exchange and learning programs every year to encourage students' intercultural understanding and communication, increase international competence, and improve their language proficiency.

However, according to Kennedy (2005), to achieve a successful implementation of reform, the school should be able to provide a supportive organizational context that operates at the school level as well as a prepared pedagogical context that operates at the classroom level. Therefore, though the school policy favors internationalization of the curriculum, the whole school needs to work collaboratively in the organizational context to facilitate its implementation. Specifically, first the whole school should work together, including the principal, panel chairs, teachers, parents, and students themselves, thereby establishing a supportive environment for communication. However, in the case study school, the curriculum decision about emphasizing multicultural perspectives and understanding still remains at the policy stage. The panel chairs only draft the documents for parent meetings and the school report. There are no subject meetings or discussions among the team about the implementation details of how to incorporate culturally respectful teaching into the English scheme of work. The lack of collaboration greatly limits the implementation of the internationalization of the curriculum, from school policy to real-life practice.

### **5.2 Classroom level**

Kennedy (2005) argues that there is little use in changing the curriculum if teaching is not also changed. At the pedagogical classroom level, the learning topics are likely to be international, but not the teaching approach. According to the information about the English Language curriculum and assessment guide on the school website, topics such as

communication, cultures of the world, technology, and getting along with others are suggested as compulsory modules. These topics go in line with Munro's (2007) argument that a learning topic is more likely to be international if it has a multicultural aspect, stresses communication, assesses information sources from other cultures, and helps students develop attitudes of tolerance, respect, and international value.

These topics are of vital value in promoting multicultural understanding and developing global citizenship; however, after observation and discussion with English teachers in the school, it was found that, despite the internationalization of the topics, the teaching remained unchanged. As introduced before, students in Hong Kong are facing heavy examination pressures, and the English teaching in most cases aims at preparing students for the exams, especially higher-grade students. As seen from the scheme of work arrangement in the case study school, junior secondary students, for example, in grades 7 and 8, are more likely to have a task-based, student-centered lesson with a meaningful topic, while students in higher grades, such as in grades 11 and 12, put exam requirements as their first priority. This kind of exam-oriented approach limits the teachers from adopting a teaching approach that fosters internationalization to encourage thinking from a multicultural perspective. "We have tried very hard to come up with meaningful authentic topics and activities for students' whole person development and global citizenship awareness," the panel head for English complained, "but we still need to report to parents, school, and the public about the public exam results." What's more, "the parents ignore all the effort we put in if the exam results are not satisfactory" (R. Hustwit, personal communication, December 4, 2015). As a result, in the Hong Kong context, even though the team aims and attempts to incorporate internationalization into their curriculum, exam-oriented teaching remains the primary focus.

## 6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, internationalization, though not an uncontroversial issue, does affect Hong Kong in terms of economy, politics, societal change, culture, and values, as well as education. Internationalization of the curriculum has influenced secondary English curriculum decision-making imperceptibly, especially at office and school policy levels. However, due to Hong Kong's deeply ingrained exam-oriented context, the implementation of internationalization at the classroom level remains a long and winding road. Moreover, to ensure the successful implementation of a curriculum decision, the school should be well prepared in both the organizational and pedagogical context, which calls for collaboration among different stakeholders throughout the preparation and implementation processes. Last but not least, the promotion of internationalization in the curriculum doesn't mean abandoning traditional cultures and values; on the contrary, internationalization and multi-cultural perspectives should be based on respect for and understanding of our own culture, taking local context into consideration.

## References

---

- [1] Celik, M. (2022). International Schools in the Context of Cultural Diplomacy: Actors and New Approaches. In Akgün, B., & Alpaydın, Y. (Eds.). *Education Policies in the 21st Century: Comparative Perspectives*. Springer.
- [2] EDB. (1999). *Syllabuses for secondary schools: English language (secondary 1-5)*. Hong Kong: The Education Department.
- [3] EDB. (2007). *English language: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (secondary 4 – 6)*. Hong Kong: The Education and Manpower Bureau.
- [4] Gregersen-Hermans, J. (2021). Toward a Curriculum for the Future: Synthesizing Education for Sustainable Development and Internationalization of the Curriculum. *Journal of studies in international education*, 25(4), p.461-481.
- [5] Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D., & Perraton, J. (1999). *Global transformations: politics, economics and culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [6] Hustwit, R. (2013). 2013-2014 Parents' evening: English language for grade 7. Retrieved from [http://www.hkbuas.edu.hk/www/s/05curriculum/schoolbased/1314/EL\\_G07.pdf](http://www.hkbuas.edu.hk/www/s/05curriculum/schoolbased/1314/EL_G07.pdf).
- [7] Kennedy, K. J. (2005). *Changing schools for changing times: new directions for the school curriculum in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- [8] Levitt, T. (1985). The Globalization of Markets. In Kantrow, A. M (Ed), *Sunrise...sunset: challenging the myth of industrial obsolescence* (pp. 53 – 68). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- [9] Maassen, P., & Cloete, N. (2006). Global reform trends in higher education. In Cloete, N. (Ed.), *Transformation in higher education: global pressures and local realities*. Dordrecht, London: Springer; pp. 7 – 33.
- [10] Munro, J. (2007). Learning internationally in a future context. In M. Hayden, J. Levy, & J. Thompson (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research in international education* (pp. 338 - 367). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- [11] Rizvi, F. (2007). Internationalization of curriculum: A critical perspective. In M. Hayden, J. Levy, & J. Thompson

(Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research in international education* (pp. 390-403). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- [12] Song, Y. (2021). 'Uneven consequences' of international English-medium-instruction programmes in China: a critical epistemological perspective. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 42 (4), p.342-356.