
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructive Alignment in IELTS Curriculum Design: Challenges and Remedies in the Vietnamese Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

In curriculum design, constructive alignment plays a crucial role in ensuring coherence and interconnectedness among learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment practices, leading to consistency across all elements of the curriculum. However, its application in Vietnam faces significant challenges, particularly in the design of IELTS preparation courses. This paper critically examines the educational context in Vietnam, discusses the theoretical challenges and practical applications of constructive alignment, and evaluates its effectiveness in IELTS curriculum design. Furthermore, it identifies opportunities to leverage constructive alignment to enhance professional development and improve the quality of academic structures.

KEYWORDS

IELTS Curriculum Design; Vietnamese Higher Education; constructive alignment

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1. Introduction

Language education plays a pivotal role in the context of globalization. Education must prepare individuals, particularly students and learners, to effectively communicate with people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. In Vietnam, high school education predominantly emphasizes grammar and vocabulary as the core content. However, in higher education, students must adapt to global contexts where the demands for integration and competency are significantly higher. To address these needs, Vietnamese higher education institutions have increasingly adopted quality assurance frameworks aimed at enhancing the quality of university courses and student competencies (Pham & Nguyen, 2020). This shift aligns with global trends and emphasizes a move from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches in education.

The IELTS test has gained significant prominence in Vietnam over the past several years, playing a critical role in equipping students with the skills necessary for academic mobility and career development. However, designing IELTS preparation courses that effectively foster these skills presents considerable challenges. Constructive alignment, introduced by (Biggs, 2014; Trigwell & Prosser, 2014), is fundamental in ensuring that intended learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments are cohesively aligned to promote meaningful learning and effective training.

Despite its importance, the application of constructive alignment in IELTS courses in Vietnam continues to face challenges. These challenges arise from various factors, including institutional constraints, administrative issues, and teaching practices. This paper critically evaluates the application of constructive alignment within Vietnamese IELTS preparation courses. It identifies key challenges, explores potential opportunities for improvement, and proposes solutions to optimize the use of constructive alignment in higher education curriculum design.

2. Context of Education and Constructive alignment

Constructive alignment is a theoretical framework rooted in outcome-based education (OBE), which prioritizes the outcomes of learning as the central focus of curriculum design. This approach contrasts with traditional teacher-centered methods, where the instructor occupies a dominant role in the classroom. In OBE, the ultimate goal is achieving the intended learning outcomes, which serve as the guiding framework for designing teaching activities and assessment practices.

Constructive alignment comprises three interconnected components:

1. **Expected Learning Outcomes (ELOs):** These articulate the specific outcomes that students are expected to achieve by the end of a course or lesson. These outcomes encompass three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
2. **Teaching Practices:** The expected outcomes guide teaching practices, ensuring that all instructional activities and classroom interactions are structured to assist learners in achieving the ELOs.
3. **Assessment:** The assessment measures students' performance based on the ELOs, ensuring that evaluations accurately reflect the knowledge, skills, and attitudes the students are expected to attain.

These three elements are mutually reinforcing, working cohesively to promote meaningful learning and ensure the effectiveness of curriculum design (Pham, 2018). Vietnam's higher education system has undergone significant reforms aimed at aligning with global standards. Policies such as the National Foreign Language Project and the introduction of new curricula for high school education emphasize enhancing learners' language proficiency to support global citizenship and employability (Nguyen & Tran, 2018). In this context, IELTS has gained prominence as a widely recognized and reliable language test, benchmarking learners' academic readiness for university education and beyond. However, the rapid incorporation of IELTS preparation programs into higher education has revealed systematic weaknesses and barriers in curriculum design. These challenges have underscored the insufficiency of constructive alignment in ensuring that learners achieve their intended outcomes. Several factors undermine the effectiveness of constructive alignment, including: Test-based strategies or overuse of Exam Simulations. These issues suggest that while constructive alignment provides a robust framework for curriculum design, its implementation in Vietnam's IELTS programs requires significant adaptation to address systemic and pedagogical challenges effectively.

3. Issues with Constructive Alignment

Inconsistency in Constructive Alignment

While the three components of constructive alignment—expected learning outcomes (ELOs), teaching practices, and assessments—are intended to work cohesively, inconsistencies in their implementation often diminish the effectiveness of the framework. One issue arises when teaching activities fail to fully support learners in achieving the intended outcomes. In some cases, ELOs are overly ambitious or insufficiently measurable, making them impractical for learners to achieve within the given constraints (Hanh et al., 2020; Stukalo & Lytvyn, 2021). Additionally, teaching activities occasionally deviate from the scope of the course content, further misaligning the curriculum design. Assessment practices exacerbate these challenges by focusing primarily on test performance rather than fostering comprehensive language competence. As a result, assessments often fail to measure learners' developmental progress in skills, knowledge, and attitudes, which are core components of constructive alignment (Lau et al., 2018). These misalignments create discrepancies across the three components, leading to a reduction in the overall effectiveness of the teaching process.

Overuse of Test Simulations

The dominance of standardized test scores as the ultimate goal in IELTS preparation courses has led to an overemphasis on test simulations and exam strategies. Market-driven demands for high band scores encourage teachers to prioritize test-taking techniques over genuine skill development (Tran, Ly Thi; Marginson, 2018). In such contexts, teaching practices often rely heavily on repetition, test tips, and strategies, leaving limited opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful language use or real-world applications of their skills. This approach undermines learners' ability to achieve comprehensive language competency, as it prioritizes immediate test results over long-term development. Furthermore, the lack of interactive and engaging classroom activities hinders learners' motivation and active participation, which are critical for language acquisition.

Systemic Barriers

Institutional and systemic constraints further hinder the effective implementation of constructive alignment. A major issue lies in the limited classroom duration for IELTS preparation courses. Research suggests that learners require approximately 800–850 hours of study to advance by one IELTS band score, yet the allocated class time is often insufficient to meet this requirement (Tang & Tien, 2020). The pressure to achieve high test scores intensifies the reliance on test-focused activities, leaving little room for diversified teaching methods that could foster language competence and personal development. Additionally, teachers face constraints in addressing learners' well-being and creating a supportive learning environment, as institutional demands often prioritize test results over holistic education. These systemic barriers undermine the potential of constructive alignment to promote meaningful learning and comprehensive skill development.

4. Remedies to Foster Constructive Alignment in Educational Reform

Reconstruction of the curriculum

The curriculum should be wholly readjusted to ensure the design of the curriculum can match the teaching practices. We need to conduct benchmarking for the curriculum, comparing the outcomes of each activity or lesson to the overall classroom outcome. The tests need to be adapted based on each level so the learners at certain levels of the curriculum can realize their personal achievements to that level, rather than they have to wait until the end of the course, so nothing can be changed, nothing can be modified. Feedback should be collected from the perspective of the learner so we can ensure whether the learner can feel at ease or they are happy to make progress because learning well-being is significant to ensure their participation in the classroom activity.

Teacher-professional development

Teacher-training programs or workshops can be another solution to foster the learner's teaching competency in ensuring the classroom effectiveness. Because it is impossible for one's curriculum to actually fulfill each demand of every single learner, the teacher needs to be competent to adapt the teaching activity and the classroom activity to the winning outcome so we can raise awareness of the criteria for constructive alignment and they can foster the collaborative learning environment.

Integration of alternative assessments

Alternative assessments such as portfolio or effective journal or peer assessment can be integrated in traditional classroom activity. For the test preparation classes, we focus much on the summative assessment, which means at the end of the course, the learner has to take the test. However, it is crucial for us to monitor the learners' progress in order to provide immediate support for further improvement. Portfolio or peer assessment can enhance the learner's reflection on their personal strengths and weaknesses. So when they give feedback or compare their learning progress with other students, they can realize their strengths and weaknesses. For their strengths, they can enhance their abilities. For their weaknesses, they can modify or change their learning strategy. This can lead to an increase in the learners' autonomy for self-reflection and lifelong learning.

5. Conclusion

The IELTS test in the context of Vietnam is currently the most reliable test to be conducted for academic performance. Therefore, the need for constructive alignment in the IELTS courses is pivotal. However, Vietnam still faces several challenges in implementing constructive alignment, such as issues with assessment alignment, excessive use of tests, and systematic constraints. With reduced effectiveness of classroom activities, sometimes teaching practices do not actually support the learner to achieve the outcomes, and the manner of assessment cannot assess the regressive development among the learner. Nevertheless, we can address these challenges by employing targeted strategies such as curriculum redesign, educator professional development, and institutional support. Addressing these issues can partially resolve specific concerns related to constructive alignment in IELTS courses. The core values of each course should be the teacher, so the teacher needs to be actually competent in understanding the constructive alignment, adapting, flexible in supporting learners to achieve the outcome, to fulfill differentiated learning. This review sheds light for further study to investigate the long-term impact of constructive alignment in IELTS courses and the variation of the educational context in applying constructive alignment.

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