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Perception between Faculties and Pupils for Alignment in English Syllabus: A Study Based on Vietnamese University

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Abstract:

Throughout the world it is a matter of discussion that what should be the constructive alignment in a syllabus. This study contributes something in this area. For English syllabus perceptions have been studied for both teachers and students' in a Vietnamese university. Through structured and semi-structured data collection tools data had been collected from 60 faculties and 167 pupils of South Vietnam. Data were of two types: qualitative and quantitative. An agreement has been noticed for both teachers and students regarding the association between the learning outcomes and teaching and assessment activities in the General English syllabus. Based on result, effect of syllabus reframing has been captured.

Keywords: Cognitive alignment, curriculum, perception

1. Introduction

English, in public and private schools of Vietnam are very popular foreign language for study. Hence it has made compulsory. When they select it as a course most of them can't speak in English. To cope up from this problem decision (No.1400/ QĐ-TTg) had been directed by Prime Minister on 30 September 2008. Foreign Languages 2020 Project had been undertaken to Improve quality of this language both at teaching as well as learning phase. A framework has been advised from Level 1 to Level 6 (equivalent A1 to C2- Common European Framework Reference (CEFR)).

It has enforced that before graduation level is being completed a student should cross level 3. As without evaluation none of the syllabus can be mentioned as effective. Therefore, more focus had been placed on evaluation at regular interval for schools and universities. Hope it will create a better effect for students.

The main focus of this paper is to check the association between learning and teaching. It also highlights the perception of faculties.

- To understand perception of pupils for English syllabus regarding the agreement between outcome and evaluation at university level. There is a gap in research that no such study had been conducted prior with this objective in Vietnam.
So, it is expected to enrich the literature highly.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perceptions

In literature definition of perceptions are many. It is mentioned by Bryant (1973) that association exists between attitude and understanding. Perception is a process of selection, organization, interpretation of stimulus such that meaningful information can be formed. (Narayan's ,1998). Here it is the experience what human receive, judge, assess. Faculties and students should involve in finding the agreement between evaluation and outcome of English syllabus. As they are the direct components working this syllabus proper and reliable judgment can be made. They can suggest the changes need to be carried out to fulfill need of the learning. Syllabus and its evaluation:

There are several definitions given by many researchers and experts for the term "syllabus". Finch and Crunkilton (1999) defined syllabus as "the sum of the learning actions, activities and experiences" a student has under the guidance of school. For Tanner & Tanner (1995), under the management of the school, a plan or program a learner experiences are called syllabus. To Wortham (2006), curriculum is a system of course taught by teachers for each specific level of ages. Catterington (2010) stated that syllabus has certain levels, guidelines and upshots which are reflected through classroom teaching. Syllabus is basically goal of a course which has subjects ordered in proper manner, finally helps in surveil and evaluation (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Components of a syllabus and interconnections are shown in the below mentioned figure.

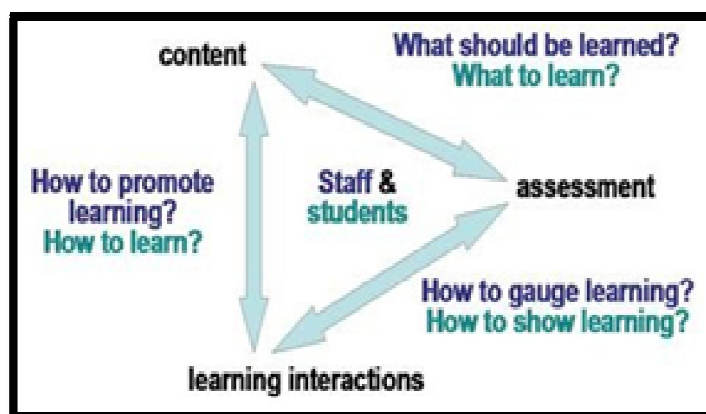


Figure 1: Key Elements and Their Relationship in a Curriculum
 Source: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teaching/teaching-strategies/curriculum-development/curriculum-process> (Cfm)

In Figure 1, the content, learning interactions and assessment have a close relationship with each other. The content reflects what the students learn. In order to show how the students learn, the learning interactions are the significant factors. In addition, the assessment presents how the learning to be shown. It is obviously those factors link and influences each other in order to help the students to achieve the learning outcomes.

According to Brown (1989), syllabus is the collection and analysis of information such that effectiveness can be reflected from academic perspective.

In this study, curriculum evaluation refers to collecting information in which judgment might be made about the effectiveness of a particular program. It is obviously shown that the purpose of curriculum evaluation is to improve the quality of the curriculum. To Burke (1995), an effective curriculum could come from a sequence of decisions which include:

- Outcomes and objectives
- Learning and teaching activities;
- The appropriate forms of assessment.

2.2. Constructive Alignment

"To align" actually denotes several purposes like to coordinate between several parts, to bring parts together such that coordination can be improved. It also indicates a "close operation" and agreement (La Marca, Redfield, Winter and Despriet, 2000).

Therefore, curriculum alignment is the agreement between learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment activities (Tyler, 1949). Biggs (2003) pointed out three Ps approach of the constructive alignment theory: the presage, the process and the product. The presage means, "What is intended to be taught, how it will be taught and assessed" (p.18). The process means, "learning- focused activities". The product means the outcomes which are desired to achieve from those learning activities (p.19). Thanks to three Ps approach, in classroom context, Biggs and Tang (2007) proposed three steps of curriculum development. Firstly, intended learning outcomes are developed. In this step, curriculum developers ask what the students will learn and achieve. In order to have a doable and understandable learning outcome, Bloom's Taxonomy is used. Instead of just being able to understand the lessons, many measurable verbs are used like identify, apply, analyze, compare and so on. Secondly, teaching methods and activities are identified to ensure that there is a link between what is taught and what is expected to learn. Lastly, assessment activities are set to evaluate what the students have learnt and what they are expected to learn. Larkin and Recharadson (2013, p 198) agreed with those previous points of view. They confirmed:

Students' engagement with the assessment tasks to achieve desired outcome is the main purpose of constructive alignment. Hence outcome, styles of teaching and evaluation need to be integrated and analyzed simultaneously.

2.3. The Study

This study is a descriptive study in which the teachers and students' perceptions of the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching and assessment activities in the General English curriculum were integrated. In this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. According to Creswell (2014), the mixed-method is more valid and reliable.

This study was conducted with 16 teachers (13 females and 03 males). They are English teachers at a university in the Mekong Delta. They are from Bachelor Degree to Doctor Degree. Their age is between 25 and 49. They have been working directly with General English curriculum in the university for more than 5 years. This study also involved 167 students (102 females and 65 males) who were in the second year at the university. Their average age is about

19. They are from a variety of majors like accounting, chemical engineering, music studies, biotechnology, primary education, construction technology. They were taking the General English course in their curriculum.

A 62-item questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. It was classified into three parts: (1) personal background, (2) perceptions of the General English curriculum and (3) open- ended questions about the alignment of the curriculum.

There were two versions of questionnaires, one for teachers and one for students. The reliability of the questionnaire for teachers and students is high ($\alpha = 0.91$, $\alpha = 0.96$), indicating the reliability of the questionnaire in this study. Another instrument was used in this study was an interview. The interview was conducted with six teachers and twelve students. They were asked some questions about their real teaching and learning experiences as well as their perceptions of the alignment in the General English curriculum.

3. Finding

3.1. Teachers' Perceptions

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), the five-point Likert scale is classified into three levels: high (M=3.5-5.0); medium (M=2.5-3.49); and low (M=2.4 or lower).

To answer the first question about teachers' perceptions of the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching content, teaching and assessment activities, the researcher used Descriptive Statistic Test to find out mean score of the alignment. The result is shown in Table 1.

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents	16	2.95	4.27	3.63	.43
The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching activities	16	3.20	4.67	4.03	.42
The alignment between learning outcomes and assessment activities	16	2.25	4.69	3.86	.51
Total	16	2.96	4.30	3.81	.34

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of the Alignment in the Curriculum

Note. M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

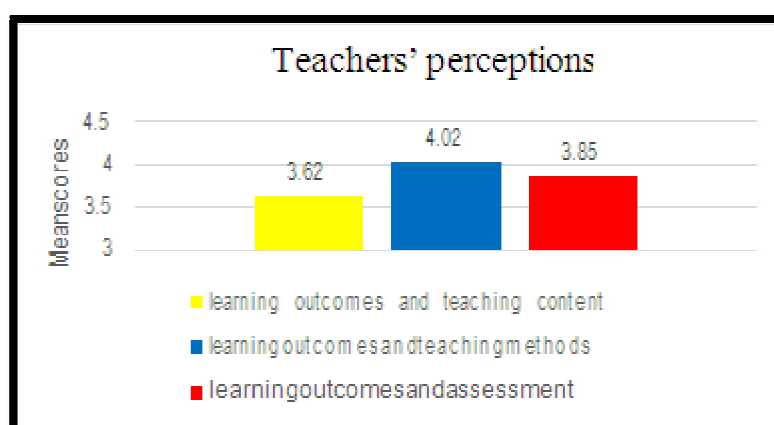


Figure 2: Teachers' Perceptions of the Alignment in the Curriculum

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, the overall mean score of teachers' perceptions of the alignment in the General English curriculum (M= 3.81, SD= .34) is relatively high, nearly reaching scale 4 indicating "Agree" in the five- point scale of the questionnaire, revealing that the alignment in the curriculum was affirmed by the teachers. The alignment was shown clearly in each element of the Curriculum. Firstly, it is clear that there was a rather agreement between learning outcomes and teaching contents in the Curriculum (M= 3.63, SD= .43). Secondly, in the teachers' point of view, there was a close matching between learning outcomes and teaching activities (M= 4.02, SD= .42). Finally, teachers believed that assessment activities were also aligned with learning outcomes (M= 3.86, SD= .51). For a large number of faculties arrangement between teaching and upshots are highly appreciable.

3.2. Students' Perceptions

Overall mean score has been calculated to find out the perception of students regarding syllabus. The output or finding was presented below.

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents	167	1.82	5.00	3.75	.55
The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching activities	167	1.47	5.00	3.89	.57
The alignment between learning outcomes and assessment activities	167	2.31	5.00	3.84	.56
Total	167	2.17	4.94	3.82	.49

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of the Alignment in the Curriculum

Note. M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

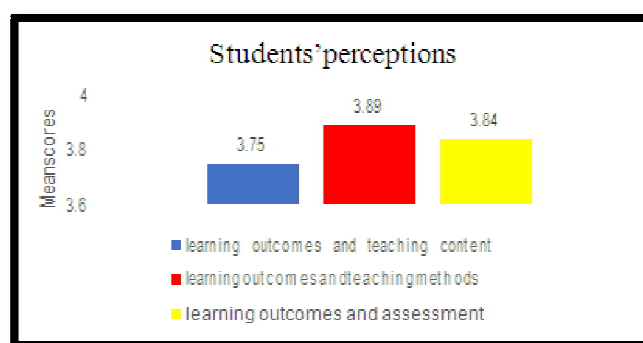


Figure 3: Students' Perceptions of the Alignment in the Curriculum

As can be seen from Table 2 and Figure 3, the total mean score of the students' perceptions had been aligned on a scale 4 in the five- point scale (M=3.82, SD=.49). So, it can be interpreted that pupils are highly agreed between the association of outcome and evaluation.

Firstly, the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents in the curriculum was affirmed by the students (M= 3.75, SD=.55). Secondly, according to students, there was a reasonable matching between learning outcomes and teachers' teaching activities (M=3.89, SD=.57). Finally, the students also stated that the learning outcomes and the assessment activities had agreed each other (M= 3.84, SD=.56). In summary, almost students in the university defined that there was an alignment between learning outcomes and teaching and assessment activities in General English curriculum.

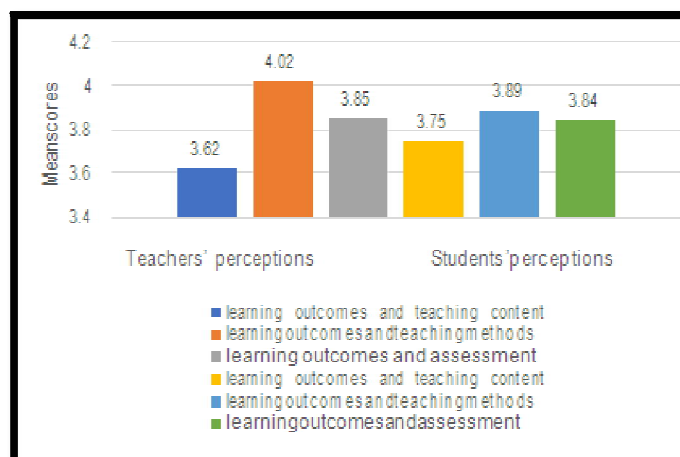


Figure 4: Teachers and Students' Perceptions of the Alignment in the Curriculum

To have a general view about teachers and students' perceptions, as can be seen in Figure 4, the teachers strongly agree that teaching activities which they applied in their class aligned with learning outcomes of the curriculum (M=4.02). Meanwhile, they do not highly appreciate the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents of the curriculum (M=3.62). Their point of view is similar to the students. The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching activities is strongly admitted by the students (M=3.89). On contrast, the students do not have a strong agreement about the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents (M=3.75).

3.3. Insight into Teachers' Perceptions of the Curriculum

To find out teachers' deeper thought about the alignment in the Curriculum, the researcher made six interviews with six teachers who have been working directly with this curriculum. The participants were chosen on their work

experience, two with lower 5-year teaching experience, two with 5-10 years of experience and two with more than 10-year experience. As presented above, most of teachers agreed on the alignment of the curriculum. Some other teachers had different points of view about the alignment.

The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents

Maximum faculties appreciate the arrangement of syllabus as it can achieve goals.

Ms. My Hanh, 3- year experience teacher stated,

"The typescript is suitable for students' level. So, the students can listen to the native speakers' voice and understand mostly what the speakers said." (Ms. My Hanh, interview extract)

Ms. Tuyet Anh also agreed with Ms. My Hanh about that alignment. She elaborated, "The content is suitable to learning outcomes. For example, Objective PET book is used.

This suits to B1 level (CEFR)." (Ms. Tuyet Anh, interview extract)

However, there was an argumentation of the alignment. Ms. Anh Thu claimed, "The content is not practical. There are some out of date information such as the

information about fashion or sports. It is hard for teachers to teach with the organization of the textbook." (Ms. Anh Thu, interview extract)

She also confirmed,

"I think that the reading content does not relate to the test. It lacks of visual materials like videos or films. There is not any link between units." (Ms. Anh Thu, interview extract)

The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching activities

It can be seen that almost all of teachers confirmed the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching methods. Mr. Hoang Dong, 9- year experience teacher, said that

"Teaching methods which are used in class help students achieve learning outcomes like role-play activities, free- writing approach, and so on." (Mr. Hoang Dong, interview extract)

Ms. Tuyet Anh also agreed,

"I always choose suitable teaching activities for students' level and interests like writing an invitation, discussing their interests, role- playing, etc. More important, I want my students obtain what are required in B1 level." (Ms. Tuyet Anh, interview extract)

The alignment between learning outcomes and assessment activities

Teachers who have been working directly with this curriculum thought that learning outcomes aligned with the assessment. Mr. Hoai An gave his idea about speaking test.

"Speaking test is actually a test for B1 level. This is because the students are asked some questions about their daily life. They are also asked to discuss a situation, describe a photo and give their opinion about an issue." (Mr. Hoai An, interview extract)

Unlike Mr. Hoai An, Ms. Bao Ngoc disagreed on the alignment between learning outcomes and assessment. She stated,

"I don't think the writing test is actually testing students' writing skills because it is somehow similar to testing reading skill when students do not write their email or letter but just choose one option among four options like a multiple-choice test." (Ms. Bao Ngoc, interview extract)

Agreed with Ms. Bao Ngoc, Ms. Anh Thu said that,

"Many test tasks and contents of B1 level are lacked in the final test like transformation sentences, writing an email or note. Especially, all listening tasks are not focused on the final test." (Ms. Anh Thu, interview extract)

3.4. Insight into Students' Perceptions of the curriculum

In order to find out students' opinions in deep about the alignment in the curriculum, twelve participants were chosen to the interview. The participants were randomly chosen based on their score of the final test and their major. Three participants in each major were selected (three students of law, three students of accounting, three students of construction and three students of agriculture). The researchers chose three students in each major depending on their test score (one student with high score, one student with average score and one student with low score).

The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents

As presented above, most of students thought that learning outcomes aligned with teaching contents. A student from Agriculture major, Nhan said that,

"The contents of the Curriculum really help students achieve learning outcomes. All contents of B1 level have been taught in the course like listening about daily conversations, directions, short reports or interviews, reading about everyday materials, letter- writing." (Nhan, interview extract)

Agreed with Nhan, Han- a Construction- major student had a good opinion about the contents of the Curriculum. She said that the contents were good and she could learn what she needed for the final test. Tuyet, a student from Accounting major, agreed with Nhan and Han, she stated,

"I have been learned many good things from the course such as how to write a letter, how to read and understand the meaning of a brochure. They helped me a lot in B1 test." (Tuyet, interview extract)

However, there were some opposite opinions about the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching contents in this curriculum. Ngoc, a student from Construction major with low test score claimed,

"I don't see much agreement between leaning outcomes and teaching contents. For example, there are many contents of B1 level which were lacked in the content like teaching students how to describe their feelings or write about a narrative." (Ngoc, interview extract)

The alignment between learning outcomes and teaching activities

As mentioned above, there were two sides of students' perception about the alignment between learning outcomes and teaching methods. However, the numbers of students who agreed on the alignment was much more than the one who disagreed. Hoa, a student of Law, said that the teaching methods which teachers used in class matched with learning outcomes. Hue also agreed with Hoa. She added,

"The activities which my teachers used are useful and interesting. They motivate us because, in my opinion, we can see the matching of the teaching methods and our objective." (Hue, interview extract)

On contrast, Tien claimed that the teachers did not teach how to scan or skim in the reading section. He also stressed that some teachers did not follow pre, while and post stage in their lesson. He stated,

"Sometimes, the teachers don't teach us new words of the lesson before we listen something. It is hard for us to understand the text. In some cases, the teachers don't let us to think or guess about what we will listen. So, we have no idea about the text as listening." (Tien, interview extract)

The alignment between learning outcomes and assessment activities

In this issue, the students' perceptions were also different. Some of students confirmed the agreement of learning outcomes and assessment. Bao, an Agriculture major student, is one of the examples. He stated,

"The test actually focused on what B1 level needs. Especially in the speaking test, we are tested with 04 sections: introduce ourselves, questions and answers about our personal opinions, photo description and pair discussion." (Bao, interview extract)

Ai, a Construction major student, had the same idea with Bao. She added,

"Listening and reading sections of the final test is exactly the same with B1 test. The test tasks are similar to B1 test such as True/ False, Multiple choice and Gap- filling." (Ai, interview extract)

However, in this issue, there were more opposite opinions of the participants. Loan admitted,

"Although the final test looks like B1 test in the test tasks, the contents are not similar to B1 test." (Loan, interview extract)

As per Hoang, interview extract, Hoang added,

"We do the final test on the computer. So, there are some skills are not tested like listening and writing skill." Moreover, they were never directed to draft a letter or an e-mail during final test.

In a summative way it can be said that both faculties and pupils had different attitude for teaching materials, methods and styles for teaching, learning outcomes and activities for evaluation. However, the number of participants who approved on the alignment in the Curriculum is higher than the one who argued on that issue.

4. Discussion

As the above results, large number of faculties has agreed upon the association. This means that the teachers realized that subject matters of the General English curriculum are suitable to the learning outcomes. The subject matters aim to provide enough knowledge and skills for students to achieve B1 level after finishing four courses of the curriculum. The teachers also think that the teaching methods they applied help students gain the learning outcomes. They chose different methods, techniques and activities for different classes basing on students' needs, level and interest. Difference between outcome of learning and its evaluation are being done by faculties. This means that the students are tested what they need for B1 level. The results of this study are in line with what Almalki (2014) reported. Furthermore, this study was conducted about the curriculum development. It developed the study of Warnick et al. (2004). The curriculum was also evaluated by the teachers. There are two noticeable differences between the current study and Warnick' study. The first thing is that the current study was conducted with both teachers and students; while Warnick only found out the teachers' perceptions. Secondly, this study was conducted in the General English curriculum; meanwhile, Warnick conducted his study with the agriculture curriculum. This drew another picture about the curriculum and it contributed to curriculum research. However, to apply constructive alignment in curriculum's design and development, there is a different between the current study and the study which was conducted by Phaeton (2017). The researcher pointed out another dimension in the curriculum. This study is conducted with other elements of the alignment in the curriculum. Phaeton found out the misalignment of intended and implemented curriculum and the lack of teachers' knowledge; while the researcher of this study found out the alignment between the learning outcomes and teaching and assessment activities. The researcher developed Phaeton's study.

According to students there is a strong association was present between outcome and evaluation in the syllabus. For students the syllabus can justify the outcome expected from the course. Between techniques for teaching and objectives of learning are associated strongly with each other. In other words, the curriculum was developed in line with principles suggested by Meyer and Nulty (2009).

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the difference in interpretation and understanding between teachers and students regarding arrangement of outcome and evaluation of teaching methods for syllabus in one university in the Mekong Delta. Answers of two research questions have been found through interview schedule and questionnaire. It indicates that both university students and teachers are agreeing about the arrangement of elements of curriculum.

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