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Evidence Supporting Instructional Alignment and Mastery Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explains the value of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) dispositions by evaluating instructional alignment and its relationship to the learning gains of 32 students. Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) pre-and post-test percentile scores were used. The results were analyzed with a t-test and effect size. All instructors used aligned instruction and assessment with the same critical features (cognitive demands). A statistically significant mean difference of t(31)=4.66, p .001 and a Cohen's d , Cohen (2013), of 0.82 were reported. The results indicate that using instructional alignment increased the likelihood that learning gains were attributable to these interventions. Results from this study can further the understanding of instructional alignment.

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Introduction

Several studies have explained the effectiveness of instructional alignments within instructional designs, increasing student success in different subjects. To safeguard student success, it is important to include instructional alignment in instructional designs. This study meets this need by explaining specific instructional alignment practices. Instructional alignment can help to answer these important teacher questions: Did I teach? Did they learn? Did they learn to learn?

Statement of the Problem

Evidence supports instructional alignment in instructional design, as shown by several reviews. It is vital to investigate what promoted student success in school. This study supports this necessity by explaining instructional alignment in instructional designs for instruction and assessment using alignment.

Scholarship for Instructional Alignment: Relation to Previous Work

Improving teaching and assessment to support student learning is an ongoing effort. Dispositions for effective teaching include teachers possessing professional beliefs, attitudes, and values to support learning for all students (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). Student success and elevated accomplishment on norm-referenced standardized tests correlate with these dispositions (Sing & Stoloff, 2008; Thompson et al., 2005). InTASC helps teachers adjust to changes and improvements driven by research and the skills needed to teach effectively (Altan & Lane, 2018; Garner & Kaplan, 2020). These contribute to their instruction, assessments, and to build positive relationships with students, which are needed to teach successfully (Laughter et al., 2020; Thornton, 2006). Earlier, writers Mager (1997a, 1997b) and Cohen (1987) explained methods for improving instruction using instructional alignment. The evidence explaining instructional alignment during instruction and assessment supports effective teaching. Cohen (1987) explained how, when the critical features (cognitive demands) of instruction are aligned with the critical features (cognitive demands) of assessment, effects are seen from 1.2-3.0. Bloom (1988) investigated instructional alignment during instruction and assessment, including deciding the critical features (cognitive demands) students will do and how they will do them during instruction and assessment with individual and multi-analytic studies (Arhin & Opoku, 2020; Abrams, et al., 2016; Brandt, 1990; Carroll, 1963; Cook, et al., 2013; Cruz, 2008; Ede & Igbokwe, 2018; Elia, 1994; Guskey, 2015; Johnson & Boon, 2020; Kulik & Fletcher, 2016; Martin, 2011; Polikoff et al.; 2011, 2012, 2012a, 2012c, 2014, 2020, & 2021; Popham, 2007; Porter et al., 2007; Reid, 1997; Russell, et al.; 2009, Wingett & Persky, 2022).

Hypothesis, Aims, and Objectives

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The study's purpose gave rise to the following overarching research question: To what extent does instructional alignment during instruction and assessment influence student growth?

RQ1: Does instructional alignment increase students' SAT-10 results between Fall 2024 and Spring 2025?

H_0: No change results in students' SAT-10 rank scores between Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 using instructional alignment. H_0: $\mu_1 = \mu_2$

H_A: Students' SAT-10 Reading percentile rank scores in Spring 2025 will be significantly higher than in Fall 2024, using instructional alignment. HA: $\mu_1 < \mu_2$

Objective

This study investigates the extent to which instructional alignment between instruction and assessment affects SAT-10 scores.

Method

This study examines the impact of daily reading instruction using instructional alignment. The

study used archival, de-identified data to compare results on the reading subsection of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-10) at two points: Fall 2024 and Spring 2025. This study qualified for exemption from the IRB review, as the data were fully anonymized and collected for purposes other than this research.

Data Source

The study used de-identified student assessment data provided by a US southeastern school district. The dataset included matched percentile rank scores from the reading subsection of the SAT-10 for 32 students who were assessed during the district's routine benchmark testing in Fall 2024 and Spring 2025. These students were enrolled in classrooms where ECRI-based methods were implemented as part of the reading curriculum.

Instructional Alignment: Aligning the Critical Features (Cognitive Demands) During Instruction With the Critical Features (Cognitive Demands) for Assessment.

Instructional alignment has been explained in diverse ways, including aligning curriculum with state standards (Polikof, 2014). However, instructional alignment for this study includes aligning the critical features (cognitive demands) during instruction with the critical features (cognitive demands) for assessment (Cohen, 1987; Polikoff, 2012; Kulik & Fletcher, 2016; Russell et al., 2009; Tekir, 2018, 2023; Cruz, 2008; Elia, 1994; and Martin, 2011).

Teachers in this system systematically and explicitly aligned the critical features (cognitive demands) for instruction with the critical features (cognitive demands) for assessment, using these and other examples.

When teachers use the lesson created at ECRI to teach a new word by reading the syllables, they say to the students:

"You will learn to read a new word by reading the syllables. Read each syllable as I point to it." (Reid, 2010a, p. 57). These critical features (cognitive demands) are used during instruction and also with assessment during guided and independent practice. Students write, spell, and read the word they are learning to read. All the lesson activities and essential questions are aligned with the learning target: reading a new word by reading the syllables.

When teachers use the lesson created at ECRI to teach literal comprehension and reading to find the setting, they say to students:

"You will read to find the setting. To find the setting, look for words that tell when or where the story takes place." (Reid, 2010b, pp. 42-43). These critical features (cognitive demands) are used during instruction and also with assessment during guided and independent practice. Students read and identify the setting. All the lesson activities and essential questions are aligned with the learning target: reading to find the setting.

When teachers use the lesson created at ECRI to teach writing so readers can find the setting, they say to students:

"You will learn to write sentences so readers can find the setting. To find the setting in sentences, readers look for words that tell when or where the story takes place. Writing words that tell when or where the story takes place helps readers find the setting." (Reid, 1992, p. 46). These critical features (cognitive demands) are used during instruction and also with assessment. Students write so readers can find the setting. All the lesson activities and essential questions are aligned with the learning target, writing, so readers can find the setting.

When the teachers use the lesson to teach critical comprehension, judging the accuracy of information through identifying opinion, they say to the students at different times:

"You will decide if the information you read could be fact. Fact is information that is true. It is information that is accurate or correct. It is information that usually can be proved to be true. To help you judge if the information you read could be fact, you can decide if the author is giving opinion instead of fact. Sometimes, there are clues

to show that information is opinion. Words such as "believe," "think," "feel," "perhaps," "maybe," "probably," "it appears," "seem," "thought" can show that the author is giving opinion." (Reid, 2010b, pp. 111-112). These critical features (cognitive demands) are used with instruction and also during assessment, during guided and independent practice. Students read and decide if the information they read can be fact or opinion. All the lesson activities and essential questions are aligned with the learning target, reading to decide if information is fact.

All reading lessons taught in this study use instructional alignment, the critical features (cognitive demands) for instruction are explicitly and systematically aligned with the critical features (cognitive demands) for assessment. Different examples are used for the modeling, guided, and independent practice; however, the critical features (cognitive demands) remain the same. For example, if the students are reading to decide if information they read can be fact or opinion, the assessment is to read new information and decide if the information is fact or opinion. This helps the teachers use the assessments to answer these critical questions correctly. Did I teach? Did they learn?

Results

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant change in students' percentile rank scores from Fall 2024 to Spring 2025 ($N = 32$). There were no outliers, as assessed by inspection of a box plot, and the difference scores were normally distributed, as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p = .488$; see Table 2).

Descriptive statistics for the SAT-10 reading subsection percentile rank scores are presented in Table 1. Students' mean percentile rank increased from 54.97 (SD = 28.08) in Fall 2024 to 69.03 (SD = 25.56) in Spring 2025.

Table 1. *Descriptives*

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Fall 2024 (SAT)	32	54.969	28.079	4.964	0.511
Spring 2025 (SAT)	32	69.031	25.564	4.519	0.370

Table 2. *Test of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk)*

		W	p
Fall -2024 (SAT)	Spring-2025 (SAT)	0.970	0.488

Note. Significant results suggest a deviation from normality.

The paired-samples *t* test revealed a statistically significant increase in reading percentile rank scores, $t(31) = -4.66$, $p < .001$. The corresponding effect size was large, with Cohen's $d = -0.82$ (SE = 0.13), indicating that the improvement in SAT reading percentile ranks may be attributed to the implementation of the ECRI-based methods (see Table 3). A raincloud plot was generated to visualize the distribution, central tendency, and individual changes in reading scores across the academic year (see Figure 1).

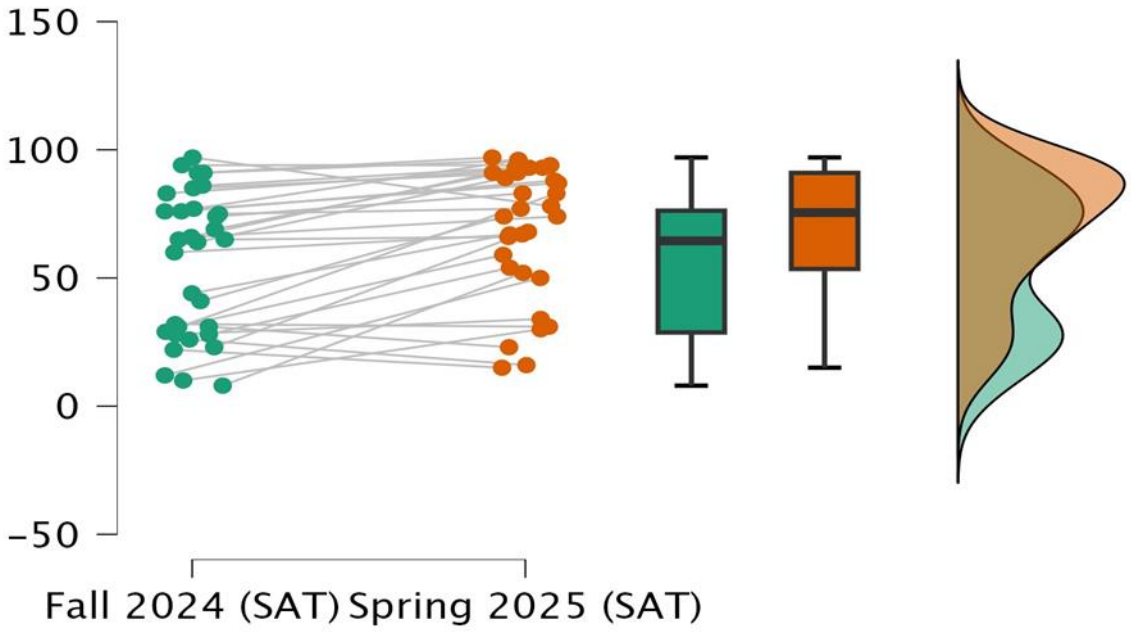

Figure 1. Raincloud Plot of SAT-10 Reading Percentile Rank Scores (Fall 2024 to Spring 2025)

Table 3. *Paired Samples T-Test*

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Mean Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Fall 2024 (SAT)	Spring 2025 (SAT)	-4.661	31	<.001	-14.063	-0.824	0.129

Note. For all tests, the alternative hypothesis specifies that Fall 2024 (SAT) is less than Spring 2025 (SAT).

Note. Student's t-test.

Discussion of Results

The results indicated a statistically significant difference between the Spring 2025 and Fall 2024 SAT Reading percentile ranks. The paired samples *t* test showed that students scored significantly higher in Spring 2025 (M = 69.03, SD = 25.56) compared to Fall 2024 (M = 54.97, SD = 28.08), with a mean increase of 14.06 percentile points, 95% CI [8.02, 20.09], $t(31) = -4.66$, $p < .001$. Given the statistically significant *p* value ($p < .001$), the null hypothesis—which stated that there would be no significant difference in SAT Reading percentile ranks between the two time points -was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, which proposed that students' SAT-10 Reading percentile rank scores in Spring 2025 would be significantly higher than in Fall 2024 following ECRI-based instruction.

According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect size of .82 is considered large, indicating that the intervention had a meaningful impact on the students' reading performance. The consistency and intensity of the ECRI approach may have created optimal conditions for reading growth from Fall 2024 to Spring 2025.

The results suggest that the ECRI intervention had a strong positive impact on students' reading achievement, as measured by the SAT-10. The statistically significant increase in percentile rank scores over time, coupled with the large effect size, supports the conclusion that the instructional approach was central to the improvement. While the effect size is large, other contextual factors-such as teacher expertise, student motivation, or instructional coaching-may have also contributed to the observed results.

These results confirm previous research (Hobe et al., 2025) providing stronger empirical support for the use of ECRI-based instructional methods as an effective intervention for improving reading outcomes. The findings contribute to a growing body of evidence that structured, evidence-based reading interventions.

Similarity of Results

The study's findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that aligned, evidence-based instructional approaches are associated with statistically significant gains in reading achievement and meaningful effect sizes. These results align with other studies supplied with similar statistically significant mean increases and effect sizes (Abrams, et al., 2016; Anderson, 2002; Cohen, 1987; Cruz, 2008; 1984; Elia, 1994, Martin, 2011; Kulik, Kulik, & Bangert-Downs, 2010, Kulik & Fletcher, 2016; Polikoff, 2012a, 2012c, 2014; Popham 2007; Porter, et al., 2007; Reid, 1997, Russell, et al., 2009; Tekir, 2023; Tekir & Akar, 2018, Vladescu, 2020). Collectively, this body of research suggests that when instruction and assessment are intentionally aligned and consistently implemented, students are more likely to demonstrate measurable gains in achievement across content areas, including reading.

Interpretation

This evaluation study focused on the instructional alignment variable used by all the teachers during instruction and assessment. The teachers aligned the critical features (cognitive demands) during instruction with the critical features (cognitive demands) used during assessment. These critical features (cognitive demands) explained what each student was to do and how each student was to do it, as explained in the examples written on pages 13-15 in this report. Knowing these critical features (cognitive demands) explicitly and systematically provides opportunities for the teachers to use formative assessment during instruction. The teachers knew what they wanted the students to do and how they wanted them to do it, and retaught as needed during instruction.

During instruction, the critical features (cognitive demands) were stated aloud and modeled explicitly by the teacher. The students, with a different example, practiced these critical features (cognitive demands) with the teacher's help and the help of other students. The students demonstrated again, with a different example, and without the teacher's help, the critical features (cognitive demands) required in the lesson.

The teachers used positive reinforcement. Reading and writing critical features (cognitive demands) were integrated. Students would read to determine whether the author was giving an opinion, using the critical features (cognitive demands) during the lesson, and then write different opinions using the same critical features (cognitive demands). Teachers required students to read, write, speak, and listen during instruction, using the critical features (cognitive demands) modeled by the teachers with different examples. All the lessons in this study aligned the critical features (cognitive demands) used during instruction with the critical features (cognitive demands) used during assessment, as explained by Cohen (1987), Cruz (2008), Hobe et al., (2025), Kulik & Fletcher (2016), Polikoff (2012c), and others. These effect sizes were reported: Cohen, (1987) 1.2-3, Cruz, (2008) 0.87, Hobe, et al., (2025) 0.63, Kulik & Fletcher (2016) 0.66, & Polikoff (2012c) 0.65). This evaluation study reports an effect size of 0.82.

Implications

An 0.82 effect size was shown during this evaluation study when all the teachers used the instructional alignment construct during instruction and assessment. Aligning the critical features (cognitive demands) used during instruction with the critical features (cognitive demands) used during assessment is supported by studies showing effective sizes from 0.63 to 3. Continued research is needed with teachers using the instructional alignment construct during instruction and when assessing what was taught to answer these questions. Did I teach? Did they learn? This research can be used by those preparing teachers and those in the schools, helping teachers to design instruction using the instructional alignment construct. Further, this research can be used to help teachers assess precisely and systematically what they teach.

This investigation can assist those deciding which standards to teach in schools, aligning instruction with the standards, and providing precise evidence that the standards are being taught.

Additional research investigating teacher preparation programs that include instructional design using the instructional alignment construct to evaluate if teacher graduates using the construct generate higher learning gains than those not using the construct can move our understanding of the learning process forward.

Conclusion

InTASC dispositions (2013) are needed for teachers to become effective. They assist teachers and school administrators in increasing student achievement. By making these dispositions part of teacher and administrator behavior, those in the schools can bring success to students. This study's findings support the instructional alignment construct, matching the critical features of instruction with the critical of assessment to increase student achievement and success in schools. These instructional practices support teacher dispositions needed for student success, including adaptability and reflective practice, leading to a commitment resulting in student success.

Author Contributions

John J. Hobe: Conceptualization (equal), Methodology (equal), Quantitative Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing –review & editing

Nedra L. Cossa: Methodology (equal), Quantitative Analysis, Writing –review& editing

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Timothy Hinchman: Methodology (equal), Quantitative Analysis, Writing –review& editing

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose

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