

# China Secondary English Teachers' Voices on *Zhongkao* Writing: Challenges, Perceived Needs and a Blueprint for Module Design

ZHANG NA<sup>1</sup>

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| Article information                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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| <p><b>Article history:</b><br/> Received: 28 Jul 2025<br/> Last revised: 4 Jun 2026<br/> Accepted: 5 Jun 2026<br/> Available online: 17 Jun 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/> <i>Zhongkao</i><br/> Secondary English education<br/> Writing module design<br/> Materials development</p> | <p><i>This study examined how China secondary English teachers perceive the teaching of <i>Zhongkao</i> English writing and how their perceptions can inform the design of an exam-aligned writing module. Thirty Grade 9 English teachers completed an open-ended online questionnaire. Items were adapted from established teacher surveys and refined through expert review. Responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Teachers described recurring challenges: limited vocabulary and grammar control, weak text organisation, difficulties connecting background knowledge to the task, high anxiety and poor time management in timed essays, and feedback pressures in large mixed-ability classes. They also reported misalignment between textbook tasks and <i>Zhongkao</i> essay demands, tensions with private tutoring materials and missed opportunities to build on students' digital writing experiences. Teachers agreed that existing textbooks and exercise books are too general and called for a dedicated <i>Zhongkao</i> writing module that is exam-specific, updated and workable within heavy workloads. From their responses, five design principles emerged: explicit training in task analysis and time management; integrated work on grammar, vocabulary, genre and organisation within exam-like tasks; scaffolded and levelled activities; embedded assessment support through rubrics, annotated sample scripts and error-coding systems; and flexible delivery that combines intensive lessons with short writing practice. The findings suggest that exam alignment, teacher workload, fairness and links to students' digital lives are central to how teachers define "need" in this high-stakes context. Future research should include novice teachers, triangulate teacher reports with classroom and learner data, and test prototype modules across different regions and school types.</i></p> |

## INTRODUCTION

Writing has become an important language skill for Chinese junior secondary students preparing for the *Zhongkao* (Wang, 2021). It is China's high-stakes senior high school entrance

examination. In this examination, students' performance can influence their access to more academically competitive senior high schools and educational tracks. The English paper usually includes a writing component. The essay task carries 15 points. Therefore, *Zhongkao* writing is not only a language assessment task but also an important gatekeeping mechanism within China's secondary education system. In many provinces, the essay is marked for how well it answers the prompt, how ideas are organised and linked, how accurate the grammar is, and how varied and appropriate the vocabulary and tone are. Recent corpus-based reviews of *Zhongkao* scripts show common weaknesses in organisation, coherence and lexical range (Song, 2023). These findings suggest that textbook-based grammar drills alone no longer meet the full rhetorical and language demands of the exam. However, curriculum policy still tends to frame writing instruction around grammar translation exercises, which limits teachers' choices in the classroom.

Secondary English teachers who prepare students for *Zhongkao* essay writing face both pedagogical and systemic challenges (Shao, 2023). Classroom ethnographies and interview studies report that oversized classes, limited contact hours, a lack of genre-based materials and restricted assessment literacy make it difficult for teachers to build higher-order writing skills such as audience awareness and textual cohesion (Shi & Deocampo, 2024; Wang-Hiles, 2024). In addition, the washback of the exam often pushes teachers and students towards "safe" and formulaic strategies, such as memorised templates and stock phrases that reduce risk but do not support flexible and independent writing (Bai & Zhou, 2024). This pattern narrows the scope of instruction and leaves little room for creativity, drafting or process-oriented feedback. Without more targeted support, many students struggle to turn their grammatical knowledge into coherent and audience-focused writing that is valued in *Zhongkao* rating scales and in later academic and workplace in China. It is therefore important to understand how teachers themselves view these challenges and what kinds of writing support they believe could meet exam requirements while moving beyond purely formulaic responses.

Research on teacher cognition and practitioner-informed materials design suggests that teachers' daily experience, knowledge of institutional constraints and close contact with students place them in a strong position to comment on which forms of writing support are realistic and useful (Arias-Contreras & Moore, 2022). By listening systematically to *Zhongkao* teachers, stakeholders can begin to identify gaps between official learning goals and what actually happens in classrooms. Then, they can use these insights to shape writing support that develops genre awareness, discourse organisation and appropriate language use. Teacher-centred design is important because teachers play a key role in deciding how far new materials and approaches are taken up. Studies show that modules developed with teacher input often have stronger uptake and more lasting impact than top-down textbook changes (Hu et al., 2024). These perspectives highlight the value of documenting teachers' perceptions of instructional challenges, their perceived needs and their concrete suggestions for a future English writing module.

Although research on examination washback in China is growing, most empirical studies still focus on reading comprehension (Wang & Ye, 2025) or on large-scale policy reforms in

English education. Writing pedagogy for *Zhongkao* has received less attention. When writing is studied, the emphasis is usually on learners' performance, such as error patterns or score profiles, rather than on teachers' voices and classroom-level decision-making. Still, limited empirical work brings together secondary English teachers' perceptions of *Zhongkao* writing challenges, their perceived needs and their ideas for the design of a dedicated writing module that matches *Zhongkao* essay demands. The present study addresses this gap by placing teachers' perspectives at the centre and by linking their views to thinking about future module design.

Against this background, the present study examines secondary English teachers' perceptions of teaching writing for *Zhongkao*, with a focus on their instructional challenges, perceived needs and views on English writing module design. Drawing on qualitative data from an open-ended e-questionnaire completed by secondary English teachers, it asks:

- (1) What challenges do secondary English teachers face when teaching writing to meet *Zhongkao* requirements?
- (2) How do these teachers perceive the need to develop a dedicated writing module for secondary learners?
- (3) What specific skills, knowledge areas and design suggestions do teachers offer for inclusion in such a module?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*This study draws on three main bodies of work: studies on Zhongkao English writing, textbook tasks and exam washback; research on teachers' perceptions and challenges in teaching writing; and research on teachers' perceived needs and their role in English writing module design. Together, these strands show why teachers' voices are central for understanding writing instruction for Zhongkao and for thinking about future writing support.*

### ***Zhongkao English writing, textbook tasks and exam washback***

*Zhongkao* is the senior high school entrance examination taken by Grade 9 students across mainland China. The English paper usually includes a short essay task, that often offers about 15 points. In many provinces, students are asked to write a letter, a short narrative or an opinion paragraph based on a prompt. Marking rubrics commonly focus on whether the response answers the task, how well ideas are organised, how clearly they are linked, and how accurate and varied the language is (Green, 2022; Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021). Excellent essays tend to show a clear structure, a smooth flow of ideas and language that is mostly accurate with some range of vocabulary and expressions.

Many studies show that students find this essay task difficult. They often struggle with text organisation, coherence and lexical variety, and rely heavily on sentence level grammar practice (Lan, 2025; Wei et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2021). Typical textbook tasks in lower secondary English, such as fill in the blank exercises, sentence translation or very short

controlled compositions, are useful for practising grammar and basic sentence patterns. However, these textbook tasks do not fully match the more open and audience-aware essays required in *Zhongkao*. This creates a gap between what students practise in textbooks and what they must produce in the exam.

Research on exam washback suggests that *Zhongkao* strongly influences classroom practice (Green, 2022). In writing, this often leads teachers and students to use safe and formulaic strategies, such as memorised templates and fixed phrases that can be quickly adapted to different prompts (Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021). These strategies may help students achieve minimum passing scores, but they give fewer opportunities to develop flexible and communicative writing. In this situation, it is important to understand how teachers perceive the relationship between *Zhongkao* demands, textbook tasks and their own teaching. Their perceptions can show where they feel current practice is insufficient and what kinds of changes or extra support they consider realistic in their classrooms.

### **Teachers' perceptions, teacher challenges and classroom realities**

Compared with the large number of studies on students' writing difficulties, fewer studies focus on teachers' perceptions and challenges in exam-oriented writing instruction at the secondary level. Ethnographic and interview work in China and other Asian contexts shows that secondary English teachers often teach very large classes, have limited time each week for writing and face heavy marking and administrative loads (Creagh et al., 2025; Hughes & Zhang, 2025). Teachers report that these conditions make it hard to give individual feedback, to guide students through multiple drafts or to move beyond textbook tasks and test-style exercises.

Research on teacher cognition finds that many secondary teachers feel that their preservice training focused mainly on grammar and reading and did not prepare them well for process writing, genre-based teaching or systematic writing feedback (Pham & Truong, 2021; Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021). Some teachers say that they would like to spend more time on audience awareness, cohesion and revision, but feel constrained by exam schedules, parental expectations and school policies (Lan, 2025; Wei et al., 2024). These studies highlight key teacher challenges, such as balancing exam preparation with broader writing goals, dealing with mixed-ability classes and working with teaching materials that do not fully reflect *Zhongkao* essay demands.

At the same time, several studies note that teachers' voices are not always central in discussions about exam washback and writing reform. Many papers focus on student scores, error patterns or policy documents (Wang & Ye, 2025), while teachers' own thoughts of what makes writing instruction difficult receive less attention. There is limited systematic evidence on how teachers themselves describe their challenges in preparing students for *Zhongkao* writing, how they experience the gap between textbook tasks and exam essays and how these perceptions shape their daily classroom decisions. This gap is directly related to the first research question in the present study, which asks about teachers' perceived challenges when teaching writing for *Zhongkao*.

## Teachers' perceived needs and English writing module design

A third line of research looks at what teachers say they need in order to improve writing instruction and how their ideas can inform English writing module design. Studies from China and neighbouring contexts suggest that teachers value teaching materials that both align with exam requirements and support wider communicative skills (Fenwick & Herrington, 2022; Lan, 2025). For example, materials that use model texts and highlight key genre moves can help students improve organisation and coherence when teachers combine them with clear and regular feedback. However, teachers also report that they need enough time, training and flexibility to use such materials effectively.

Other work examines teachers' perceived needs around more innovative tools and activities. Corpus-based tasks, where students compare their own writing with examples from learner or expert corpora, can help them notice more natural language use and expand their vocabulary (Li et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2024). However, studies show that the success of these tasks depends on teachers' digital skills, access to technology and the space they have in the timetable. Professional development research further reports that many teachers would like practical, step-by-step guidance on integrating process writing, peer feedback and genre-based activities into exam-focused curricula (Pham & Truong, 2021). These findings point to clear perceived needs for support in both content and delivery.

Research on teacher-informed curriculum and module design, mainly at university level and in English for Specific Purposes courses, shows that teachers' diagnostic insights and feedback practices can be used to adapt tasks and content so that they better match students' real difficulties and target genres (Lin & Lin, 2025; Winstone et al., 2022). However, these studies focus mostly on tertiary education and do not directly address *Zhongkao* or the specific tensions between textbook tasks and the exam essay in mainstream secondary schools. There is still little empirical work that brings together secondary English teachers' perceptions of their own needs, their views on what an exam-related writing module should include and their suggestions on how such a module could fit into their teaching.

Overall, the literature suggests two main gaps. There is limited research that systematically examines secondary English teachers' perceptions of *Zhongkao* writing challenges and their perceived needs for support. There is also little work that uses teachers' voices to inform the design of an English writing module that responds to *Zhongkao* essay demands and helps bridge the gap between everyday textbook tasks and high-stakes exam performance. The present study responds to these gaps by focusing on teachers' perceptions, their challenges, their perceived needs and their concrete suggestions for English writing module design for *Zhongkao*.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study design with a teacher-centred lens to explore secondary English teachers' perceptions of teaching *Zhongkao* writing, the challenges they face, the support they feel they need and how they think an English writing module should

be designed. In this approach, teachers were treated as the main informants, their classroom experiences, views and suggestions formed the primary data for analysis. The aim was not to measure needs statistically, but to understand how teachers themselves describe their difficulties and what kinds of support they consider realistic in exam-oriented classrooms. To capture these views in a flexible yet systematic way, the study used an open-ended online questionnaire with Grade 9 English teachers who were directly responsible for preparing students for the *Zhongkao* composition task. Their written responses were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key patterns in teachers' reported challenges, perceived needs and proposed module features.

## Participants

Thirty full-time secondary English teachers from mainland China took part in the study. All participants were currently teaching Grade 9 and were responsible for preparing students for the *Zhongkao* English composition task. They had at least five years of English teaching experience. Teachers worked in multiple public junior secondary schools rather than a single institution, which allowed some variation in school context while still focusing on *Zhongkao* preparation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. School leaders and teacher networks were approached and invited to share the study information with eligible teachers. Participation was entirely voluntary. The invitation message made clear that teachers could choose whether or not to participate, that they could stop at any time before submitting their responses and that there would be no consequences for non-participation.

The variables reported are gender, age, familiarity with *Zhongkao* and years of *Zhongkao* teaching experience. A modest gender imbalance appeared in Figure 1, with 18 women (60%) and 12 men (40%), which mirrors national patterns where female teachers form the majority of the secondary English teaching force in China (Liang et al., 2025; Yu, 2020). Gender itself is unlikely to shape teachers' technical understanding of *Zhongkao* writing, but the distribution suggests that the sample reasonably reflects the larger workforce that prepares students for this exam.

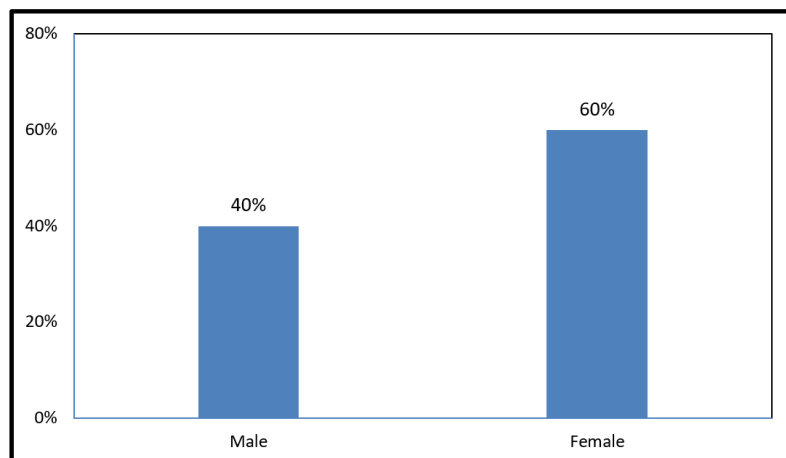


**Figure 1** Gender

Age and career stage form a cohort dominated by mid to late-career teachers in Figures 2 and 3. Almost two-thirds (60%) are aged forty or above and a further 23% are between 35 to 40 years old. Only five teachers (16.7%) are under thirty-five. This aligns with reported teaching tenure. Only 6.7% have fewer than six years' *Zhongkao* experience, while the largest group (33.3%) has 11 to 15 years and 23.3% have over 16 years' experience. This depth of practice gives teachers a long view of persistent writing problems, textbook limitations and exam changes. It also means that the needs they identify are grounded in long-term observation rather than short-term impressions. At the same time, the small number of novice teachers may mean that some needs specific to early-career staff are under-represented.

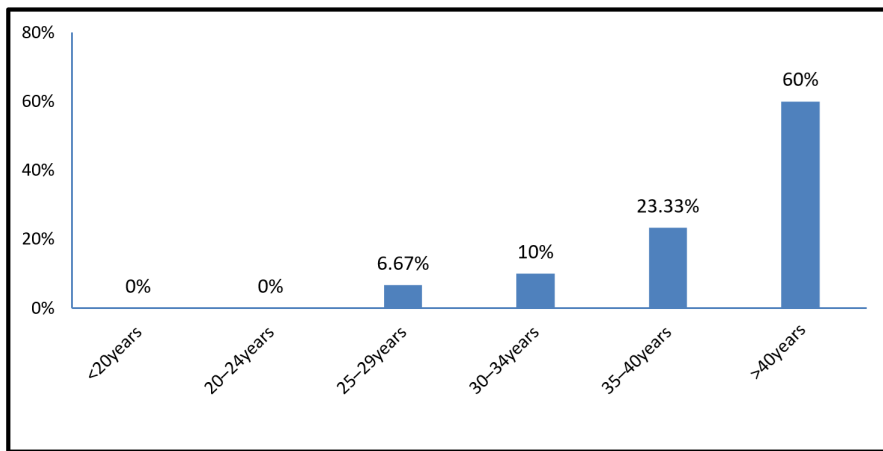


Figure 2 Age

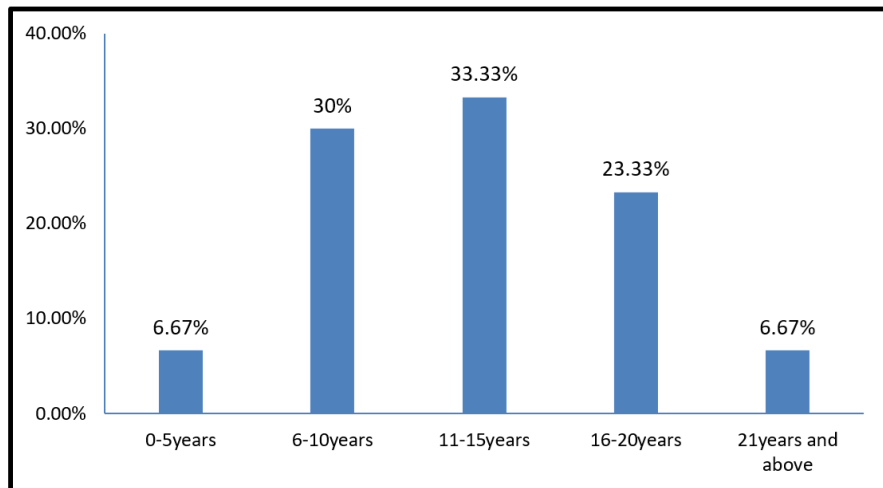


Figure 3 Years of *Zhongkao* teaching experience

Familiarity with *Zhongkao* was high among the participants, as shown in Figure 4. Twenty-seven teachers (90%) described themselves as familiar with *Zhongkao*, indicating that they had a clear understanding of its format, writing requirements, assessment expectations and classroom preparation practices. Two teachers (6.6%) reported being quite familiar or

very familiar, suggesting a deeper and more sustained level of engagement with *Zhongkao* teaching and assessment. Only one respondent (3.3%) selected general, which may indicate basic awareness rather than extensive practical experience. Overall, the findings suggest that the participants were experienced and exam-familiar practitioners. Their responses therefore reflect needs emerging from daily work in high-stakes *Zhongkao* classrooms.

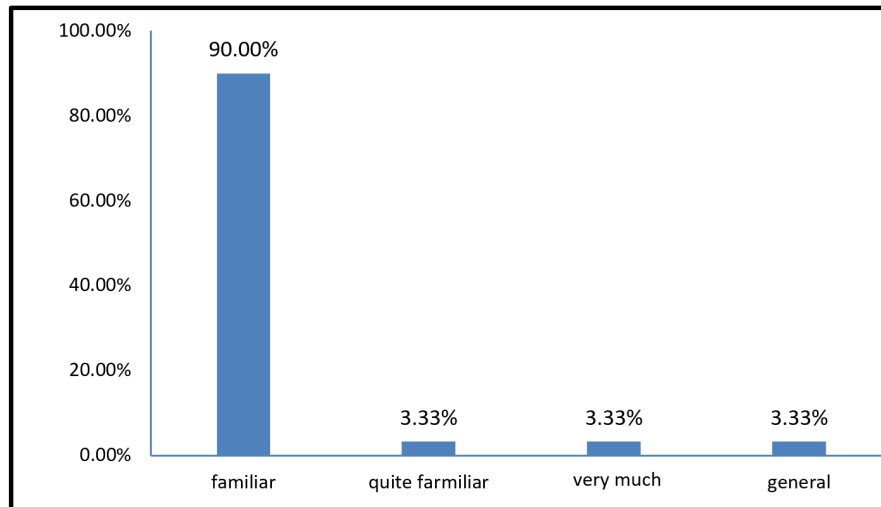


**Figure 4** Familiarity with *Zhongkao*

### Research instrument

Data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire created on *WenJuanXing*, a platform that links easily with WeChat and is widely used by teachers in China. The questionnaire served as an open-ended survey in which teachers wrote extended answers rather than selecting from fixed response options. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section collected background information. The second section asked teachers to describe the main challenges they face when teaching writing for *Zhongkao*, including examples from their own classrooms. The third section focused on perceived needs, inviting teachers to explain what kinds of support, resources or training they felt were necessary to improve *Zhongkao* writing instruction. The fourth section asked teachers to suggest specific skills, knowledge areas, task types and assessment approaches that they would like to see in a future English writing module for *Zhongkao*.

Item stems were adapted from established English for Specific Purposes needs analysis checklists and teacher survey instruments (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Serafini et al., 2015), and then reworded to fit the *Zhongkao* writing context and the focus on teachers' perceptions. This adaptation helped ensure that the prompts covered core areas such as target situation demands, present situation constraints and teachers' wishes for future support, while still allowing open-ended responses.

The questionnaire was administered in English, which is the language used for *Zhongkao* English teaching and assessment. All items were drafted in English by the research team

and checked by a second researcher for clarity and appropriateness for secondary English teachers. During the pilot, five non-participant teachers confirmed that the wording was understandable and relevant. Participants completed the questionnaire in English and their written responses were analysed in the original language. For reporting purposes, only minor editing was done to illustrative quotes without changing their original meaning.

### ***Pilot study***

Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with five secondary English teachers who did not take part in the final study. Pilot participants were similar in profile to the main sample in terms of years of experience and *Zhongkao* teaching responsibilities. They completed the full questionnaire and were then interviewed briefly to comment on the clarity, length and relevance of the items.

Feedback from the pilot led to minor changes, such as simplifying some question wording, adding examples to one prompt to make its focus clearer and adjusting the order of two items to improve flow. Pilot feedback also confirmed that a 14-day response window was realistic for teachers during the school term. No structural changes to the four-section layout were needed.

### ***Data collection procedures***

After the pilot, the final questionnaire link was distributed through school contacts and teacher networks. Data collection took place over a 14-day period during the school year when teachers were actively preparing students for *Zhongkao*. Teachers accessed the questionnaire via *WenJuanXing* on their computers or mobile phones at times convenient to them.

The first page of the questionnaire contained an information sheet and consent form. Teachers could only proceed to the questions after ticking a box to indicate informed consent. No identifying information such as full names or school names was required. Participants were reminded that their answers would be anonymised and that they could close the browser at any time before submission if they chose not to continue.

### ***Data analysis***

All written responses were exported from *WenJuanXing* and imported into Atlas.ti for analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021): (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report.

In the first phase, the first and second authors read all responses several times to gain an overall understanding of teachers' views on challenges, perceived needs and module design. In the second phase, they generated initial codes. Both researchers used an initial coding framework based on the research questions but remained open to new ideas that emerged from the data.

To strengthen consistency, two researchers independently coded a random 25% of the dataset. They then compared their coding decisions. Most disagreements related to whether a particular segment should be coded under exam pressure, school-level constraints or classroom-level factors and whether certain suggestions were best placed under “resources” or “pedagogical strategies”. These differences were discussed in detail until a shared understanding was reached and the code definitions were refined. Cohen’s kappa for this 25% sample was 0.86, which is above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.80 for strong agreement. After agreement was reached, the revised codebook was applied to the full dataset by the first author, with ongoing discussion when new questions arose.

In the later phases, related codes were grouped into broader themes that captured key patterns in teachers’ perceptions of challenges, perceived needs and module design ideas. Themes were checked against the original data to ensure that they reflected teachers’ words and did not overstate their claims.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Several strategies were used to support the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the use of two coders and discussion of coding disagreements helped reduce individual bias and clarify code meanings. Second, member checking was conducted by sending a brief thematic summary to all 30 participants and inviting comments on whether the summary reflected their views. Teachers who responded confirmed that the themes were clear and consistent with their experiences. A few minor wording suggestions were incorporated.

Third, an audit trail was kept in Atlas.ti and in a separate document, recording key decisions made during coding and theme development. This included notes on how codes were merged, renamed or split. These records make the analytic process more transparent and allow others to see how the reported themes were reached.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the authors’ university ethics committee (Ref. 2024-0492-01). All participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, what participation involved and how the data would be used. Digital informed consent was obtained before teachers could access the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and teachers could withdraw by closing the survey before submitting their responses.

To protect confidentiality, no full names or school names were collected. Each participant was assigned a numeric code (e.g., T01, T02) for reporting. All data were stored on a password-protected computer and backed up on a secure university server. Only the research team had access to the files. Digital data was kept for a limited period in line with university policy and then securely deleted. These procedures were explained in the information sheet so that teachers were aware of how their data would be stored and disposed of.

## RESULTS

This section first presents key demographic information to show who the participating teachers are and how their backgrounds shape the kinds of needs they report. These demographic patterns are used descriptively to contextualise the themes. They are not used for statistical comparison between subgroups. The main part of the section then reports teachers' perceived needs, organised around three areas: (1) needs arising from student and classroom challenges; (2) needs for a dedicated *Zhongkao* writing module; and (3) needs related to specific skills, knowledge and design features of such a module.

### *RQ 1: Addressing student and classroom challenges for Zhongkao writing*

Figure 5 shows five categories and ten themes that describe the challenges teachers face and the needs that follow from these challenges. At the student level, teachers pointed to a language gap that weakens writing quality. Many reported that students have limited vocabulary, as in “*I had too little vocabulary before*” (T2) and continue to “*make mistakes with tenses, subject-verb agreement and incomplete sentence structures*” (T7). These patterns restrict nuance and lead to repetitive wording, which lowers accuracy scores. Teachers therefore expressed a need for vocabulary work that focuses on high-utility words and phrases linked to common *Zhongkao* topics and for grammar practice that targets recurring exam-relevant errors rather than general drills.

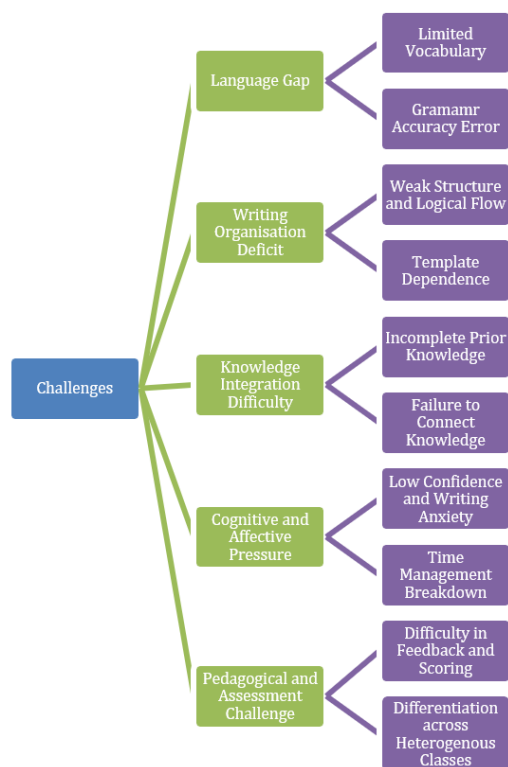


**Figure 5** Challenges secondary English teachers face to teach *Zhongkao* writing

Teachers also highlighted needs related to text organisation. They frequently observed that *“a topic is given, but the organisation is bad”* (T4). Students often rely on rigid templates and *“repeat the same expressions and ideas ... which restricts their improvement”* (T14). Templates appear to help weaker students start writing but can trap stronger students in predictable structures. Teachers thus called for explicit support in planning introductions, body paragraphs and conclusions, and for activities that help students adapt a basic pattern to different tasks. Several teachers specifically stated that they *“need resources that show students how to change a template, not just copy it”* because high-scoring essays that look too similar can be penalised as memorized. It is a concern that is rarely discussed in the existing washback literature.

Knowledge integration generated another group of needs. Teachers noted that some students bring *“incomplete or inaccurate prior knowledge”* (T8) to their writing. Others *“find it difficult to connect their prior knowledge with the writing topic”* (T10). As a result, essays may contain off-topic or under-developed content even when language is acceptable. Teachers therefore saw a need for pre-writing activities that help students activate and check their background knowledge, such as short reading, discussion or picture-based tasks linked to typical *Zhongkao* themes.

Cognitive and affective pressures, including confidence and time management, also shaped teachers’ perceived needs. Some students *“lack confidence ... feeling anxious about making mistakes”* (T7), which delays starting the essay and reduces willingness to try more complex structures. Many also *“spend too much time on one part ... and fail to finish the entire essay on time”* (T7). Teachers therefore identified a need for regular low-stakes timed writing, explicit pacing strategies and classroom routines that normalise making and then correcting mistakes. Several teachers stressed that the key need was not simply for *“more hours of practice”*, but for *“smarter practice”* that trains students to plan quickly, write within the time limit and revise selectively. They felt this kind of practice is still under-developed in current *Zhongkao* writing research, which often counts practice time but not its quality.

At the classroom and school level, teachers described pedagogical and assessment challenges that produce further needs. Large mixed-ability classes make it hard to *“cater to diverse student abilities”* (T20) and to *“accurately grasp the differentiated foundations of each student”* (T21). Giving detailed written feedback on every script is difficult. Some teachers felt that existing rubrics are vague and promote inconsistent marking. Teachers therefore expressed needs for simple, shared marking criteria, feedback tools such as error codes or short checklists and structured peer or self-assessment to share the feedback load. These concerns echo recent work on EFL writing assessment literacy, which finds many teachers in exam-driven systems want more practical support to align classroom feedback with test rating scales.

Two less familiar patterns emerged. First, several teachers reported that their students are active digital writers in Chinese on social media and gaming platforms, yet *“cannot transfer this experience to English exam writing”* (T19). They explicitly asked for tasks that help students *“use their online ideas and stories in exam essays”* (T6). This creates a new type of need at the interface between informal digital learning and exam preparation, which has been widely discussed for oral and general English but rarely for *Zhongkao* writing. Second, a

few teachers noted that private tutoring centres supply memorised high-scoring essays that do not match school textbooks, so school lessons and shadow education sometimes send conflicting messages. They described a need for “*a common writing standard*” (T12) that schools and tutors can both refer to, to reduce confusion for students. This concern links to recent work on misalignment between exam papers and curriculum standards in shadow education but brings it into the specific space of *Zhongkao* writing.

Overall, this research question shows that teachers see needs not only in student language and skills, but also in classroom tools, feedback practices and system-level coherence that help them manage high-stakes constraints.

### *RQ 2: Developing a dedicated Zhongkao writing module*

Figure 6 shows five categories and ten themes that explain why teachers perceive a dedicated *Zhongkao* writing module as necessary. One central need concerns teaching materials. Many teachers stated that although “*there are many exercise books, it’s difficult to find a suitable one*” (T1), and that “*no book can fully embody all the content that needs to be taught, textbooks should be specially prepared according to the situation*” (T3). They felt that current textbooks and supplementary books are too generic and not sufficiently aligned with *Zhongkao* essay types, rating criteria and typical prompts. They therefore see a need for a module whose content, tasks and examples are explicitly designed around the exam’s requirements.

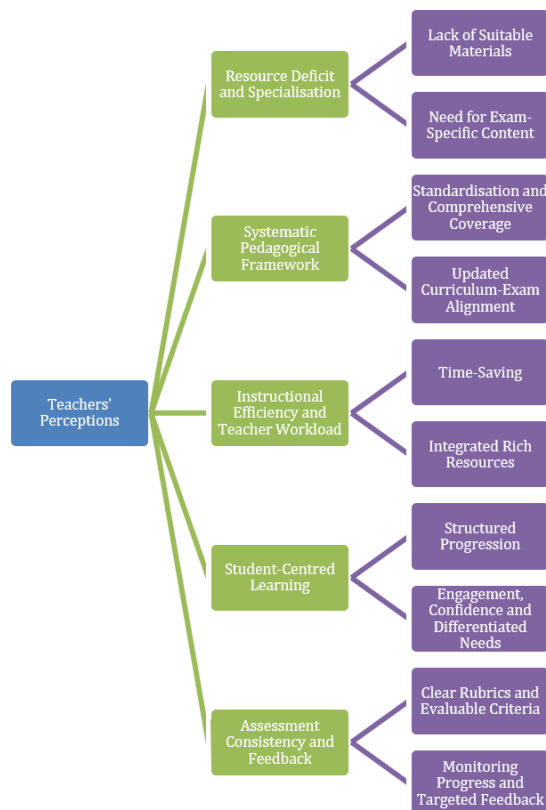


**Figure 6** Teachers’ perceptions regarding writing module development needs

A second group of needs relates to a systematic pedagogical framework. Teachers want a module that *“provides a standardised teaching framework and teaching resources”* (T8) and *“ensures that teachers cover all necessary aspects of writing skills, such as grammar, vocabulary and writing styles”* (T13). They emphasised the need for a clear sequence that links model texts, guided practice and independent writing, rather than isolated exercises. Alignment with current policy is also important. T25 recommended that the module should *“integrate the 2022 Compulsory Education English standards and the new direction of the entrance exam”*, echoing calls in recent national reviews for stronger connections between curriculum standards, classroom practice and exam writing tasks.

Instructional efficiency and workload formed a third cluster of needs. Many teachers noted that preparing suitable writing tasks and materials themselves *“consumes a lot of energy”* (T23) and that a well-designed module *“can save teachers a lot of time in preparing teaching materials”* (T9). They imagined a resource that bundles model essays, typical error analyses, ready-to-use prompts and multimedia support. As T11 suggested, this could include *“multimedia resources, such as video tutorials to support visual learners”*, while T27 highlighted the need for *“integrated teaching templates and typical error analyses”*. Some teachers went further and described the module as *“a kind of training book for teachers”*, saying that clear teacher notes and demonstration lessons would help them update their own writing pedagogy. This dual role as a student resource and as informal professional development has not been widely documented in Zhongkao studies and adds a new dimension to how modules can support teachers’ learning needs.

Teachers also emphasised needs related to student-centred learning and differentiation. They wanted a module that offers a clear progression *“from basic to advanced writing skills”* (T10) and provides *“levelled exercises for mixed-ability classes”* (T11). In their view, carefully sequenced tasks and graded texts would support weaker students to build confidence while still offering challenges for stronger writers.

Finally, teachers identified assessment-related needs. They called for standardised rubrics and transparent criteria to support fair and consistent marking. T11 argued that a module should *“provide standardised rubrics for consistent assessment”*. T14 stressed the need for tools that can *“monitor students’ progress”*. T21 suggested that the module include mock tests aligned with official scoring criteria, as well as space for recording feedback and setting goals. These points resonate with recent work that highlights gaps in teachers’ writing assessment literacy and the need for practical tools in high-stakes contexts.

One relatively unexpected pattern was that some teachers explicitly framed the module as a way to reduce unfair differences between students who can afford private tutoring and those who rely only on school lessons. They hoped that a shared and publicly available module would give all students access to clear models and criteria, not only those who attend fee-paying classes. This fairness-oriented need is in line with recent discussions on justice and equity in second language writing assessment but is rarely voiced so directly in *Zhongkao* studies.

### RQ 3: Skills, knowledge and design features for a Zhongkao writing module

Figure 7 indicates that teachers' recommendations cluster into five categories and eleven themes that together outline the skills, knowledge areas and design features they believe a *Zhongkao* writing module should include. First, teachers identified needs related to cognitive and metacognitive control of the writing process. They stressed that students must learn to "*examine questions*" (T19), unpack prompts and understand what is being asked before writing. This points to a need for explicit task-analysis activities. Teachers also called for regular timed practice so that students can "*get used to writing under time pressure*" (T6) and learn how to plan, draft and revise within the exam limit.

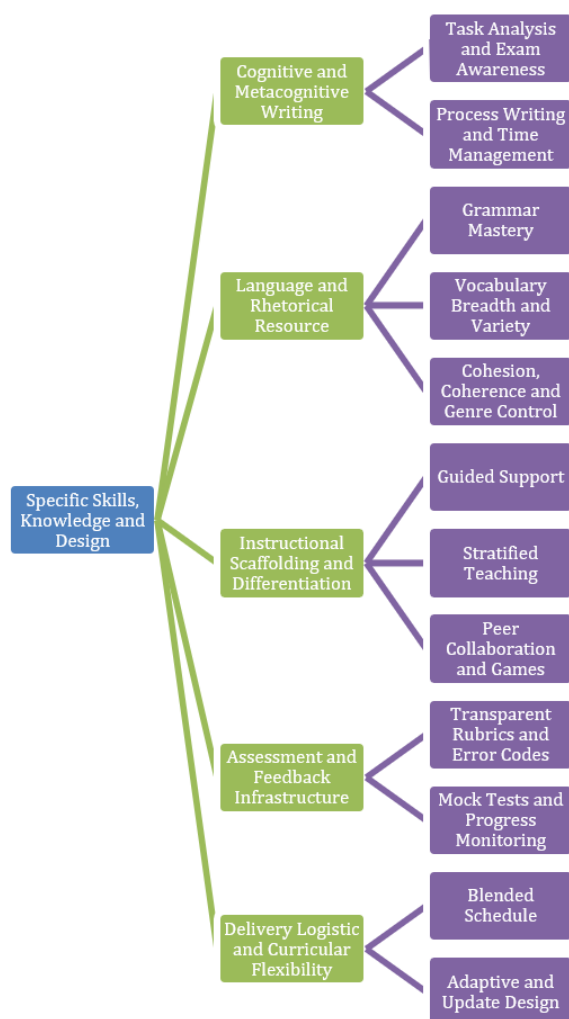


**Figure 7** Specific skills, knowledge areas and design for writing module

Second, teachers described needs around language and rhetorical resources. They asked for "*targeted grammar exercises on the tenses and key sentence structures required for the entrance examination*" (T14) and "*error correction exercises and focused tense practice*" (T16), as well as activities to build a "*repertoire of high frequency synonyms and idiomatic*

*phrases*" (T16). They also wanted tasks that develop cohesion and coherence, such as linking devices and paragraphing. T1 noted that without clear guidance on *"writing thoughts"*, students struggle to turn sentence-level knowledge into coherent texts. T13 suggested a *"genre-immersion approach"* where common *Zhongkao* genres, such as letters, narratives and opinion paragraphs are studied in depth, with multiple examples and controlled practice. Some teachers specifically asked that the module *"wrap grammar and vocabulary practice inside full texts and real exam tasks"* rather than separating language exercises from writing, arguing that this integration is still missing in many school materials and in much of the research evidence. This emphasis on integrated language-and-writing work slightly extends existing exam washback studies, which tend to describe a split between language lessons and writing lessons.

Third, teachers emphasised needs related to scaffolding and differentiation. They preferred a gradual release model in which students start with partially completed outlines or sentence starters and then move towards independent writing. T8 described this as helping students *"build confidence and master the writing skills step-by-step"*. Teachers also wanted stratified tasks that provide remedial support for weaker students and extended tasks for stronger ones, as illustrated by T9 description of extra remedial hours and more demanding argumentative writing for higher-level students. Peer collaboration was another perceived need. T11 suggested small *"mutual aid groups"* of four or five students, supported by simple checklists, to share ideas and feedback.

Fourth, teachers discussed needs around assessment literacy and feedback. They wanted the module to include student-friendly rubrics, annotated sample essays at different score levels and tools such as error codes or short comment banks to make feedback more manageable. T15 suggested teaching students to *"guess the grading standards"* so that they can use the rubric as a learning tool, not only as a marking tool. T11 proposed a simple system where teachers mark errors with symbols and provide two or three focused comments, while T21 called for a bank of high-scoring scripts, timed mock tests and follow-up advice on how to improve. These ideas are consistent with recent research showing that both teachers and students benefit when assessment criteria are made visible and used formatively in writing instruction.

Finally, teachers identified needs related to delivery and flexibility. They proposed combining more intensive workshops, for example, *"several classes on weekends ... about three hours in the morning"* (T20), with short and regular in-class practice such as ten-minute writing tasks (T9), to maintain continuity without overwhelming the timetable. They also stressed that the module must be *"supplemented or replaced based on the hot topics of each year"* (T7) and adaptable to different class profiles (T30). In addition, a few teachers proposed including sample tasks based on students' out-of-school digital experiences, such as writing about a favourite short video or online game, and then reshaping these into exam-style essays. They saw this as a way to connect informal digital learning with formal assessment, a link that is only beginning to appear in the broader informal digital learning of English learning literature and is largely absent from *Zhongkao* research. Some teachers also suggested that short reflection prompts should invite students to comment on whether exam topics feel fair and

relevant to their lives, indicating a small but notable need to open space for critical discussion of exam content, not only drill.

## DISCUSSION

The teacher sample in this study was mainly female, mid-career and highly familiar with *Zhongkao* writing demands. This profile is consistent with national patterns that show women in the majority in China's secondary English teaching workforce and a strong concentration of experienced teachers at examination grades (Liang et al., 2025; Yu, 2020). Such stability increases the credibility of teachers' thoughts of long-term challenges and adaptations in exam preparation. At the same time, the limited representation of novice teachers contrasts with recent reviews which show that early-career second language writing teachers often have less assessment training and weaker confidence in handling exam-oriented writing instruction (Crusan et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2022). Future module design work should therefore include structured input from beginning teachers, who may experience different tensions between policy expectations, exam pressure and classroom realities.

Across the data set, teachers' descriptions of students' language and writing problems both confirm and extend earlier research. As in previous Chinese and East Asian studies, teachers reported limited vocabulary, tense and agreement errors and weak discourse organisation in high-stakes exam writing (Qi, 2007; Yu, 2020). However, they added a more detailed account of how heavy dependence on fixed templates can suppress rhetorical flexibility and individual voice in *Zhongkao* scripts. This goes beyond many corpus-based studies that mainly count cohesive devices or lexical sophistication and pay less attention to how templates shape stance and argument development (Poe & Elliot, 2019; Yu, 2020). Teachers also highlighted that activating background knowledge is not always helpful. Inaccurate or only partly relevant prior knowledge can push students off topic and harm coherence and task fulfilment. This double-edged role of prior knowledge is less visible in genre-based intervention studies which usually assume that more background schemata lead to better writing organisation (Cumming, 2002; Yu, 2020). In addition, the findings linked writing anxiety directly to poor time management under exam conditions, suggesting that emotional pressure and planning difficulties interact to produce unfinished essays. It is a pattern rarely documented in quantitative washback surveys (Liang et al., 2025; Qi, 2007).

Pedagogical and assessment constraints also appeared more severe than policy documents or curriculum guidelines imply. Large mixed-ability classes, limited contact hours and subjective rubrics made it difficult for teachers to provide detailed and formative feedback on every script. This aligns with international work showing that many second language writing teachers feel under-prepared for classroom-based writing assessment and struggle to use rubrics in ways that genuinely support learning (Crusan et al., 2016; Liu, 2024). In the present study, teachers openly admitted that the official scoring criteria did not always help them explain grade differences fairly to students with very different prior knowledge. This self-critique supports calls for stronger writing assessment literacy that links criteria, feedback and revision more transparently in high-stakes school contexts (Poe & Elliot, 2019; Weng,

2023). For module design, these findings indicate that assessment support cannot be an add-on. Clear rubrics, common error-coding systems and feasible feedback routines need to be built into the materials from the start.

Teachers' strong demand for a dedicated writing module reflects well-documented washback dynamics in China, where high-stakes exams reshape curriculum priorities and teaching routines (Liang et al., 2025; Qi, 2007; Yu, 2020). However, this study refines existing studies by showing that, in *Zhongkao*, exam alignment often takes priority over broader communicative goals. Teachers did not reject communicative writing. Instead, they framed it as something that must be realised through exam-oriented tasks rather than in competition with them. This stance echoes recent work on teacher beliefs in National Matriculation English Test, where teachers try to balance real-life language use with exam requirements but often feel that the latter dominates their decisions (Liang et al., 2025). For writing module design, this means that tasks need to satisfy two conditions at once. They must resemble *Zhongkao* genres closely enough to be perceived as relevant and fair. They must still foster transferable discourse skills and confidence beyond the test itself.

Most importantly, the blueprint in this study can be translated into five concrete design principles for an English writing module that addresses *Zhongkao* needs. First, teachers called for explicit exam strategy and process training, such as analysing prompts, unpacking marking criteria, and practising timed drafting and revision. This emphasis places procedural fluency at the centre of readiness and complements existing research on cognitive and metacognitive support in exam writing (Camp, 2012; Yu, 2020). Second, they argued for integrated language and genre work, combining focused grammar and vocabulary routines with explicit teaching of text structure, cohesion and genre moves. This aligns with reviews which show that genre-based and multi-trait writing instruction can improve organisation and clarity when it is supported by sustained modelling and feedback (Cumming, 2002; Zheng et al., 2022). Third, the findings point to scaffolded and stratified support, including partially completed outlines, levelled tasks and peer-review groups. Such differentiation responds to the mixed-ability reality of many Chinese classes and echoes broader evidence that teachers' beliefs and local constraints mediate how exam reforms are translated into classroom practice (Liang et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2022). Fourth, teachers stressed embedded assessment literacy. This operationalises recent arguments that fairness and justice in writing assessment require transparent criteria and meaningful opportunities for students to understand and use feedback (Plakans & Lee, 2026; Poe & Elliot, 2019). Finally, teachers favoured flexible delivery that combines intensive weekend workshops with brief daily practice and allows yearly updates to topics and tasks. This principle answers calls from informal digital learning of English learning and blended-learning study to respect time constraints while sustaining regular engagement (Guo & Lee, 2023; Liu et al., 2025).

A notable and somewhat unexpected feature of the findings is the near absence of digital or AI-based writing tools in teachers' suggestions, despite the rapid growth of research on informal digital learning of English and technology-mediated writing support in Asia (Liu et al., 2025; Rezai et al., 2024). Whereas recent reviews report strong interest in harnessing digital platforms and game-based informal digital learning of English learning to support language

learning, the teachers in this study mainly requested print-based materials, structured classroom tasks and human-mediated feedback. This silence may reflect infrastructural gaps in lower-tier schools, cautious attitudes toward technology in high-stakes settings or uncertainty about how to integrate AI-assisted tools without violating exam rules. For future module iterations, it suggests that any digital components should be introduced gradually, with clear guidance and training and perhaps positioned mainly for pre-exam practice rather than for use close to test dates.

Overall, the findings contribute to ongoing conversations about washback, teacher cognition and fairness in second language writing assessment. Instead of treating washback only as an external constraint, this study shows how teachers actively reshape exam demands into a detailed design brief for materials, emphasising workload, update-readiness and perceived fairness as part of “need”. This resonates with recent work that calls for more teacher and student-centred perspectives on equity and opportunity in writing assessment (Plakans & Lee, 2026; Poe & Elliot, 2019). Practically, the five design principles derived from teachers’ voices can guide the development of an English writing module that is exam-aligned but not exam-limited. One strengthens language and genre control, builds strategic and emotional readiness, standardises assessment practices and remains responsive to policy and topic changes. In this way, teacher perceptions in *Zhongkao* are converted into concrete design decisions that can be tested, refined and adapted in future research and practice.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined how experienced China secondary English teachers perceive the teaching of *Zhongkao* writing, what challenges they face, what support they feel they need and how they think an English writing module should be designed. Using open-ended e-questionnaire data from thirty teachers, the study reported three main sets of findings. First, teachers described a cluster of student and classroom challenges: limited vocabulary and grammar control, weak text organisation, difficulties linking background knowledge to the task, high anxiety and poor time management under exam conditions, and feedback pressures in large mixed-ability classes. These patterns confirm earlier work but also add new nuance, such as the double-edged nature of template use and the risk of inaccurate content when prior knowledge is only partially relevant. Second, teachers reported that current textbooks and exercise books are too general and not well aligned with *Zhongkao* essay types, rating criteria and common topics. They therefore asked for a dedicated writing module that is exam-specific, regularly updated to match curriculum reforms, and realistic for heavy workloads and mixed-ability classes. Third, teachers sketched a detailed blueprint for such a module, emphasising integrated language-and-genre work, explicit task analysis and time management, scaffolded and stratified tasks, visible assessment criteria and feedback tools, links to students’ digital experiences, and flexible delivery through a mix of intensive workshops and short, regular practice. Together, these findings show that teacher perceptions can be translated into concrete design principles for a *Zhongkao* writing module that is exam-aligned but not exam-limited.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample focused on mid to late-career teachers with extensive *Zhongkao* experience. This gave depth of insight into long-term exam preparation, but it may under-represent the perspectives of novice teachers who face different pressures, such as limited mentoring or lower confidence in assessment. Future studies should therefore include more early-career teachers and compare needs across career stages. The study also relied on self-reported perceptions, even though member checking was used to support credibility. Classroom observations, student writing samples and learner corpus analysis would help to triangulate and refine the themes reported here. In addition, most participating teachers worked in urban or relatively well-resourced schools. The needs and module priorities of teachers in rural or under-resourced settings or in highly competitive schools may differ. A larger multi-site study across different regions and school types would improve transferability and test the robustness of the proposed design principles.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several practical implications. For curriculum designers and publishers, the blueprint points to a module structure organised around clear strands: task and criteria understanding, integrated grammar–vocabulary–genre work, strategy and time management, scaffolded and differentiated practice, and embedded assessment and reflection. For policymakers, teachers’ emphasis on exam alignment, fairness and update-readiness suggests that official support should go beyond general curriculum documents to include shared rubrics, annotated sample scripts and resources that can be refreshed annually in line with policy and exam changes. For teachers and teacher educators, the findings highlight classroom strategies that can be adopted even before a full module is produced, such as simple error-coding systems, short time writing tasks, small peer-review groups and activities that help students transform ideas from their digital lives into exam-appropriate essays. Future research could implement a prototype module based on these principles in different school contexts, track changes in student writing and teacher workload over time, and explore how digital or AI-mediated tools might be integrated in ways that respect exam rules and local resources. Overall, by centring teachers’ voices in a high-stakes context, this study proposes an agenda for *Zhongkao* writing support that aims to narrow the gap between textbook tasks and exam performance while also attending to teacher workload, student confidence and issues of fairness.

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## Appendix

### Needs analysis questionnaire

#### Needs Analysis (Adapted from Abd Rahman et al, 2024; Scroggs & Simonson, 2021; Shen et al., 2019)

This needs analysis consists of FOUR PARTS. The first part of the instrument included demographic information on gender, age, school, teaching experiences, grade levels teacher teaches, familiarisation with the *Zhongkao* examination, and *Zhongkao* writing skills requirement. This information will be used by the researcher for the purpose of developing a writing module to assist the teachers to teach writing skills to students so that they are not just prepared for the *Zhongkao* examination. The module developed will be used by teachers as a guide to assist and improve students' writing skills. I request your cooperation to show your insight of the statement presented sincerely and honestly. Your help to complete this needs analysis is very much appreciated. All pieces of information that are filled in are CONFIDENTIAL and only for the use of the researcher. This questionnaire should be answered by Chengdu EFL teachers teaching writing for *Zhongkao* only.

#### SECTION A: Demographic

Please tick (✓) the most appropriate response.

1. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

2. Age: < 20 years ☐  
20 – 24 years ☐  
25 – 29 years ☐  
30 – 34 years ☐  
35 – 40 years ☐  
> 40 years ☐

3. Which area are you from:

4. School:

5. Years of teaching experience:

6. Grade levels teacher teaches:

7. Familiarisation with the *Zhongkao* examination:

8. Years of teaching experience in relation to *Zhongkao* writing skills requirement:

#### SECTION B: Present teaching practices of teaching writing

- What are the purposes of teaching English to middle school students in China? Please list several purposes.
- How do you teach writing skills to a group of middle school students in your school?
- Do you at this time teach writing skills to students for the purpose of preparing them for the *Zhongkao* examination? Please indicate some challenges.
- Do you give an opportunity to students to write based on their prior knowledge? Please state the reasons and challenges.

- e) Do you think there is a need to develop a writing module for the purpose of assisting the teachers to teach students to improve their writing skills? Please state your reasons.
- f) What are the problems you face when teaching writing for Zhongkao? (Please rank from 1 - Least challenging to 5 - Most challenging)

|                                                                                                       |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Using appropriate materials to teach writing, preparing them for the <i>Zhongkao</i> exam.            |  |
| Getting students to come up with comprehensible and well-structured essays for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams. |  |
| Getting students to apply vocabulary in their essays for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                       |  |
| Teaching students to use appropriate language for writing in <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                   |  |
| Ingrain critical and creative thinking skills in writing.                                             |  |
| Avoid rote-learning and memorisation in writing.                                                      |  |
| Sufficient time to teach writing for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                                           |  |
| Making grammatical mistakes in writing during <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                                  |  |
| Mistakes in punctuation errors in writing during <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                               |  |
| Encouraging students to develop ideas for writing in <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                           |  |
| Making students feel confident when they write for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                             |  |

### SECTION C: Content and structure of the writing module

What specific writing skills in terms of the content and structure do you think should be included in the module? (Please provide your comment for each of the suggested aspects of the writing module)

| Specific skills and content of the writing module                                                | Comments |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Writing genre (examination requirements: Writing formal letters, emails, speech draft, or diary) |          |
| Vocabulary needed for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                                                     |          |
| Guide for sentence structure development for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                              |          |
| Guide for paragraph development for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                                       |          |
| Structure of essay and organisation                                                              |          |
| Writing effective introduction and conclusion                                                    |          |
| Supporting arguments with evidence                                                               |          |
| Grammar (Present, past, perfect & future tenses; Prepositions; Conjunctions, etc). Please list.  |          |
| Punctuation                                                                                      |          |
| Elements of creativity in writing                                                                |          |
| Inclusion of sample essay that align with the <i>Zhongkao</i> examination's requirements         |          |
| Inclusion of exercises that align with the <i>Zhongkao</i> examination's requirements            |          |
| Insertion of page number                                                                         |          |
| Topics related to real-life situations in Chengdu for <i>Zhongkao</i> exams.                     |          |
| Themes in accordance to syllabus of the middle school students                                   |          |
| Teaching resources (online/offline)                                                              |          |
| Lesson plans and outlines                                                                        |          |

| Specific skills and content of the writing module  | Comments |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Marking rubrics                                    |          |
| Assessment tools                                   |          |
| Worksheets and practice exercises                  |          |
| Fun learning activities                            |          |
| Analysis of students/sample essays for improvement |          |
| Quizzes (online/offline)                           |          |

**SECTION D: Additional comments** 第四部分：

Please share about your skills, knowledge, or suggestions in relation to teaching writing for the *Zhongkao* examination that can be included in this writing module. (The comments should be constructive suggestions that this questionnaire might not cover such as teaching strategies, time allocation, etc).

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH !**