Alignment between Course Learning Outcomes and Assessments: An Analysis within Linguistic Programs at a University in Vietnam

Dang Thi Minh Tam[1], Pham Thuy Quynh[1*]

[1] School of Languages and Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry, Hanoi, Vietnam
[*]Corresponding author's email: quynhpt@haui.edu.vn
[*] https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3042-5250
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ABSTRACT

Internationally, the trend of student-centered learning in higher education has emphasized the importance of aligning student learning outcomes with corresponding assessment methods. This study is conducted at a university in Vietnam by investigating 32 sets of syllabi and test specifications varied from English Language programs to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses. The findings reveal that a lack of precision in verb usage within learning outcomes can introduce ambiguity, potentially hindering the effectiveness of both teaching and assessment. The study also highlights the significance of balancing the quantities of requirements within a single learning outcome to foster a positive and manageable learning experience. As a result, it is believed that a careful selection of verbs in writing learning outcomes, coupled with a balanced approach to requirements, can contribute to a more coherent and effective curriculum within linguistic programs.

Keywords: Alignment, learning outcomes, assessment, linguistic programs

Introduction

Considering the alignment between assessment and learning outcomes in improving educational practices and fostering student learning represents a significant focus in higher education globally, particularly with the shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach (El-Maaddawy & Deneen, 2017; Ngatia, 2022). A major concern in developing learning outcomes is their measurability, as they must lend themselves to assessment procedures that successfully evaluate what students have obtained after learning the courses. Theoretically, the critical requirement is to develop evaluation methods and assessment tasks that can determine the extent to which these established learning outcomes are satisfied. This cohesive connection between assessment strategies and intended learning outcomes is crucial in enhancing the transparency of the overall learning experience (Coates, 2014). However, teachers may confront the difficult challenge of selecting and designing suitable assessments to

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guarantee a smooth alignment with the specified learning objectives. As a result, the difficulty is not only in articulating precise and measurable learning goals but also in integrating them into a framework that improves the learning experience. This study mainly aims to assess the use of Bloom's Taxonomy in conveying learning outcomes and analyze the correlation between stated learning objectives and assessment methods among linguistic courses and EMI courses.

Literature Review

Course learning outcomes

In recent decades, 'learning outcomes' has gained widespread usage in educational literature and among higher education practitioners (Hussey & Smith, 2008). In terms of curriculum studies scholarship, Pollard (2014), Fautley and Savage (2013) and Butt (2006), among others, remark that writing learning outcomes is essential to excellent lesson design. In general, learning outcomes, also known as intended learning outcomes, learning objectives, or student-focused goals, are classified as week- or lesson-long planning. All these terms include the idea of intention and maintain an emphasis on the students' educational objectives. Consequently, formulating learning outcomes necessitates instructors to accurately predict what they intend their students to acquire, demonstrating the expected interaction between teaching and learning during sessions.

Learning outcomes are statements outlining the achievements of learning and describing what a learner is supposed to demonstrate an understanding or apply knowledge at the end of a period of learning (Adams, 2006). A successful learning outcome should be measurable, necessitating careful consideration of summative assessment at the beginning of the planning stages (Kibble, 2017). These outcomes must delineate the specific behaviors of learners to be assessed and emphasize the content of knowledge acquired by students, rather than detailing the instructional methods the educator will employ in shaping their learning experience (McNeill et al., 2012). An outcome denotes the output or resultant effect of a particular action or process and encompasses action verbs that are both observable and measurable, describing the capabilities of students' acquisition upon concluding a designated learning encounter. Therefore, the essential principle for creating well-designed courses hinges on ensuring harmony between the content that students intend to master and the strategies employed to assess their grasp of that content (Abu-Hamdan & Khader, 2014; Kibble, 2017).

In the context of this study, a suitable operational interpretation is as follows: "Learning outcomes are statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning" (European Commission, 2015, p.10). In essence, learning outcomes establish a connection between anticipations, instructional methods, and evaluation. These outcomes play a pivotal role in enhancing clarity and understanding in:

1. what kinds of knowledge, skills, and abilities students should develop as a result of taking part in the unit or course
2. what students will be expected to demonstrate in assessment activities.

Assessment

Assessment is an ongoing process for measuring, monitoring, improving learning, evaluating achievements, and determining the degree of objective accomplishment. (Dao, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2001; Taylor, 2009). In Yambi's opinion, assessment is a term that refers to a procedure aimed at gathering information utilized to make decisions concerning students, as well as curricula, programs, schools, and educational policies (Yambi, 2018). As outlined by Chapelle and Brindley (2002), "assessment refers to the act of collecting information and making 'judgments' about a language learner's knowledge of a language and ability to use it" (p. 267).

Assessing educational outcomes is gaining significance in higher education as accreditation organizations emphasize the significance of measuring student academic learning (Allen, 2006; Bers, 2008). This highlights the necessity of appropriately documenting student academic achievements through the assessment process (Praslova, 2010). A study was conducted on two types of assessments, namely: 1) assessments designed to track students' progress (referred to as assessment for learning), and 2) assessments conducted to verify outcomes at the conclusion of a study period or program (referred to as assessment of learning) (Stiggins, 2005).

In this study, the researcher focuses more on summative assessment as the Assessment of Learning aimed at measuring and quantifying the level of learning accomplishment that students have reached at a specific point in time (Stiggins, 2001). The assessment and quantification of learning outcomes are based on predefined criteria or standards that, when followed, produce statistical information in the form of test scores (Ahmad, 2020).

Alignment

Alignment pertains to the degree of concordance between objectives and assessments, ensuring their harmonious correlation, and thereby guiding the educational framework towards the intended outcomes for student learning (Webb, 2002). Alignment focuses on "the degree to which expectations and assessments are in accord and function in combination with one another to lead the system toward students learning what they are expected to know and accomplish," in addition to curricular alignment (Webb, 1997).

Alignment entails an analysis of how explicit criteria are constructed hierarchically within a specific educational pathway. This process requires a close correlation among intended learning outcomes, instructional methods, and assessment procedures, ensuring their harmonious reinforcement. Essentially, alignment serves as a mechanism to gauge the extent to which various elements within an educational system collaboratively contribute to a common objective (Martone & Sireci, 2009). As advocated by Biggs (2011), a sequential approach is recommended, prioritizing intended learning outcomes, followed by learning activities, and then assessment practices. This sequence not only enhances transparency and significance in the overall learning experience for students but also guarantees that assessment practices are purposefully designed to evaluate the achievement of learning outcomes.

Furthermore, this approach functions as a guiding principle, directing a wide array of deliberate actions (Ambrose et al., 2016). Neglecting such alignment could result in a failure to impart the essential skills that are the intended learning outcomes. The concept of alignment is often

associated with "excellent teaching" (Biggs, 1996), and students' educational attainment is anticipated to be enhanced thanks to the alignment (Antes, 2014).

Theoretical framework: Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Taxonomy is a logically organized framework that illustrates the cognitive abilities needed for students to gain a deep and meaningful understanding of knowledge (Nurmatova & Altun, 2023). In this research, Bloom's taxonomy is employed to classify the cognitive processing levels that learning objectives and assessments aim to address. Bloom's Taxonomy is a well-established cognitive hierarchy of learning objectives, and a broadly accepted tool for categorizing types of thinking including remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (Lau et al., 2018). The framework offers a structured approach to categorizing educational goals based on their cognitive complexity in which the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy embrace lower levels—for example, an analysis-level inquiry necessitates mastery of application, understanding, and knowledge (Momsen et al., 2010). However, inexperienced educators encounter challenges when it comes to incorporating Bloom's Taxonomy into language instruction because it necessitates a comprehensive understanding of their students' language proficiency levels (Nurmatova & Altun, 2023).

Bloom's taxonomy is widely employed for writing learning outcomes since it gives a pre-built structure and collection of verbs (Kennedy et al., 2007). It might be claimed that using the proper verbs is essential for successfully writing learning outcomes. Learning outcomes should be written using action verbs so that students are able to demonstrate that they have learned or achieved the outcome (Reichgelt & Yaverbaum, 2002). Course designers should consider guidelines and experience in writing learning outcomes (Table 1) to ensure clarity, alignment with educational objectives, and consistency in assessment practices.

Table 0

Guidelines and experience in writing learning outcomes

i.	Action verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills should be used.
ii.	To facilitate the assessment of outcomes, one verb per learning outcome should be used.
iii.	There should be between 4-8 learning outcomes for each course, in fact the fewer the better.
iv.	Course learning outcomes should describe what a student should be able to DO at the end of a course rather than what the instructor teaches.
v.	Course learning outcomes should be written in language that students (and those outside the field) are able to understand.
vi.	Course learning outcomes are typically not content-specific.
vii.	Ideally, each course or program should include learning outcomes from more than one domain (cognitive, psychomotor, and affective).
viii.	Each course learning outcome should be measurable and can be assessed, preferably using more than one assessment tool.
ix.	Weak verbs such as ""be aware," "appreciate," "identify," "read," and "recognize," are to be avoided in general. For example, recognizing a phenomenon is weak compared to understanding that phenomenon.

Note: Adopted from "Measuring course learning outcomes" by Keshavarz, M., 2011, *Journal of Learning Design*, 4(4)

Research Questions

In order to find how alignment between course learning outcomes and assessment is occurring, the research aims to answer the questions below:

How do the stated course learning outcomes align with the assessment methods?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting

The study is situated within a dynamic academic environment, specifically in the Faculty of English Language, which administers a diverse range of programs that cater to both linguistics and non-linguistics disciplines. Within the linguistics programs, the focus is on providing a comprehensive educational experience for English-majored students. Simultaneously, the faculty offers English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses tailored to non-English-majored students from Tourism, Tourism & Travel Service Management and Hotel Management program, who engage in content-driven studies entirely in English. This dual focus on linguistic and non-linguistic programs, with a specialized emphasis on English proficiency through EMI courses, creates a distinctive academic backdrop for the study, presenting an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of alignment between learning outcomes and assessments across varied educational contexts within the same academic institution.

As part of the research methodology, 32 sets of syllabi and test specifications were collected and analyzed, providing a robust foundation for understanding the nuances of outcome formulation and assessment alignment within linguistic programs. This deliberate sampling ensures a representative examination of the university's pedagogical approach, shedding light on the difficulties of course development employed by the Faculty of English Language and EMI.

Design of the Study

This study is part of a broader thesis dedicated to uncovering the current course design and development. A qualitative data collection and analysis approach was employed to achieve the aims. In the initial phase of the research procedure, data collection serves as the foundational step towards systematically analyzing the alignment between course learning outcomes and assessment methods within linguistic programs at a Vietnamese university. This phase occurs within one month and entails the acquisition of 32 sets of syllabi and corresponding assessment guidelines from a diverse range of linguistic courses. The alignment assessment is conducted using the predefined coding scheme, focusing on assessing the extent to which learning outcomes align with the cognitive demands implied by assessment methods. The qualitative method enabled in-depth investigation and understanding of the complicated relationship between stated learning outcomes and assessment tasks used in educational environments.

Data collection & analysis

The procedures for collecting and analyzing data spanned a duration of approximately one month (September 2022 – October, 2022) and revealed significant outcomes. Through a purposive sampling method, data was collected from two main sources of the Faculty of English language and EMI group, including 17 sets of syllabi and test specifications from English-majored courses and other 15 sets from EMI courses. The data collection process focused on distinguishing and evaluating how learning outcomes were written, emphasizing the use of verbs and their association with specific levels of Bloom's taxonomy. Besides, the data assists in figuring out how the assessments align with the learning outcomes.

Results/Findings

In considering the critical relationship between learning outcomes and assessment, two essential facets emerge in crafting learning objectives. Another crucial finding involves examining the alignment between the stated learning outcomes and the assessments conducted, ensuring a seamless integration that accurately reflects the intended educational goals and effectively measures students' achievement of those objectives.

The clarity of verbs in learning outcomes

The analysis of documents from linguistics courses reveals a significant observation regarding the utilization of verbs from Bloom's taxonomy in learning outcomes (LOs).

Table 2 indicates that the majority of these LOs do not incorporate verbs from Bloom's taxonomy. Instead of writing *"Demonstrate the ability"*, the course designers started the requirement for the LO by *"Be able to …"* or *"Have skills to …"* (Cross-cultural Communication, English Translation and Interpreting Theory) or *"Ability to…"* (English Listening Skills 2).

Therefore, some LOs employed language that cannot be easily measured, such as terms like *"effectively", "be aware of", "be able to"* and *"have the ability to"*, etc. This finding is similar to the experience in writing learning outcomes mentioned in Table 1 (Keshavarz, 2011). These imprecise expressions in LOs might hinder the clear communication of the cognitive level of skills or knowledge that students are expected to achieve. By not employing Bloom's taxonomy verbs, these LOs might fail to effectively communicate the cognitive level of skills or knowledge that students are expected to achieve.

Table 2

The clarity of verbs in learning outcomes

Course name	Intended learning outcomes	Assessment purpose	Test methods
English Translation and Interpreting Theory	L2: Be able to search for information relevant to lesson content from different sources of translation and interpretation documents	- Ability to search for information relevant to lesson content from different sources of translation and interpretation documents	Presentation
Cross cultural Communication, English Translation and Interpreting Theory	G1: Able to describe, explain and analyze intercultural knowledge G2: Have skills to effectively search and synthesize information, be able to solve communication situations and demonstrate adaptation to changes in new cultural environments	- Ability to describe, explain and analyze students' intercultural knowledge - Students' ability to effectively search and synthesize information related to cross-cultural communication - Some concepts related to culture include | communication strategies, verbal and nonverbal communication, culture shock phenomenon - Solve communication situations through knowledge learned about cross-cultural communication such as communication strategies, sign language, politeness, direct/indirect speech.	- Group presentation - Speaking test
English Listening Skills 2	L1: Ability to remember and recognize vocabulary in context to serve listening comprehension on familiar topics such as personality, time, family, work, life, and some social events. L2: Ability to listen and understand the main ideas and important details of speech and simple conversations about areas such as society, personality, time, family, work, life, and Fields equivalent to levels A2, B1-	L1: Ability to remember and recognize vocabulary in context to serve listening comprehension on familiar topics such as personality, time, family, work, life, and some social events. L2: Ability to listen and understand the main ideas and important details of speech and simple conversations about areas such as society, personality, time, family, work, life, and Fields equivalent to levels A2, B1-	- Written test (matching, true/false, gap-fill, short answer, quiz)

The quantities of requirements within a single LO

Table 3

Learning outcomes of linguistics courses

Course name	Intended learning outcomes
English Reading Skills 4	L1: Memorize and use vocabulary… Apply reading comprehension strategies to determine the meaning of polysemous words…, synthesize detailed information…, identify detailed information…, identify summary information…, determine the author's attitudes…, determine the causes of the event…
English Translation and Interpreting Theory	L1: Describe and explain … and apply necessary strategies before translating and interpreting...
English Interpreting practice 2	L1: Describe, explain and apply interpretation skills …
English Listening Skills 1	L1: Apply vocabulary and listening strategies… to determine detailed information…, to determine reasons, instructions, quantity, time of events/ events…
English Reading skill 2	L1: Memorize and use vocabulary … and apply some reading comprehension strategies; understand the main ideas…; distinguish between practical and theoretical information; understand complex sentence structure; understand cause-effect relationships; understand different expressions; identify participle clauses; understand the implications of the reading; determine the author's views and attitudes; summarize reading information

Another interesting finding in the construction of linguistics course LOs revealed in Table 3 is a consistent trend where many LOs include numerous demands or objectives within a single statement. A wide range of requirement could be mentioned Table 2 as *"Memorize and use vocabulary… Apply reading comprehension strategies…, distinguish…, determine…, identify detailed information…"* (English Reading Skills 4). L1 of English Translation and Interpreting Theory shows the expected outcomes to "Describe and explain…, identify and apply…". This tendency could lead to information overload for students enrolled in these courses, make it challenging for students to focus on the core objectives of the course, and result in confusion. This observation raises concerns about the clarity and manageability of LOs within linguistics courses.

Besides using only one or two verbs to describe learning outcomes, LO should incorporate a learning taxonomy such as Bloom's or Biggs' SOLO taxonomy for specifying instructional objectives (Biggs, 2014). The LOs in EMI courses are examples characterized by using only one specific requirement in each statement.

Table 4

Learning outcomes of EMI courses

Course name	Intended learning outcomes
Basic Economics	L1: Demonstrate understanding of… L2: Apply obtained knowledge…
Communication in Tourism	L1: Demonstrate an understanding of… L2: Suggest solutions for…
Introduction to Tourism	L1: Demonstrate the understanding of… L2: Identify…
Visiting accommodation models	L1: Analyze the characteristics of… L2: Formulate a startup idea…
Travel Business 1	L1: Demonstrate understanding of… L2: Analyze fundamental knowledge…

In contrast to the issues identified in linguistics courses, Table 4 illustrates that the analysis of LOs in courses delivered in EMI reveals a positive trend. One key principle is to use a single, action-oriented verb in each learning outcome, ensuring precision and focus. For example, instead of using a phrase like "understand the principles of," a more specific verb like "analyze" or "evaluate" can be employed. This specificity helps in clearly defining the intended outcome and provides a basis for designing assessments that align with these outcomes. Each LO in EMI courses focuses on only one certain request which contributes to exceptional clarity, making it easy for both students and educators to follow and assess progress. By incorporating a single, well-defined requirement in each LO, EMI courses eliminate ambiguity and ensure that students' learning objectives are clear.

Furthermore, learning outcomes should be designed to encourage higher-order thinking skills in addition to language proficiency. Verbs such as "analyze", "formulate", and "suggest" prompt critical thinking and problem-solving, contributing to a more enhanced learning experience. Assessments corresponding to these outcomes can then include tasks that require students to demonstrate their ability to think critically and apply language skills in complex situations. This approach not only enhances language proficiency but also fosters the development of cognitive skills essential for academic and professional success.

Alignment between stated in LOs and assessment

According to the data, the examination of course discovers a concerning pattern in matching LOs with assessment. It is evident that in many instances, there was a misalignment between the stated LOs and the requirements of the assessments. In such cases, the assessments demand more from students than what was originally stated in the LOs. This misalignment poses a significant challenge for both educators and students, as it can lead to confusion regarding what students are expected to achieve and be evaluated on.

Table 5

Different requirements between learning outcomes and assessment

Course name	Learning outcomes	Assessment
English-speaking country	L1: Present knowledge about many different aspects of social life in England, America and some English-speaking countries	L1: Describe, explain and analyze knowledge about many different aspects of life social life in English-speaking countries
	L2: Effectively apply information search skills to collect information about many aspects of social life in the UK, America and some English-speaking countries	L2: Work independently, research and search for information about many different aspects of social life in the UK, America and some English-speaking countries.
Employability Skills (for English major)	L2: Solve work-related situations such as first day of work, time management, negotiations, meetings, customer service, and innovation.	L2: Proactively solve different situations at work; instruct and supervise others in performing defined tasks; Demonstrate a sense of respect for organizational culture.
	L3: Organize and operate groups effectively.	L3: Establish, organize, manage and operate effective group activities.
English Interpreting practice 2	L3: Demonstrate confidence when communicating in translation practice activities; demonstrate adaptability when performing different translation tasks; Demonstrate professionalism in translation tasks	L3: Organize and manage appropriate translation activities; Demonstrate professional ethics and take responsibility for assigned translation tasks

A related finding shown in Table 5 is that the differences between the specific requirements outlined in the assessments and the language used in the LOs. The requirements in the assessments were often phrased differently or included additional criteria not mentioned in the LOs.

The first misalignment here lies in the English-speaking country course. The discrepancy exists between the relatively passive action of presenting knowledge and the more active requirements of describing, explaining, and analyzing that knowledge. Presenting knowledge might involve a straightforward demonstration or presentation, whereas describing, explaining, and analyzing require a deeper understanding and engagement with the material. Another case is expanding requirements in assessment compared to stated learning outcome in the Employability Skills (for English major) course. While the learning outcome emphasizes the application of information search skills, the assessment introduces additional elements such as working independently and conducting research. While independence and research skills are valuable, they may not directly align with the initial learning outcome.

This incongruity between LOs and assessments can hinder the transparent communication of expectations, making it crucial for educators to harmonize the language and content between these two components.

Discussion

The alignment between course learning outcomes and assessments is critical to effective educational practices, especially within linguistic programs at Vietnamese universities. As highlighted in Table 1 and mentioned by Savage (2015), the challenge of maintaining a balance between the number of learning outcomes and their effectiveness in a lesson is an important consideration. Savage recommends a streamlined approach, suggesting that one or two outcomes per lesson suffice. This insight raises questions about the optimal number of outcomes that enhance rather than weaken the educational impact.

Furthermore, Gronlund & Brookhart (2009) contribute valuable perspectives on addressing the issue of overloading outcomes with multiple statements of learning. They emphasize the importance of using action verbs as the primary defining element in restricting learning outcomes. To be more specific, they contend that each outcome statement should center around a single action verb, ensuring a clear focus on what students are expected to learn. This emphasis on precision aligns with the broader goal of communicating instructional intent without becoming overly tied to specific topics. The implication is that outcomes should be practical and transferable, fostering students' understanding of the subject matter.

The implications of how learning outcomes are written and implemented extend beyond mere formulation, significantly influencing the clarity of expectations for both students and educators. The finding supports the idea that consistent association of verbs with specific levels of Bloom's taxonomy can substantially reduce ambiguity in articulating expertise levels within learning outcomes (Stanny & Albright, 2016). This approach not only facilitates a more straightforward understanding for students but also simplifies the assessment process for instructors, allowing them to more easily monitor progress against well-defined and distinct objectives. The link between clarity in language and improved educational outcomes emerges as a crucial factor in enhancing the educational experience for both learners and educators.

The analysis of alignment between course learning outcomes and assessments within linguistic programs this university emphasizes the importance of thoughtful outcome formulation. Balancing the number of outcomes, employing action verbs, and ensuring specificity contribute to a clearer understanding of instructional intent. The finding supports the finding mentioning that if the curriculum is hefty and demanding; it becomes unproductive (Le & Le, 2022). This clarity not only aids students in fulfilling their expectations but also facilitates more effective assessment practices for educators. The implications extend to the broader pedagogical landscape, emphasizing the crucial role that language precision plays in optimizing the educational experience.

Conclusion

The findings from process of collecting and analyzing data reveal that the clarity of verbs used in the statements pertains to learning outcomes. The language employed in LOs plays a crucial role in conveying the expected skills and knowledge to be acquired by students. The study highlights that imprecise verb usage in learning outcomes can lead to ambiguity, potentially hindering the effectiveness of both learning and assessment. Additionally, the examination of the quantities of requirements within a single learning outcome uncovered insights into the potential challenges students may face in meeting the outlined expectations.

The implications of this study on the alignment of course objectives and assessments within linguistics programs provide useful insights for educational practitioners. Firstly, educators should prioritize careful verb selection when developing learning objectives to guarantee clarity and accuracy, hence improving the efficacy of learning and assessment. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the significance of maintaining a balance in the quantities of requirements within a single learning outcome, thereby promoting realistic and achievable educational goals.

Furthermore, the analysis of the alignment between stated learning outcomes and assessments revealed areas of congruence and misalignment. This aspect of the study highlights the need for continuous evaluation and refinement of assessment methods to ensure they accurately measure the intended learning outcomes. The findings suggest that regular reviews of both LOs and assessments can contribute to a more coherent and effective curriculum, ultimately enhancing the quality of education within linguistic programs.

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Biodata

Dang Thi Minh Tam is the Deputy Dean of the Department of English Language at the School of Languages and Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry, Vietnam. She is also an experienced English teacher receiving PhD Degree in Education in Murdoch University. She is interested in doing research on Linguistics and Culture and leadership in educational management.

Pham Thuy Quynh is currently a lecturer working for EMI group, Faculty of English Language at School of Languages and Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry. She has been involving in developing syllabus and teaching materials for EMI courses. Her professional interests include English as the medium instruction, language testing and assessment, curriculum design and development.