

## English O-NET and the Core Curriculum: Expectations and Alignments

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Received 2021-03-20; Revised 2021-04-24; Accepted 2021-04-25;

Published online: 2021-05-31

### Abstract

The education system in Thailand requires that students who complete their elementary and secondary school levels (Grades 6, 9, 12) have to pass the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET). The test is mandatory and administered annually by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) to be aligned with the Basic Education Core Curriculum under the purview of the national Ministry of Education (MOE). While the O-NET is claimed to be aligned with the core curriculum, criticisms for all subjects have been made on this mandatory test in the past 15 years (The Bangkok Post, 2021), especially the deficiencies in the English O-NET tests (Kaewmala, 2012). It is therefore essential to investigate how the designed test corresponds to the prescribed curriculum. By focusing on the English subject, the present study aimed to compare the alignments of the O-NET test items with the learning domains set in the core curriculum. The research instruments included the English O-NET test items administered in the past four years (2016-2019), the learning domains prescribed in the basic education core curriculum, the assessments made by the three raters who were senior secondary school teachers and had experiences in teaching and preparing students for the English O-NET tests, and a group interview. The findings showed that while the test items significantly aligned with some learning domains of the basic education core curriculum, the same test items could also align with some minor requirements of other domains. Moreover, none of the test items showed an alignment with one domain. Based on the findings, some implications in terms of student preparation for the test and directions for future study are discussed.

**Keywords:** *O-NET, Basic Education Core Curriculum, Alignments*

### 1. Introduction

In a Thai educational system, students have to take O-NET in the final years of their lower and upper secondary school education (years 9 and 12). The tests cover the contents of five main subjects, namely: (1) Thai language (2) mathematics (3) science (4) social studies, religion and culture and (5) English. According to the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS, 2008), the O-NET aims to:

- 1) test the knowledge and thinking ability of students according to the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E 2551 (A.D. 2008),

- 2) assess their academic proficiency according to the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E 2551 (A.D. 2008),
- 3) provide information to the schools to improve their teaching and learning activities, and
- 4) evaluate the quality of education at the national level.

These objectives clearly show that regardless of the O-NET of any subjects that the students have to take, the tests rely heavily on the assessment of students' academic performances based on the basic education core curriculum. While the core curriculum was designed to provide core guidelines by taking into consideration the local community problems and needs (Foley, 2005), the O-NET test items should be designed not only to assess student knowledge of language, but also students' ability to apply the knowledge to serve those community problems and needs.

Among Thai secondary schools, achieving high results of O-NET in all the five subjects is one of the challenging and competitive missions set to accomplish. This is because the O-NET results have been playing two important roles in the Thai educational context: as a gatekeeper for students and as a source for schools to ensure their academic accountability. On the one hand, O-NET results serve to ensure students' academic performances. They are used as one of the criteria to determine if students are qualified for university admissions (Napakornkitti & Adunyarittigun, 2018). Even though the admission system presently relies on GAT (General Aptitude Test) and PAT (Professional and Academic Aptitude Test), the O-NET results could also be used as an alternative source to keep the universities informed of students' English knowledge level in the process of considering and selecting students for admission.

On the other hand, O-NET results are used as a tool to reflect the school accountability. The students' annual test results are reported to the schools in comparison with the results of other schools at different levels, namely: provincial, regional and national, resulting in different schools staying cautious and trying to improve the level of their students' academic performances to ensure their best practice. The schools' academic accountability is also a source for trustworthiness among the parents. Nammala (2016) investigated the factors affecting parents' decision to select schools for their children and found that the schools' academic rank was rated as the highest level by the parents among other factors. This implies that the O-NET has impacts on all stakeholders, namely: students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and policy makers (NIETS, 2008).

Concerning the O-NET test results of English subject, the recorded average scores of Thai students at a broad perspective are still at an unsatisfactory level. Table 1 below illustrates the English O-NET results of Thai students at upper secondary school level (Matthayom 6) in the past five years.

**Table 1.** O-NET Results (English Subject) of Thai Students from 2015 to 2019 (Admission Premium, 2019)

Years	Results (%)
2019	29.20
2018	31.41
2017	28.31
2016	24.88
2015	24.98

Table 1 shows that the average English O-NET scores of Thai students are low in the past five years. Even though there was an increasing trend between years 2015 and 2018, the average scores were still below the standard level; and the score even dropped down in year 2019.

When the English proficiency of Thai students assessed by other institutions was considered, Thailand scored 47.62 in the EF English Proficiency Index 2019 prepared by Swiss-based Education First, resulting in the country being placed at a low level among the countries in Southeast Asia (Thai PBS WORLD, 2019). This raises the question of what could be the obstacles for student test achievement and whether or not the students have been prepared with the required areas of knowledge aligned with the assessment. As O-NET tests were administered according to the national core curriculum, many teachers stated that the school syllabus, textbooks, as well as student preparations for the test were arranged following the guidelines of the learning domains prescribed by the MOE. With the awareness of this, the present study aims to investigate the alignments of the English O-NET test items and the prescribed learning domains required by the core curriculum.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The basic education core curriculum 2008

The current core curriculum implemented in the Thai educational system was developed from the previous basic curriculum 2001. Since the application, relevant agencies have followed up and evaluated its strengths and weaknesses. Later on, the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) revised the curriculum based on the problems found and developed the current basic education core curriculum 2008 which was implemented to all school levels.

According to the Ministry of Education (2008), the basic education core curriculum aims to enhance the competencies of learners in five main areas: communication capacity, thinking capacity, problem-solving capacity, capacity for applying life skills, and capacity for technological application. On the basis of these, the curriculum sets up the learning standard of eight learning areas, namely: Thai language; mathematics; science; social studies, religion and culture; health and physical education; arts; occupations and technology; and foreign languages.

For assessment, students' learning development is guided to be administered at four levels: classroom, school, educational service area and the national level. Classroom assessment can be made regularly by the teachers through questions, quizzes, or assignments. School assessment is organized to assess students' learning achievement on an annual or semester basis. Concerning educational service area assessment, standard examination papers could be prepared and administrated in cooperation with the parent agency. National assessment is designed, based on the learning standards prescribed in the national curriculum; and the common type of this kind of assessment is through the use of O-NET.

In designing the O-NET, the eight prescribed areas of learning are administered to be the tests of five subjects: Thai, mathematics, general sciences, social studies, and English. For English language subject in particular, the core curriculum aims to raise students' awareness of cultural diversity and viewpoints in the world community, conducive to friendship and cooperation with various countries. Based on this, the knowledge contents focus on four main domains: *language for communication, language and culture, language and relationship with other areas, and language and relationship with community and the world* (MOE, 2008). These domains are explained based on the concepts of 4Cs, namely: communication, culture, connection, and communities (Foley, 2005). The requirements of contents as well as learner quality are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** The Core Curriculum's Requirements of Contents and Learner Quality

Strands	1: Language for communication	<b>F 1.1:</b> Understanding of and capacity to interpret what has been heard and read from various types of media, and ability to express opinions with proper reasoning
		<b>F 1.2:</b> Endowment with language communication skills for exchange of data and information; efficient expression of feelings and opinions
		<b>F 1.3:</b> Ability to present data, information, concepts and views about various matters through speaking and writing
	2: Language and culture	<b>F 2.1:</b> Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers and capacity for use of language appropriate to occasions and places
		<b>F 2.2:</b> Appreciation of similarities and differences between language and culture of native and Thai speakers, and capacity for accurate and appropriate use of language
	3: Language and relationship with other learning areas	<b>F 3.1:</b> Usage of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, as foundation for further development and to seek knowledge and widen one's world view
	4: Language and relationship with community and the world	<b>F 4.1:</b> Ability to use foreign languages in various situations in school, community and society
		<b>F 4.2:</b> Usage of foreign languages as basic tools for further education, livelihood and exchange of learning with the world community

Table 2 shows that the national core curriculum emphasizes the learning outcomes at four strands. Each strand consists of different learning domains which set the learning requirements that students are expected to achieve through their school years.

## 2.2 O-NET

The O-NET test items investigated in this study were developed in the past four years (2016-2019), and are consistently organized in three main parts: *language use*, *writing ability*, and *reading ability* (NIETS, 2008). The language use section (Part I) aims to assess students' ability in using language for communication and their knowledge of structure while the writing ability section (Part II) focuses on a cloze test of an incomplete text. In the reading ability section (Part III), students have to read different text types and answer the questions. This part consists of two sub-sections, focusing on the assessment of their vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (See Table 3).

**Table 3.** O-NET Structure (Years 2016-2019) at a Broad Perspective

	<b>Part I</b>	<b>Part II</b>	<b>Part III</b>
	<b>Language use (35 items)</b> * Dialogue completion, Situational dialogue, Sentence completion (items 1-25) * Error correction (items 26-35)	<b>Writing ability (10 items)</b> * Cloze test (items 36-45)	<b>Reading ability (35 items)</b> * Vocabulary knowledge (items 46-50) * Reading Comprehension (items 51-80)
<b>Total</b>	<b>80 items</b>		

Table 3 shows that students are required to use their knowledge of English for communication and grammar in Part I, and they are required to deal with texts constructed in different forms and structures in Part II (writing) and Part III (reading).

## 2.3 Previous studies on O-NET

Previous studies on O-NET were conducted to investigate two main areas: factors affecting students' achievements (e.g., Atsawasongpol, Tungkunan & Seesan, 2016; Bumrunghan, Sompongtham & Theerawanichtrakul, 2019; Pholmanee, Sawangsakdi & Boontima, 2015; Waiyawannajit, 2009) and the core-relations between the O-NET tests and other relevant resources (e.g., Nipakornkitti & Adunyarittigun, 2018; Sukying, Wan-a-rom & Phusawisot, 2012).

Scholars have pointed out different factors which play an important role on students' O-NET achievements. Atsawasongpol et al (2016) claimed that the main factors included students (background knowledge and motivation), teachers (teaching behaviours), and parent supports. Bumrunghan and colleagues (2019) supported Atsawasongpol et al (2016) in terms of students' background knowledge and emphasized that family support also played an important role on students' test outcomes. In addition to student and teacher factors, other

studies pointed out that school administrators also affected students' O-NET achievements (Pholmanee et al, 2015; Waiyawannajit, 2009).

Reasons for students' low scores were also investigated. Waiyawannajit (2009) pointed out that the curriculum and learning materials played an important role on students' test results. Drawing on the claim by Waiyawannajit, other studies examined the relationship between the designed O-NET test and other relevant resources, namely: the textbooks and the core curriculum. To investigate the core-relation between the schools' prepared knowledge of vocabulary and the national test, Sukying et al (2012) developed a corpus to compare the occurrence of words in the five sets of O-NET (years 2006-2010) and in the textbook series. The study found that the textbook series successfully prepared learners for the English O-NET tests in terms of vocabulary size. However, the English O-NET tests were not regarded as good text for independent reading, which could cause difficulties when students engage in the test (Sukying et al, 2012). Based on the findings, Sukying et al (2012) claimed that the EFL O-NET scores reported annually did not seem to represent learners' actual language proficiency as a result of teaching and learning of English in Thai secondary schools.

Nipakornkitti and Adunyarittigun (2018) examined the consistency of the O-NET test items and the basic education core curriculum and found the alignments between the test items and some of the prescribed learning domains. The study claimed that there were some test items and other learning domains which did not clearly match nor show consistency. While the O-NET test items are produced and improved annually to assess students' English proficiency, the study by Nipakornkitti and Adunyarittigun (2018) investigated the O-NET test items developed during the years of 2008 and 2010, which dated back ten years ago. There have been changes in the development of the O-NET tests in later years in terms of, for example, the number of test items, the test structure, and the texts students have to deal with. Further studies of the more recently developed tests are therefore needed. To contribute to previous research on O-NET, the present study compared the consistency of O-NET test items used in the most recent four years (years 2016–2019) with the core curriculum as required by the Ministry of Education. The study aims to answer the following research questions.

### **3. Research Questions**

Do the English O-NET test items administered during the academic years 2016-2019 consistently respond to the basic education core curriculum? And in which ways?

### **4. Research Methodology**

#### **4.1 Research instruments**

The research instruments used in this study included the guidelines of the learning requirements of English subject indicated in the basic education core curriculum 2008, the O-NET test items administered during the past four years (2016-2019), and the consistency-

evaluation form for the raters. The national core curriculum includes four strands, and each strand includes minor learning domains (see Table 2 above). The O-NET tests were downloaded from the website which were published online at <https://www.niets.or.th/>. A group interview was finally conducted to clarify some of the findings needed from the raters.

#### 4.2 Data analysis

By using the purposive sampling method, three secondary school teachers who had experiences in teaching and preparing students for the English O-NET tests were invited to consider the characteristics of the O-NET and compare with the requirements in the learning domains of the basic education core curriculum. The three raters were the head of the foreign language department and had experiences in organizing the annual training for year-12 students to prepare for the O-NET. Table 4 below presents the details of the three raters.

**Table 4.** The Details of the Raters

Raters	Age	Gender	Nationality	Education	Experiences in teaching English	
					Years	Level
A	60	Female	Thai	B.A. (English)+ Dip. in ELT	38	M.6 (Yr.12)
B	53	Female	Thai	B.A. (English)	31	M.5 (Yr.11)
C	51	Female	Thai	M.A. (English)	30	M.6 (Yr.12)

The three raters had a meeting to discuss the guidelines of how the alignments would be measured. The matching process began by considering the direction provided in each part of the O-NET, followed by the questions asked in different test items. The requirements on skills and knowledge to select the answers were then identified. Eventually, these requirements were categorized into four areas for the matching process, namely: the use of language for communication (Part I), knowledge of grammar and structure (Part I), writing ability (Part II), and reading ability (Part III). The requirements were then compared with the learning domain descriptions specified in the national curriculum shown in Table 2 above to investigate the alignments.

In this study, a form was provided to the raters with the details of the required skills and knowledge from the O-NET (*Language use, Error correction, Writing ability, and Reading ability*). The different learning domains of each strand were analysed closely and compared with the test items designed in different sections in the O-NET tests in order to identify their alignments.

After comparing the test items and the requirements in the learning domains, the raters identified if they were related; and for those considered as being related to any part of O-NET, the learning domains were written down to precisely indicate the areas of alignment. Table 5 below is a sample of a rater's evaluation form.

**Table 5.** Raters’ Evaluation Form

Rater: .....	Relevant learning domains			
Parts	Strand 1	Strand 2	Strand 3	Strand 4
<b>I:</b> Language Use (items 1-25)				
<b>I:</b> Error correction (items 26-35)				
<b>II:</b> Writing ability (items 36-45)				
<b>III:</b> Reading ability (items 46-80)				

After the three raters returned the form, the matching results were calculated for interrater reliability. According to McHugh (2012), interrater reliability is concerned with the consistency of measurement that data collectors (raters) assign the same score to the same variable. It helps to reflect the extent to which the data collected in the study are correct representations of the variables measured. In this study, the interrater reliability was identified, taking the lens of Cohen’s kappa statistics. The Kappa’s evaluation can range from -1 to +1, where 0 represents the amount of agreement that can be expected from random chance, and 1 represents perfect agreement among the raters (See Table 6).

**Table 6.** Sample of Percentage Calculation for the Agreement across the Range of Raters  
(cf. McHugh, 2012)

Var#	Raters			% of Agreement
	Mark	Susan	Tom	
1	1	1	1	1.00
2	0	1	1	0.66
3	1	1	1	1.00
4	0	0	1	0.33
5	0	0	0	1.00

According to McHugh (2012), Kappa results can be interpreted as: ‘no agreement’ for values  $\leq 0$ , ‘none to slight’ for 0.01–0.20, ‘fair’ for 0.21–0.40, ‘moderate’ for 0.41– 0.60, ‘substantial’ for 0.61–0.80, and ‘almost perfect agreement’ for 0.81–1.00.

## 5. Results

5.1 Do the English O-NET test items administered during the academic years 2016-2019 consistently respond to the basic education core curriculum? And in which ways?

The three raters were asked to consider the alignments of the O-NET test items developed in academic years 2016-2021 with the basic education core curriculum, and the percentage calculation was made to identify the evaluation congruence of the raters. Interestingly, the three raters made constant indication of the core-relations during the four years. Table 7 below presents the percentages of the agreements made by the three raters.



**Table 7.** Evaluation Congruence of the Alignments of the O-NET Test Items Administered during the Academic Years 2016-2019 and the Learning Domains in the Basic Education Core Curriculum

Strands	Leaning Domains	Raters			% of agreement
		1	2	3	
1: Language for communication	<b>F 1.1:</b> Understanding of and capacity to interpret what has been heard and read from various types of media, and ability to express opinions with proper reasoning	1	1	1	1.00
	<b>F 1.2:</b> Endowment with language communication skills for exchange of data and information; efficient expression of feelings and opinions	1	1	1	1.00
	<b>F 1.3:</b> Ability to present data, information, concepts and views about various matters through speaking and writing	1	1	1	1.00
2: Language and culture	<b>F 2.1:</b> Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers and capacity for use of language appropriate to occasions and places	0	1	1	0.66
	<b>F 2.2:</b> Appreciation of similarities and differences between language and culture of native and Thai speakers, and capacity for accurate and appropriate use of language	0	0	0	1.00
3: Language and relationship with other learning areas	<b>F 3.1:</b> Usage of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, as foundation for further development and to seek knowledge and widen one's world view	0	1	1	0.66
4: Language and relationship with community and the world	<b>F 4.1:</b> Ability to use foreign languages in various situations in school, community and society	0	0	0	1.00
	<b>F 4.2:</b> Usage of foreign languages as basic tools for further education, livelihood and exchange of learning with the world community	0	0	0	1.00

Table 7 shows that the three raters have the congruent agreement that the O-NET test items developed during the academic years 2016-2019 aligned with Strand 1 and misaligned with Strand 4 and Strand 2: Learning Domain 2 (F2.2) as required by the basic education core curriculum. The raters, however, do not show congruence in their evaluation of Strand 2, learning domain 1 (F 2.1) and Strand 3.

The assessment made by the raters are still broad and cannot explain clearly how the test requirements aligned with the learning strands or domains. Taking the same guidelines as the raters, a qualitative study was conducted by the researcher to confirm the alignments of the learning domains and the test items. It was found that most of the test items aligned with more than one domain of the core curriculum. Some items aligned partially with the descriptions of the domains while none of the test items aligned with Domain 4.2. Table 8 below summarizes the alignments of the test items and the learning domains.

**Table 8.** Alignments from the Detailed Analysis

Strands	Domains	Parts of O-NET		
		Aligned	Partially aligned	Not aligned
1	1.1	I (Communication) III (Reading comprehension)	-	-
	1.2	I (Communication)	-	-
	1.3	I (Communication)	I (Error analysis), II (Writing ability)	-
2	2.1	-	I (Communication)	-
	2.2	-	I (Error analysis), III (Vocabulary)	-
3	3.1	-	II (Writing ability), III (Vocabulary)	-
4	4.1	-	I (Communication)	-
	4.2	-	-	√

To explain the findings above, a detailed analysis will be made and organized, based on the three parts of the O-NET.

#### **O-NET Part I: Language use**

Part I of the O-NET tests used in the past four years was designed under the same heading (*Language Use*) and aimed to assess students' ability to use the language for speaking and writing in different situations. This part was consistently divided into four sub-sections: *dialogue completion, situational dialogue, sentence completion, and error correction*. While sub-sections 1-3 had the characteristics to respond to all the three learning domains of Strand 1 (F 1.1- F1.3, see Table 7 above), they also showed alignments with some parts of the requirements of Strand 4, Learning Domain 1 (F 4.1: *Ability to use foreign languages in various situations in school, community and society*) or even some parts of Strand 2, Domain 1 (F 2.1: *Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers and capacity for use of language appropriate to occasions and places*).

To illustrate this, extracts 1-3 below are the test items used in sub-sections 1-3 in Part I of the O-NETs administered in different academic years. The expressions in the brackets are the correct answers.

**Extract 1.** Part I: Language Use, Sub-Section 1: Dialogue Completion (O-NET' 2019)

**Directions:** Read the dialogues and choose the expression that BEST completes each missing part.

**Dialogue 1: At Jack's house**

Jack: Hi Pam. Glad that you could come.

Pam: Hi Jack. Nice to see you again. (1: *How's it going?*)

Jack: Pretty good. How about you?

Pam: (2: *Very busy*). I've been working like a slave since last month.

Jack: (3: *You poor thing!*) I think you should get some rest. Let's go to Ben's café, shall we?

Pam: (4: *I'd love to*), but I have to submit my project the day after tomorrow. (5: *Maybe next time*).

Jack: All right, just let me know when you are free.

**Extract 2.** Part I: Language Use, Sub-Section 2: Situational Dialogue (O-NET' 2018)

**Directions:** Read each situation and choose the BEST alternative.

11. **Situation:** Kirk wants Mary to play tennis with him this evening.

He says: (*How about a game of tennis before dinner?*)

1. Do you want to go to the gym?
2. Why don't you go to the stadium?
3. How about a game of tennis before dinner?
4. You are very fond of playing sports, aren't you?
5. Mary, are you interested in watching tennis matches?

**Extract 3.** Part I: Language Use, Sub-Section 3: Sentence Completion (O-NET' 2017)

**Directions:** Read each sentence and choose the alternative that BEST completes it.

16. If we take a bus, the admissions office (*will have closed*) by the time we get to the university.

1. would close
2. is closing
3. will have closed
4. has already been closed
5. had already been closed

In sub-section 4 of Part I: *Error correction*, students were required to choose the best correction of the identified errors in the given passage. The test in this sub-section had the characteristics of a writing skill assessment which, though not completely, responded to the guidelines of Domain F 1.3 (See Table 7). Extract 4 presents the example of the test items used in sub-section 4 of the O-NET administered in academic year 2018.

**Extract 4.** Part I, Sub-Section 4: Error Correction (O-NET' 2018)

**Directions:** In the passage below, TEN mistakes are underlined. Following the passage, you will find the correction of each underlined mistake. Choose the BEST correction.

Books are wonderful friends. They tell us stories, (26) give to us information and make our imaginations (27) works. (28) They are all kinds of shapes and sizes of books on (29) more differently subjects. (30) Therefore, books have one thing (31) for commonly. They all have a cover (32) for that the title and the author (33) are to write. If (34) book has pictures, there may be the name of the illustrator (35) either.

When the requirements on the skills and knowledge that students needed to identify the correct answers were considered, the knowledge of grammar or sentence structure was also needed, resulting in the test items in this part aligning with some descriptions specified in Strand 2, Learning Domain 2 (F 2.2: *Appreciation of similarities and differences between language and culture of native and Thai speakers, and capacity for accurate and appropriate use of language*).

**O-NET Part II: Writing ability**

Part II of the O-NET was designed as a cloze test, requiring students to find the answers to complete the text. To illustrate this, Extract 5 below was used in Part II of the O-NET test administered in year 2017. The expressions in the brackets are correct answers.

**Extract 5.** Sample Text of Part II: Writing Ability (O-NET' 2017)

**Directions:** Choose the word, phrase or clause that BEST completes each blank in the passage below.

If you find brushing your teeth a tiring chore, you can blame it on an English prisoner, William Addis. William Addis was arrested in 1770 (36: for starting a riot and was sent to) the notorious Newgate Prison.

(37: Unlike many of his fellow prisoners), Addis had a lively and questioning mind, one that (38: he wanted to put to use) once he was released. For example, one morning, Addis (39: was cleaning his teeth in the usual way), with a rag, when an idea came to him. Wouldn't it be easier and more effective (40: to brush teeth instead of wiping) them?

(41: The next day), he picked a small bone (42: from a piece of meat) he had for dinner and took it (43: back to his cell). A guard (44: supplied him with a bristles). After boring holes into the bones, Addis tied the bristles into tufts and wedged them into the holes. (45: That's how the first toothbrush was made).

36.      1. to send a riot and to start from  
          2. for sending and starting a riot at  
          3. for starting a riot and was sent to  
          4. for starting and sending a riot to  
          5. to start a riot and sending it into

Extract 5 shows that the sample text is constructed as a historical recount (*a text functioning to tell of events that have impacts on large groups of people*- Victoria State Government, 2020). The test requirements in this part had the characteristics to respond to the Learning Domain 3 of Strand 1 (F1.3, See Table 7). In order to select the correct answer, however, students also needed the knowledge of grammar and structure. For instance, they needed the knowledge of lexical collocation to select the correct answer for item 36 above i.e., “someone was arrested for doing something and was sent to somewhere”. This requirement, therefore, also aligned with some descriptions of Learning Strand 3, Domain 1 (F 3.1: Usage of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, as foundation for further development and to seek knowledge and widen one's world view).

### **O-NET Part III: Reading ability**

Part III of the O-NET test developed during the years 2016-2019 was constructed from two sub-sections: *vocabulary and reading comprehension*. In these two sub-sections, students were presented with reading texts, followed by questions to assess their vocabulary knowledge and their comprehension of the story. Extracts 6 and 7 below present examples of the reading texts taken from the O-NET administered in year 2018, focusing on assessment of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

#### **Extract 6. Sample Text of Part III: Reading Ability, Sub-Section 1: Vocabulary (O-NET' 2018)**

**Directions:** Choose the BEST alternatives to complete the passage.

“Circus clown” is a profession. The job has its (46) origin in the courts of the Middle Ages. There, jesters (47) amused the nobility with all kinds of humour. Clowns provided most of the (48) entertainment for thousands of circus-goers, and children especially would be disappointed without them. Years ago, clowns were singing and talking comedians. Now they are pantomimists. Even without (49) speech, clowns have the power to make audience (50) burst out laughing.

46.      1. basic  
            2. source  
            3. ground  
            4. cause  
            5. origin

**Extract 7.** Sample Text of Part III: Reading Ability, Sub-Section 2: Reading Comprehension (O-NET, 2018)

**Directions:** Read the extracts and choose the BEST alternative to complete the statements that follow each extract.

**SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA:** An office worker cleaning a refrigerator full of rotten food created a smell so noxious that it sent seven co-workers to the hospital and made many others ill. Firefighters had to evacuate the building in Central San Jose after the fumes led someone to call emergency services. What crews found was an unplugged refrigerator crammed with mouldy food. Authorities say an enterprising office worker had decided to clean it out, placing the food in a conference room while using two cleaning chemicals to scrub down the mess. The mixture of old lunches and disinfectant caused 28 people to need treatment for vomiting and nausea.

67. According to the news report, firefighters were called to help deal with the odour in the building.
1. extinguish a fire in the building
  2. clean the rotten food in an office
  3. take people in the office to hospital
  4. remove the refrigerator from the building
  5. help deal with the odour in the building

Extract 6 shows that in sub-section 1 of the ‘Reading ability’ section, students were required to use their knowledge of vocabulary choices to fill up the passage. While the test characteristics of this sub-section seemed to respond to some parts of the learning requirements prescribed in Strand 3, Domain 1 (F 3.1: Usage of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, as foundation for further development and to seek knowledge and widen one’s world view), they also aligned with some parts of the descriptions of Strand 2, Domain 2 (F 2.2: Appreciation of similarities and differences between language and culture of native and Thai speakers, and capacity for accurate and appropriate use of language).

In Extract 7, students were asked to read a news item (*a text functioning to inform listeners, readers or viewers about events of the day which are considered newsworthy*- Gerot & Wignell, 1994). The characteristics of the test items in this sub-section informed the alignments with domain 1 of strand 1 (F1.1) as shown in Table 7 above.

## 6. Discussion

The findings from this present study have provided threefold implications for English language learning, which will be useful for student preparations for the O-NET.

### 6.1 The alignments of O-NET test items with more than one learning domain

The findings from the rater assessments and the researcher’s detailed investigation were consistent in that the test items in Part I: *Language use* and Part III: *Reading ability* clearly aligned with Strand 1, Learning Domains 1-3 (i.e., Part I aligned with domains F: 1.1-1.3 and

Part III aligned with Domain F: 1.1.) The findings also showed that even though these test items clearly aligned with certain learning domains, they could also align partially with the descriptions of other learning domains. For example, despite Learning Domains 1-3, Part I of the O-NET also aligned with some descriptions of the learning requirements existing in domain 4.1.

The results also informed that even though some test items were identified as being aligned with some learning domains (for example, domains 2.1, 2.2, 3.1), these alignments did not match completely. The test items only responded to some descriptions of the learning domains. This reflects that clear matching could not be made between the test items and the individual learning domains. Rather, the English test items tended to involve the alignments of more than one requirement existing in different learning domains.

From a group interview, Rater A explained why some test items showed alignments with more than one domain by referring to the nature of English subject.

The nature of tests designed for English subject is different to those of science or mathematics. Each question of maths or science requires a certain correct answer because of the fixed equation. In this way, the test item of those subjects can be developed independently from one another. This nature is different to that of English test. While several questions could be asked based on the same content, each question in an English test could require more than one skill or knowledge to answer. For example, learners may need the knowledge of language together with the knowledge of the subject matter as well as the knowledge of culture to understand the passage provided, draw interpretation, and find the correct answer to one particular question. This could be the reason why one test item aligned with more than one learning domain.

(Rater A)

The findings provided some useful implications for the language teachers in terms of language teaching and student preparation for O-NET. With this awareness, the teacher may have to analyse and thematize different descriptions included within the same domain. In this way, one learning domain may include different minor requirements with the focus on different language skills. These minor requirements should then be consulted when preparing for the teaching materials, exercises, and supplementary resources to prepare students for the O-NET test.

To equip students for the requirements of Learning Domain 2.1 (F 2.1), for instance, the descriptions could be divided into two minor requirements: “*Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers*” and “*capacity for use of language appropriate to occasions and places*”. Then, the learning resources could be prepared accordingly. For the first minor requirement, the teaching materials could involve the input knowledge of language and culture of the native speakers and class activities may include the

use of language to express the impressions or attitudes towards their culture. For the second minor requirement, students may be exposed to exercises or practices, taking place on different occasions and requiring them to use appropriate language for those occasions.

6.2 Broad expressions of the learning domains that may not allow for the assessment administered through O-NET

From the inter-rater assessment, the three raters did not show a congruent agreement on the alignments of the test items and Domains 2.1 and 3.1, and they considered three domains as being misaligned with the O-NET test items i.e., Domains 2.2, 4.1, and 4.2.

The raters stated in a group interview that they did not consider the test items in any part aligning with Domains 4.1 and 4.2 due to their uncertainty of some expressions, for example, “*community and society*” and “*the world community*” used in the requirement descriptions. The three raters considered the assessment of these descriptions involved a complicated process of language performances and should be conducted in real practice or in the community. Meanwhile, one rater who showed incongruent assessment of Domains 2.1 and 3.1 stated that some expressions used in the descriptions, for example “*Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers*” in Domain 2.1 and “*to seek knowledge and widen one’s world view*” in Domain 3.1 were broad and abstract. So, the rater was not certain if the O-NET would allow for those assessments. The other two raters, however, stated that even though the descriptions which did not seem to align with the test items were noticed in the two domains (2.1 and 3.1), they had identified the alignments because the test items aligned with other minor descriptions within the same domains.

The findings reflect different interpretations made by different persons who read the requirements. This could cause confusion and, for teachers preparing their students for the O-NET, could lead to misinterpretation and a preparation of the contents or materials which do not align with the test items existing in the real assessment.

The detailed consideration of the learning requirements also showed some descriptions which are broad and suitable for assessments of more complicated skills. Learning Strand 2, for example, requires the students to show appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of the native speakers. This requirement is abstract as it focuses on the assessment of feeling expressions, and taking the two-hour test might not be the appropriate option for assessment. Similarly, some expressions in learning strands 3 and 4 also focus on the assessments which are not feasible in the O-NET (e.g., “*to seek knowledge and widen one’s world view*” or “*exchange of learning with the world community*”). These expressions imply that students are expected to link their learnt knowledge of language to the community or other contexts. The measurements of these two learning strands are more possible for the long-term or on-going modes which require students to perform on a task or project and allow them to apply the learnt knowledge into practice.



While the O-NET tests administered in the past four years were designed as multiple-choice tests, limitations are pointed out by scholars regarding this type of assessment for high order thinking skills. Adunyarittigun (2001), for example, argued that multiple-choice tests cannot measure a wide range of higher order thinking skills and students cannot engage in real-world activities. Assessments for these requirements are therefore more suitable for the students to perform the skills by using the language to associate with other participants or to apply the knowledge of language for life-long learning.

As the basic education core curriculum sets the broad expectations of students' learning achievements to serve as a frame for different schools to develop their own curriculum, teachers may need to set clear and mutual understandings that assessments of students' achievements on some requirements may not be possible through the system of O-NET. However, the schools can organize additional activities or methods to cover those requirements. As indicated by the MOE that assessments on student learning must be done at different levels, namely: classroom, educational institution, educational service area, and national level (MOE, 2008), assessments could be administered outside the O-NET system to fulfil the missing requirements. To achieve the minor requirements of Domain 2 (*“Appreciation of the relationship between language and culture of native speakers”*), for instance, the school may organize activities, such as a debate or speech competition, which encourage students to express their opinions or impressions toward the relationship between the language and culture. The activity may start from class level as a classroom activity and continue to school level or even the level of educational service area for competitions.

For Learning Strand 4 which requires students to link their learnt knowledge to the community, the teachers may assign students to survey the needs or problems in terms of language in the community. Then, students may conduct a project to apply the knowledge of language to serve the community. Alternatively, schools may set in the curriculum the so called 'final year project' (*“a project whereby academics from different institutions come together over the course of an academic session to share their practice and to develop portfolios to document this practice”*, Lancaster, Jenkins, Barroca, Calvert, Devlin, Foley, Horton, Moore & Sturdy, 2011: 2) of which students can apply their accumulated knowledge and perform via the disciplinary commons. In so doing, the overall learning achievements of students throughout the school years would address the four strands prescribed, and student preparation on ONET could focus on the learning requirements which align with the O-NET test items.

### 6.3 The need for further investigation of O-NET and other related learning resources

In this study, the alignments of the English O-NET test items and the basic education core curriculum were examined. The results could inform the areas of alignments as well as non-alignments which could help raise awareness of the teachers in preparing their students for the test. It is important to note that student achievements in O-NET could also be contributed from other factors. While schools and curriculum also play a great role in student learning

process (Waiyawannajit, 2009), the investigation on other factors which could have the effects on students' achievements should also be conducted. Previous studies, e.g., Sukying et al (2012), compared the vocabulary items used in textbook series with the words occurring in O-NET. Future studies could examine further the relevance between the two sources by taking different perspectives, for example, the texts or discourses that the students are exposed to or the question types that they have to deal with.

Alternatively, further study may investigate good practices of successful schools and take the findings as the guidelines to improve the students' proficiency. The study by Suwathanpornkul (2015), for example, interviewed the schools that had high O-NET scores to identify the strategies of how the O-NET results could be used to develop students' quality. Based on the findings, the four strategies offered by the study included: *providing feedback on policy to related department; feedback analysis, determining and monitoring program/project; using feedback into practice at student level; and using feedback into practice at teacher level.* These strategies could be used by other schools as a model to consider their school policy, identify the areas that need improvements, and find the ways to improve their students' proficiency. As teachers and students are one of the main factors affecting students' O-NET achievements (Atsawasongpol et al, 2016), the two strategies suggested by Suwathanpornkul (2015) which are practical at classroom level are strategies 3 and 4. After strategies 1 and 2, teachers may employ different teaching approaches to train students how to cope with the requirements of different sections of the O-NET test. Following strategy 4 as suggested by Suwathanpornkul (2015), teacher training should also be conducted as the activity plays a crucial role on student learning and achievements. Especially for those who take the responsibilities for student preparation for the O-NET, the awareness of the consistency of the basic education core curriculum and the test items should be raised. In addition to this, the training would allow teachers the chance to exchange ideas and experiences with other teachers and work collaboratively to find the best way to prepare their students for the O-NET test.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper investigated the consistency of the O-NET test items administered in the past four years (2016-2019) and the basic education core curriculum. The findings showed that the test items significantly aligned with the requirements of strand 1. Meanwhile, the test items showed partial alignments or did not seem to fit completely with the requirements of strands 2, 3 and strand 4, domain 1. The rater assessments as well as the qualitative analysis made by the researcher also showed that none of the test items aligned with the learning domain 4.2.

This present study is limited in terms of the number of participants who were the raters as well as the subjective nature of the data analysis, however, the findings from this study have contributed to those from previous studies on ONET and have informed language teachers of some useful implications in terms of language teaching and the preparation of students for the O-NET test. The paper also proposes other options which could help students achieve the

expected learning outcomes as specified by the basic education core curriculum. As the O-NET results of Thai students have been constantly below the standard level, further studies are still needed to investigate the alignments of the O-NET with other learning resources as well as to identify the effective ways to support students' higher achievements.

## 8. The Author

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