The Gap between Curriculum, Assessments, and National Standards of Vietnamese English Language Teacher Education

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Abstract
This study is to understand the extent to which the provincial Vietnamese English Language Teacher Education curriculum and assessments are aligned with national standards. The study used a mixed-method with the data sources from policy documents, a survey, and interviews conducted with the lecturers and administrators from two provincial ELTE institutions in the North of Vietnam. The initial data results revealed (i) a low alignment level of curriculum and MOET language proficiency standards, and (ii) a moderate alignment level of assessments and the knowledge and skills clarified in the curriculum. To address these gaps, it is necessary for the curriculum and assessments to be re-focused on national standards and on the social demands.

Keywords: standard, assessment, curriculum, English language teacher education, alignment

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1. Introduction and background of the study

To respond new requirements of the international and global context, Vietnam considers education as a top national policy and the foundation for the future development of the country (Mai & Jun, 2013). The Vietnamese government has made many changes to educational policy to prepare best for the educational development in the new era. Of the largest investments, the project for *"Teaching and Learning Foreign Language in the National Formal Educational system in the period of 2008-2020"* (Government, 2008; Vietnamese Prime Minister, 2008) is considered the most significant change for English language teaching and learning across all levels. Following this national project, ELTE institutions have more and more strategic plans to develop their programs, seeking to meet the requirements of the social demands and the global changes (Hoang, 2013; T. A. Nguyen, 2009; V. K. Nguyen & Tran, 2013).

As has just been introduced, Vietnamese ELTE is receiving an increasing amount of investment, not only in terms of finance and resources, but also in developing human resources; however, it is still perceived as a system that has more challenges than opportunities. The question raised whether the ELTE system meets national standards, and more broadly, the social demands of Vietnam. This study aimed to examine (i) the extent to which the institutional ELTE curriculum is aligned with national standards, and (ii) the extent to which the institutional assessments are aligned with national standards.

2. Literature review

The study reviews international and national scholars about the theorising and evaluating of standards, assessments, curricula, and alignment between and among these components. It also discusses the current issues related to these major educational components in ENL, ESL, and EFL countries. It specifically identifies the alignment of national standards with institutional implementation across a number of countries.

Curriculum, the roles, and the factors of a quality curriculum are the focus of a great deal of research. It is defined as "a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex of philosophical, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational program" (Nunan, 1993) or "the total effort of the school to bring about desired outcomes in school and out-of-school situations" (Taba, 1962). It is considered the heart of schooling (Lunenburg, 2011).

Alignment is a key goal of education, and it attracts a variety of research. Within the education context, there are various definitions of this term. Alignment has been defined as follow: "Two or more system components are aligned if they are in agreement or match each other" (Webb, 1997, p. 2). Alignment has been defined as the extent to which curricular expectations and assessments are in agreement and work together to provide guidance for educators' efforts to facilitate students' progress toward desire academic outcomes (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008).

This study focuses on scholars relating to alignment of curricula, assessments, and standards. International studies suggested various degrees of alignment between

standards required by national organizations, and ELTE curriculum and assessment system. Within this literature, it can be seen that misalignment among educational elements is a key challenge for many EFL countries, including Vietnam.

A gap between curriculum and outcomes or standards within the Vietnamese pre-service teacher education programs have been reported. Vietnamese pre-service teacher education often fails to provide graduates with essential work skills, such as communication, planning, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. This gap is largely the result of traditional university teaching and learning methods (Tran, 2013). Some Vietnamese institutional certifications do not reflect the true capacity of their graduates. These institutions are considered to have more focus on their students' obtaining a certification, instead of reflecting their students' true level of attainment (Mai & Jun, 2013).

Alignment between educational aspects is the final goal of any educational system. However, most countries face challenges during the transition process from national standards to state or institutional implementation. Institutional outcomes have been set up and presented in the curricula, but they are not always achieved. Curricula perhaps do not align with the institutional outcomes or with national standards. Assessments may be not a good representative of curricula content. National policies may have misinterpretation when redefined at an institutional or faculty level. A low alignment of ELTE factors is a significant concern for the international perspectives, especially in EFL countries, included Vietnam.

3. Research design

To address the research questions, and based on the literature, the study is designed using the mixed-method, with three tools of data collection, namely policy documents, survey, and interviews. Data triangulation is offered to ensure the consistency of the research findings. National and institutional documents relevant to ELTE standards, assessments, and curricula have been collected and analyzed. The survey has been conducted with lecturers and administrators within two provincial Northern institutions who are housing ELTE program. Six semi-structured interviews with administrators and experienced lecturers have also been conducted to obtain information that could not be expected to attain from the survey.

4. Interview data analysis

4.1 The interview respondents

The study conducted six interviews with administrators and lecturers within two representative Northern provincial tertiary institutions, whose ELTE programs attracted a large number of students every cohort. The interview participants are either dean, vice-dean of faculty or experienced lecturers, who are directly working with ELTE program at the time of interviewing. The informants all get involved in curriculum management and/or curriculum development. They also take tasks relating to assessments. The interviewee profiles are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Interviewees demographics

| No. | Roles | | Qualifications | ELTE Experiences | Gender | Curriculum Managing | Curriculum designing and developing | Assessment development and management |
---	Administrators	Lecturers						
1.	√		Doctorate degree	25 years	M	√		√
2.	√	√	Doctorate degree	17 years	F	√	√	√
3.		√	Master's degree	8 years	F		√	√
4.	√	√	Master's degree	11 years	F		√	√
5.		√	Master's degree	6 years	M		√	√
6.		√	Master's degree	5 years	F		√	√

4.2 Curriculum and language proficiency standards

High aim standards

According to the national project, the C1 level, level 5 in six Common Reference Levels of CEFR[1], is a new requirement for graduation from Vietnamese ELTE bachelor program (Vietnamese Prime Minister, 2008). The C1 level standard of language proficiency has brought much concern to almost ELTE administrators and lecturers, especially at provincial institutions.

According to over half the interview participants, the C1 level is quite a high aim standard. This is concern of not only lecturers but also administrators. An instructional leader emphasized that the C1 level of language proficiency is a high requirement, even to her colleagues, not only to her students (Interviewee No.4). One vice-dean of ELTE faculty confirmed *it is impractical for 100% students to achieve the C1, not only for our provincial students, but even students in large metropolitan institutions"*(Interviewee No.2). Sharing this concern, an EFL faculty dean expressed he hoped *"the national standard of language proficiency would lower to the B2 level (level four), so that my students could try to attain"* (Interviewee No.1).

Students' language proficiency poor entry levels

Participating lecturers and instructional leaders emphasized that students' poor entry levels of language proficiency prevent them from achieving the C1 level standard. As a young lecturer shared, *"The C1 level is too difficult for the children to attain"* (Interviewee No.3). In addition, this lecturer explained that her students' language proficiency now is lower than level one. One instructional leader also stressed that her students' starting level is poor. The students' background knowledge is limited (Interview No.2).

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[1] CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Additionally, in the words of an administrator, who has over 30 years of working for ELTE program:

> *Our institution located in a North mountain region, our students' entry levels are poor, and it is a common issue of our Vietnamese country. For example, this academic school year 2016, the average grade of English is 3.5… We must accept this… to exist and to fit with the actual Northern mountainous condition, when the MOET standard is fixed…*
> *On average English entry grade is 3.5.. However, some students achieved some priority policies, their English entry grade maybe 1.0 …*
> *I mean that students' entry level is poor, when they have priority policies, and their entry level is much poorer* (Interviewee No.1)

More than half of the participating lecturers indicated that their current ELTE curriculum does not well align with MOET English language proficiency standard, because the curricula is not designed based on MOET standards. The current curricula are assessed to involve many non-language courses, and curricula do not provide enough language major courses. Most of interviewees complain about the lower number of major language courses compared to that of foundation knowledge courses (n = 3; Interviewees No.01, No.03, and No.04). It is highlighted that in comparison to the number of English language practice courses, the number of theoretical courses relating to Psychology, Mark-Lenin and Cultures is much higher (Interviewee No.04). It is perceived that institutions cannot change the MOET required courses, even non-language courses (Interviewees 01, 02, 03, and 04). The interview participants complained, *"The MOET required courses are a large fixed part of the curriculum which institutions and faculty cannot change"* (Interviewees No.01 and No.03)

In sum, the majority of lecturers and administrators did not find a high level of alignment between their institution curriculum and MOET standards of language proficiency skills. The participants reported their being pessimistic with the students' poor entry levels of English language proficiency. They also emphasized their concern about the insufficient amount of time for language practice, and they believed this makes students difficult to attain the English language proficiency requirement.

4.3 Assessments and curriculum

When asking lecturers and instructional leaders about their perceptions of their current assessments, many worries have been shared. The most serious concern is that assessments do not match the curriculum intent. The participants also reported their being pessimistic that assessments cannot assess exactly students' levels.

Participants reported their being concern about both assessment content and form, that they cannot assess knowledge or skills specified in the curriculum. A young lecturer complained, *"the tests used now have gaps with what are taught and what are to be taught"* (Interviewee No.06). She confirmed that the tests do not match the current curriculum, in terms of both knowledge and skills. In the voice of an instructional leader, *"Speaking course includes a variety of skills, like monologues, dialogues, problem-solving, etc. but the current tests only cover productive monologues"* (Interviewee No.04). This informant added, *"The curriculum now aims developing students' capacity; however, current theoretical-based tests are not based on students' capacity. I mean tests do not match curriculum intent."* In addition, another lecturer commented, *"assessment content only requires the reproduction of*

knowledge. The paper-tests cannot cover the use of authentic application of knowledge relating to real life and the world of their future work" (Interviewee No.03).

The participants also identified that their institutional assessments cannot assess exactly their students levels. The most common comment is that there is a variety of challenges when designing and organizing assessments, and assessments thus cannot define the students' true capacity or levels. For example, as a lecturer reported, *"We have some difficulties, for example, insufficient time to assess a large number of students, a lack of testing devices in the testing venues… Speaking assessment forms cannot generally assess students' speaking skills* (Interviewee No.05). His colleague also added, *"The current Note-taking assessment forms cannot assess the students' true levels, as they are in the same form of Listening tests"* (Interviewee No.06).

In sum, there seems not to be a close link between assessments and curriculum intent. Both the assessment content and form are perceived not to match with knowledge or skills specified in the curriculum. Difficulties in developing and organizing assessments, as well as much concern of the participants that assessments cannot exactly assess students' true levels have been clearly reported.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

After sharing the perception about gaps between curriculum and national standards of language proficiency, most of the informants recommended reduce the time amount allocated for foundation knowledge courses, and spend more time on English language major courses instead. The most common comment is *"cut off or reduce the foundation or non-language courses"* and *"more time should be offered to language courses"* (n = 4). The participants added, *"… curriculum now has just four terms for English language practice, it should have more. Maybe students need six terms to attain the required standards"* (a voice of a vice-dean, (a voice of a young lecturer – interviewee No.02), or *"the non-language courses like Translation, Cultures, Second foreign language … should be removed… As I see after graduation, actually, students never use second foreign language"* (a voice of a young lecturer – interviewee No.06).

Relating to institutional assessment concerns, as well as a mismatch between current assessments and knowledge, skills specified in the curriculum, some suggestions for more standard-based assessments have been made. Using various forms of assessments is the most common suggestion. Evaluating assessments after using is also suggested by half of the interviewing participants.

The initial findings indicated that the link between curricula, assessments and standards was widely perceived as problematic. The assessments did not align with the knowledge or skills clarified in the curriculum; and the curriculum did not match MOET standards of the graduates' language proficiency. In order to address these gaps, all curriculum stakeholders should be encouraged to engage on process of negotiation and collaboration on the development of vision for change. The lecturers should have more autonomy to design and develop curriculum to be more standards-based. The assessments should also be re-developed to have a stronger focus on both standards and social performance demands. The institutions should invest more on

assessment development, for example, allow assessment developers to spend more money and time on assessment tasks, and have assessment evaluation after each cohort.

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