

Constructive alignment as a compensatory policy technology: A critical analysis of Vietnam's revised foreign language proficiency framework

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Abstract: In contemporary education governance, competency frameworks have increasingly been employed as system-level regulatory devices, particularly in language education. When localized from international reference frameworks such as the CEFR, these frameworks are often accompanied by the expectation that Constructive Alignment can ensure the feasibility of reform through consistency between objectives, teaching, and assessment. This article aims to reconceptualize Constructive Alignment not as a purely pedagogical principle but as a compensatory policy technology mobilized to sustain reform under conditions of institutional capacity gaps. The analytical focus is placed on Vietnam's Draft Seven-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, examined in reference to the CEFR. The study employs critical policy analysis as a form of theoretical inquiry, drawing on a corpus of policy documents related to Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework and associated policy discourses. A three-layer model (normative – pedagogical – institutional), together with newly developed conceptual tools, is used to trace how alignment operates within the reform process. The findings indicate that, in the Vietnamese context, Constructive Alignment functions as a compensatory mechanism that enables the expansion of standards and CEFR integration while deferring corresponding institutional investment. Alignment, therefore, tends to stabilize reform rather than generate sustainable pedagogical transformation. The study contributes a new theoretical framework for analyzing alignment as a conditional policy technology, thereby extending international debates on CEFR localization, implementation capacity, and the politics of educational reform.

Keywords: *CEFR localization, Compensatory policy technology, Constructive Alignment, Implementation capacity, Language policy reform.*

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, competency frameworks have become one of the central governance technologies in educational reform, particularly in the field of language education. Through the description, classification, and standardization of levels of competence, these frameworks not only guide teaching and assessment but also establish system-level behavioral norms with binding effects. Among them, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has emerged as a supranational institution, widely localized and expected to serve as a “common language” for foreign language education reform across diverse contexts [1, 2].

However, the localization of international reference frameworks does not take place in a neutral space. When translated into national competency frameworks linked to learning outcomes, certification, and accountability mechanisms, the CEFR ceases to function merely as a pedagogical reference tool and instead becomes a powerful standardization device that directly intervenes in governance structures and the allocation of responsibility within education systems [3, 4]. In this context, Constructive Alignment – originally developed as a principle of learning design – is increasingly mobilized as a policy promise: if objectives, teaching, and assessment are consistently aligned, reform will be able to operate effectively despite diversity in contexts and implementation capacity.

This assumption has been widely adopted in competency-based reforms, including the development and adjustment of Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework. From the Six-Level Framework promulgated in 2014 to the recent Draft Seven-Level Framework, alignment logic has been positioned at the center of reform: curricula must be aligned with the framework, teaching activities must be aligned with learning outcomes, and assessment must reflect corresponding competence descriptors. Alignment is thus expected to both ensure pedagogical quality and sustain the feasibility of reform in a system undergoing transition.

However, recent empirical evidence reveals a critical paradox. Quantitative studies on foreign language proficiency framework reform in Vietnam indicate that the positive impact of Constructive Alignment on teaching quality does not increase linearly with system-level implementation capacity. On the contrary, alignment tends to exert its strongest effects in contexts characterized by low to medium implementation capacity, while its marginal effectiveness declines as institutional capacity is strengthened. This finding directly challenges the prevailing assumption that alignment invariably functions as a reform-amplifying mechanism and raises a theoretical question that has yet to be satisfactorily addressed in the existing literature.

The literature on Constructive Alignment has largely approached the concept from a pedagogical perspective, emphasizing its role in supporting constructive learning and improving assessment quality [5, 6]. Meanwhile, studies on language policy and CEFR localization have tended to focus on issues of standardization, assessment, and international compatibility but have rarely examined in depth how alignment operates as a policy mechanism under conditions of uneven implementation capacity. This gap makes it difficult to explain systematically the paradoxical findings regarding the effects of alignment.

This article argues that to fully understand the role of Constructive Alignment in competency-based reforms, analytical focus must shift from the question of whether alignment is pedagogically sound to the question of what alignment does within the structure of policy and reform governance. On this basis, the study proposes reconceptualizing Constructive Alignment as a compensatory policy technology: a mechanism that enables reform to continue operating and maintain legitimacy under conditions of institutional capacity gaps by transforming the burden of reform downward to implementation levels through alignment logic.

The analytical focus of the article is Vietnam's Draft Seven-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, examined in reference to the CEFR. Through critical policy analysis, the study traces how alignment is mobilized to connect normative requirements, pedagogical practices, and institutional conditions, as well as the structural consequences arising from the prolonged use of alignment as a compensatory mechanism. A three-layer model – normative, pedagogical, and institutional – is developed to clarify how alignment changes its function when implementation capacity fails to keep pace with the expansion of standards.

2. Re-Reading the Literature

2.1. *Constructive Alignment and Foreign Language Competency Frameworks*

In the educational literature, Constructive Alignment was developed as a principle of learning design, emphasizing internal coherence between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment to optimize learners' knowledge construction processes [5, 6]. Within this original epistemological "home," alignment functions as a normative–practical pedagogical tool, used primarily at the classroom and program levels with the aim of improving learning quality through intentional design.

However, when removed from pedagogical spaces and attached to national-level language competency frameworks, Constructive Alignment begins to operate in a different context. Competency frameworks such as the CEFR, originally designed as open reference tools to support professional dialogue and international comparability, have increasingly been localized into learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and accountability mechanisms in many education systems [1–3]. This process pulls

alignment away from its role as a purely pedagogical design principle and places it at the center of reform governance architecture.

This shift is not merely a matter of scale but a restructuring of function. When competency frameworks are linked to certification, accreditation, and accountability, alignment no longer answers only the question of “how to teach and learn effectively,” but also implicitly addresses the question of “how reform can operate consistently under conditions of diversity and uncertainty.” From a policy instrumentation perspective, policy tools do not merely transmit objectives; they also reorganize relations of responsibility and expectation within systems [7]. In this context, Constructive Alignment operates as an intermediary device that connects abstract competency standards with concrete teaching practices without requiring direct intervention in each implementation setting.

The language policy literature shows that CEFR localization is often accompanied by a significant intensification of alignment requirements: curricula must be designed in accordance with competence descriptors, teaching activities must reflect learning outcomes, and assessment must demonstrate compatibility with the framework [4]. Within this structure, alignment becomes the shared language of reform, enabling different actors, policymakers, institutions, and teachers to interpret and enact standards within a common conceptual frame. It is precisely this appearance of “technical neutrality” that makes alignment particularly suitable for mobilization at the policy level, as it creates the sense that reform is being implemented through professional principles rather than through direct administrative command.

Yet this apparent neutrality also conceals an important shift in power and responsibility. When alignment is used as the central instrument for realizing competency frameworks, the burden of translating standards from policy texts into practice is displaced downward to implementation levels. Problems arising during implementation, from limitations in teacher training to inadequacies in assessment infrastructure, are easily interpreted as issues of “insufficient alignment,” rather than being recognized as limitations of policy design. As Bacchi [8] argues, the way policy defines a problem determines which types of solutions become possible; in this case, alignment contributes to redefining reform problems as technical–professional issues rather than as questions of institutional capacity.

These analyses indicate that Constructive Alignment, when embedded in system-level language competency frameworks, can no longer be regarded as a neutral pedagogical principle. It becomes a structural policy instrument capable of supporting pedagogical improvement and sustaining the feasibility and legitimacy of reform under conditions of uneven implementation capacity. However, the existing literature largely stops at describing this role without examining in depth the consequences of alignment being mobilized beyond its original pedagogical function, particularly in contexts where education systems expand standards more rapidly than they invest in institutional capacity.

This gap provides the foundation for the present study’s approach. Rather than continuing to debate whether Constructive Alignment is “correct” as a pedagogical principle, this article focuses on what happens when alignment is systematically used as a policy technology to compensate for implementation capacity deficits. This repositioning shifts analytical attention from the quality of learning design to the operational logic of reform, opening the way for conceptualizing alignment as a compensatory policy technology, a concept that will be developed in detail in the subsequent theoretical section.

2.2. Policy Implementation, Capacity Deficits, and the Logic of Compensation

The literature on education policy implementation has long pointed out that the gap between policy design and implementation practice is not a random “implementation failure,” but a structural feature of large-scale reforms [9, 10]. Particularly in standardization-based reforms, where objectives are encoded in standards, competency frameworks, or performance indicators, the realization of policy outcomes depends closely on the system’s implementation capacity, encompassing human resources, organizational infrastructure, professional knowledge, and mechanisms for institutional learning.

Recent studies emphasize that implementation capacity is not a binary condition (present or absent), but exists along a continuum from low to high [11, 12]. In contexts characterized by low or medium capacity, reforms are often implemented through indirect mechanisms that rely more heavily on adaptation by lower-level actors than on centralized coordination. It is precisely in this space that flexible policy tools with an appearance of “technical neutrality” tend to be preferred, as they allow reform processes to be sustained without requiring immediate institutional restructuring.

The literature on street-level bureaucracy provides an important lens for understanding this dynamic. When policies are implemented under conditions of limited resources and conflicting demands, frontline actors, such as teachers and schools, develop adaptive strategies to preserve the operability of the system [13]. These strategies, however, are not merely individual responses; they are often shaped and legitimized by policy tool design itself. When tools are constructed in ways that allow for “self-alignment,” the burden of translating policy from text to practice is systematically displaced downward to implementation levels.

In this context, several studies on education reform have identified the emergence of a logic of compensation, whereby policy tools are mobilized to temporarily substitute for missing institutional capacities [14, 15]. Rather than investing simultaneously in organizational capacity, human resource development, and supportive infrastructure, reform is “propped up” by technical principles – standardization, alignment, and measurement – with the expectation that these can absorb diversity and uncertainty in implementation contexts. This logic enables reform to continue operating in the short term, while simultaneously blurring the boundary between substantive improvement and formal stabilization.

In language competency framework-based reforms, this compensatory logic is particularly evident. Competency frameworks are rapidly expanded and refined to meet demands for international integration and comparability, while implementation conditions – teacher training, instructional materials, and assessment design – often develop more slowly and unevenly. Within this structure, alignment becomes an intermediary anchor that connects abstract framework standards with concrete teaching practices without requiring immediate resolution of foundational deficits. For this reason, alignment is not merely a pedagogical choice but a viable policy solution under conditions of limited capacity.

Nevertheless, despite extensive discussions of implementation capacity and frontline adaptation, there remains a lack of conceptual analyses that clarify what happens when alignment is systematically mobilized as a compensatory mechanism. Studies of Constructive Alignment have largely focused on pedagogical effectiveness, while policy implementation research has rarely treated alignment as a policy tool with its own functional logic. This gap leaves unexplained empirical findings showing that alignment exerts strong effects in low- to medium-capacity contexts but declines in effectiveness as capacity increases.

On this basis, the present study identifies a central theoretical gap: the absence of an analytical framework that enables Constructive Alignment to be understood as a conditional policy technology that operates differently depending on levels of implementation capacity. Rather than continuing to evaluate alignment as a universally “good practice,” it is necessary to interrogate how and when alignment changes functions – from a tool supporting learning design to a mechanism compensating for institutional deficits. Conceptualizing this shift is a necessary step toward explaining the empirical paradox and extending discussions on the politics of competency-based reform.

3. Theoretical Reframing

3.1. Defining “Compensatory Policy Technology.”

The concept of compensatory policy technology is proposed in this study to name a familiar but insufficiently conceptualized phenomenon in education policy research: the mobilization of technical tools, models, or principles to sustain the operability of reform in contexts where institutional capacity fails to keep pace with policy ambition. Unlike conventional understandings of “policy instruments” as

neutral means for achieving predefined objectives, compensatory policy technology emphasizes the substitutive function of instruments in temporarily standing in for foundational conditions that have not been, or cannot be, directly addressed.

Conceptually, “policy technology” encompasses not only material devices or digital systems but also assemblages of practices, languages, and operational logics designed to render policy implementable, monitorable, and assessable. Lascoumes and Le Galès argue that policy instruments always carry a form of “political rationality,” as they reflect policy goals and shape how actors understand problems and act within permissible frameworks [7]. When deployed under conditions of capacity deficit, these instruments tend to assume an additional function: compensating for limitations that policy has not or cannot confront directly.

Following this logic, a compensatory policy technology can be identified through three core characteristics. First, it emerges in contexts of prolonged imbalance between reform demands and implementation capacity, where structural solutions, such as investment in human resources, organizational rebuilding, or institutional change, are deferred or fragmented. Second, such technologies typically assume a technical, neutral, and easily disseminable appearance, allowing policy to be rapidly integrated into guidance documents, professional development programs, or evaluation criteria without substantially increasing political or financial costs. Third, and most importantly, they redistribute responsibility: away from system-level capacity building and toward requiring frontline actors to “make policy work” through individual professional effort.

It is important to emphasize that “compensation” here does not carry a moral or evaluative connotation. It does not imply that such technologies are erroneous or devoid of value. On the contrary, in many cases, they help reforms avoid deadlock, maintain systemic continuity, and generate a sense of progress. The theoretical problem arises when this compensatory function is neither recognized nor openly discussed, leading policy technologies to be mistaken for structural solutions to capacity problems. In such cases, reform risks operating on what are effectively “temporary supports” while being interpreted as sustainable improvements.

In education, compensatory policy technologies are often associated with standardization, alignment, and measurement, as these domains are capable of rapidly producing formal coherence. Power [16] observes that in accountability-based governance systems, the expansion of verification mechanisms is frequently used to manage uncertainty and capacity deficits, even when such mechanisms do not directly improve core practices. Similarly, Ball [17] argues that contemporary education reforms increasingly rely on “soft technologies” – models, conceptual frameworks, or standards of practice – to coordinate organizational behavior without deeply intervening in power structures and resource distributions.

Within this analytical framework, compensatory policy technology does not aim to resolve policy problems at their root but to render them manageable in the short to medium term. It enables policy to “move forward” by creating actionable anchors for implementation actors while simultaneously providing governing bodies with visible signs of compliance and progress. Yet precisely because it operates at the intersection of technique and power, support and responsibility transfer, this type of technology always contains an inherent tension: between substantive improvement and the maintenance of reform’s formal viability.

Defining compensatory policy technology is, therefore, a necessary step to avoid two analytical extremes in education policy research. On the one hand, it moves beyond a reductively optimistic view in which technical instruments are assumed to be solutions to all reform problems. On the other hand, it avoids an equally reductive critique that treats all standardization or alignment tools as mere expressions of administrative control. Instead, the concept opens analytical space for examining the conditions of emergence, operational logic, and consequences of policy technologies in relation to institutional capacity and professional practice.

On this basis, the following section applies the concept of compensatory policy technology to reread Constructive Alignment, not as a unilinear pedagogical principle but as a hybrid entity situated between

pedagogy and policy. This approach enables clarification not only of what alignment is but, more importantly, of what alignment is being required to do within the structure of contemporary education reform.

3.2. *A Three-Layer Model of Compensatory Alignment*

To avoid allowing the concept of compensatory policy technology to remain at the level of abstract description, this study proposes a three-layer model of compensatory alignment. The model does not seek to standardize Constructive Alignment into a universally applicable formula but rather to expose the distinct layers of logic within which alignment operates simultaneously – yet are often conflated or blurred in policy discourse (Figure 1). Disaggregating these layers enables more precise analysis of what purposes alignment serves and what tensions emerge when one layer is required to compensate for another.

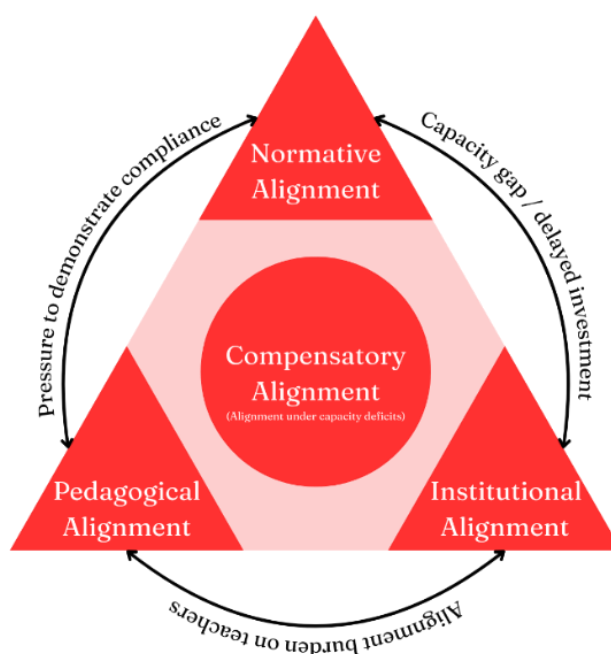


Figure 1.
The three-tier model of compensatory alignment.

3.2.1. *Layer 1: Normative Alignment*

The normative layer is where alignment is directly linked to competency frameworks and officially sanctioned learning outcomes, defining what counts as legitimate, valuable, and recognizable competence. At this level, alignment signifies ensuring that learning objectives, curricular content, and assessments correspond to established standards, thereby enabling system-level comparability, measurement, and accountability. This is the layer of greatest concern to policymakers, as it provides reform with visibility: alignment can be inspected, reported, and demonstrated through documents, matrices, and evidence.

Within compensatory logic, the normative layer is often prioritized, as it allows policy to generate a sense of coherence and control even when implementation conditions remain uneven. However, when overemphasized, alignment at this level risks becoming an end in itself, privileging “standards compliance” over “pedagogical meaning.” This is also the point at which many tensions originate, as normative requirements are frequently issued with the implicit assumption that other layers of alignment will automatically follow.

3.2.2. Layer 2: Pedagogical Alignment

The pedagogical layer constitutes the original space of Constructive Alignment, where alignment is understood as internal coherence among learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment to facilitate learners' meaning-making. At this level, alignment is not about compliance with external standards but about professional judgment grounded in teachers' understanding of learners, content, and classroom context. Flexibility and reflexivity are essential conditions for pedagogical alignment to function effectively.

In compensatory models, the pedagogical layer is often placed in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it is expected to "translate" normative requirements into meaningful practice, thereby softening rigid standardization. On the other hand, when investment in capacity and professional support is insufficient, the pedagogical layer is burdened with responsibilities beyond its scope: ensuring learning quality while simultaneously demonstrating policy compliance. This overload increases the risk of pedagogical alignment being reduced to surface-level design techniques, eroding its original epistemological depth.

3.2.3. Layer 3: Institutional Alignment

The institutional layer is the least discussed yet most decisive in determining whether alignment becomes compensatory. This layer concerns organizational capacity, support mechanisms, learning culture, and conditions for collective reflection within schools and education systems. Institutional alignment is not merely about consistency between policy and organizational structures but about the system's ability to learn from implementation practice, adjust policies, and provide continuous support to teachers.

In many standards-based education reforms, the institutional layer is the weakest. When organizational capacity is insufficiently developed, alignment at the normative and pedagogical layers is forced to compensate for the absence of institutional support. The result is intensified alignment requirements at the level of standards and classrooms, while long-term support mechanisms, professional development, and organizational learning remain thin. This imbalance drives alignment's shift from an improvement-oriented tool to a mechanism that sustains the reform's formal operability.

3.2.4. Dynamics and Internal Tensions Across Layers

The significance of the three-layer model lies not in rigid classification but in highlighting the dynamic relationships and tensions among layers. Alignment becomes "compensatory" when one or two layers are expected to assume functions belonging to a missing layer, particularly when the institutional layer lacks the capacity to support the other two. Under such conditions, normative alignment tends to harden to ensure control, while pedagogical alignment is compressed to serve verification and reporting demands.

This model enables analysis of alignment not merely in terms of whether alignment exists, but in terms of where alignment operates and what deficits it compensates for. It thus allows differentiation between contexts in which alignment genuinely supports learning and contexts in which it primarily sustains the formal viability of reform. This provides the foundation for the subsequent section's deeper examination of the manifestations of compensatory alignment and its consequences for pedagogical practice and education governance.

3.3. New Conceptual Tools

To analyze Constructive Alignment as a compensatory policy technology, this study proposes a concise set of conceptual tools designed to capture not only what alignment does but how and when it changes function within reform structures. These concepts are not constructed as independent categories but as interrelated analytical devices that enable tracing alignment's operation across normative, pedagogical, and institutional domains.

The first concept is alignment burden, referring to the extent to which alignment is required to absorb implementation capacity deficits within a system. When institutional capacity is low or uneven, alignment is tasked not only with connecting objectives, teaching, and assessment but also with sustaining the reform's operability. Alignment burden is therefore not an intrinsic property of alignment but a consequence of the imbalance between the pace of standards expansion and the system's capacity to support them. This concept distinguishes alignment as a routine pedagogical design tool from alignment as an overstretched, compensatory mechanism.

The second concept is the functional displacement of alignment, describing the shift whereby alignment moves from a learning-construction function to a function of maintaining system operability and legitimacy. This displacement does not occur abruptly but accumulates over time as alignment is repeatedly used to address issues that properly belong to institutional design. The concept helps identify the point at which alignment ceases to operate primarily as a pedagogical principle and begins functioning as a reform governance tool.

The third concept is performative stabilization, which captures a condition in which alignment contributes to producing formal coherence in reform even when underlying pedagogical and institutional conditions have not improved correspondingly. In this condition, alignment practices – mapping matrices, compatibility statements, documentary evidence – become central to safeguarding reform legitimacy and auditability. Performative stabilization does not imply deception or bad faith, but rather identifies an operating regime in which alignment prioritizes visibility and verifiability over learning transformation.

The fourth concept is alignment elasticity, referring to alignment's capacity to adapt to varying levels of implementation capacity. When institutional capacity is low to medium, alignment exhibits high elasticity: it can absorb contextual diversity and uncertainty, thereby exerting positive effects on pedagogical practice. However, as institutional capacity is strengthened and support structures become more robust, this elasticity diminishes; alignment is no longer required to compensate, and its marginal effectiveness accordingly declines. This concept directly connects theoretical analysis to empirical findings on the nonlinear relationship between alignment and implementation capacity.

Finally, the study employs the concept of alignment slippage to describe the widening gap between reform's normative intentions and substantive learning meaning when alignment is prolonged as a compensatory mechanism. Alignment slippage is not the result of "incorrect" implementation but a structural consequence of assigning alignment a role beyond its original design function. This concept enables analysis of the inherent limits of competency-based reform without reducing the problem to individual capacity or technical compliance.

Taken together, this conceptual toolkit serves a single analytical purpose: to clarify how Constructive Alignment changes function when mobilized as a policy technology under conditions of uneven implementation capacity. Rather than expanding the conceptual inventory, the study deliberately limits the number of tools to those minimally necessary to ensure theoretical coherence and analytical operability across subsequent sections.

3.4. Analytical Propositions Guiding the Study

Based on the reconceptualization developed in Sections 3.1–3.3, this study does not aim to test hypotheses in a linear empirical sense but instead constructs a set of analytical propositions to guide policy reading, practice interpretation, and the connection of layers within compensatory alignment. These propositions function as theoretical compasses: they do not predict outcomes but identify likely relationships, tensions to be traced, and indicators to be recognized in case analysis.

Proposition 1: When institutional capacity fails to keep pace with policy ambition, alignment tends to be mobilized as a compensatory mechanism rather than a pedagogical choice.

This proposition follows from the study's core argument: alignment becomes "compensatory" not because its nature changes, but because implementation contexts require it to assume functions beyond its original pedagogical domain. Under conditions of prolonged capacity deficit, alignment is expected

to sustain reform operability by translating normative demands into actionable classroom practices. Policy analysis under this proposition focuses on identifying signs that alignment is being used to fill institutional gaps rather than being supported by corresponding structural investments.

Proposition 2: Alignment burden increases in proportion to the degree of standardization and accountability at the normative layer.

This proposition directly links normative alignment with pedagogical alignment burden. As competency frameworks and accountability requirements expand, become more detailed, and are tightly coupled with assessment mechanisms, the burden of translating these demands into meaningful practice shifts toward teachers and schools. Analysis under this proposition attends to responsibility displacement – from system design and support toward individual and collective effort at the micro level – as well as the adaptive strategies developed to cope with alignment pressure.

Proposition 3: When alignment is tightly coupled with verification mechanisms, it tends to shift from a learning-oriented to a performative orientation.

This proposition grounds the identification of performative alignment. In standards- and evidence-based governance contexts, alignment not only supports learning but also becomes a means of producing observable and assessable indicators of compliance. Analysis under this proposition does not seek dishonesty in practice but rather examines how verification logic restructures pedagogical priorities, privileging what is measurable and reportable over what is contextual, long-term, and difficult to quantify.

Proposition 4: Alignment slippage increases in the absence of institutional feedback mechanisms linking implementation and policy adjustment.

This proposition emphasizes the dynamic nature of alignment through the concept of alignment slippage. When frontline interpretations and adaptations are not fed back into policy revision processes, alignment may persist across layers while its pedagogical meaning becomes increasingly misaligned. Analysis under this proposition focuses on rupture points where formal coherence is maintained, while substantive pedagogical coherence deteriorates.

Proposition 5: Alignment produces sustainable pedagogical improvement only when normative, pedagogical, and institutional layers are simultaneously supported, rather than when one layer is required to compensate for others.

The final proposition serves as a normative reference point for the entire analysis. It does not assume compensatory alignment to be inevitable or permanent, but instead identifies conditions under which alignment can return to its pedagogical “home.” Under this proposition, alignment yields improvement only when institutional capacity is strong enough to support pedagogical judgment and when normative alignment guides rather than constrains practice. This proposition distinguishes contexts in which alignment functions as substantive improvement from those in which it primarily sustains reform’s formal viability.

3.4.1. Role of the Propositions in the Analytical Structure

The propositions above are not employed as binary evaluation criteria but as analytical reading frames for the case study. They guide the selection and interpretation of policy materials, the identification of alignment practices, and the connection of layers within the three-layer model in subsequent analysis. More importantly, they enable the study to maintain critical distance: rather than asserting alignment as a solution or problem, the article clarifies what alignment is being mobilized to do, under what conditions, and with what consequences for education reform.

4. Critical Policy Analysis as Theoretical Inquiry

4.1. Research Design and Epistemological Positioning

This study is designed as a theory-driven qualitative inquiry aimed at analyzing how Constructive Alignment operates as a policy technology within foreign language competency framework reform. Rather than approaching alignment as a discrete pedagogical practice or as an intervention variable

amenable to direct measurement, the study foregrounds the policy function of alignment – that is, what alignment is required to do within reform structures when conditions of implementation capacity are uneven.

Epistemologically, the study is positioned within the tradition of Critical Policy Analysis, which treats policy not merely as a set of formal decisions but as discursive and organizational practices that frame problems, allocate responsibility, and legitimize particular reform choices. From this perspective, policy texts are not read as neutral descriptions of goals or solutions but as structures that carry assumptions about system capacity, the roles of implementation actors, and the pathways of improvement deemed feasible [18].

This stance is particularly aligned with the study's purpose, which is not to assess the "correctness" or "effectiveness" of Vietnam's Draft Seven-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, but to explain the operational mechanisms of reform by tracing how alignment is mobilized to connect normative requirements with pedagogical practice and institutional conditions [8]. Focusing on mechanisms – rather than outcomes – allows alignment to be analyzed as a conditional policy solution whose function shifts depending on the context of implementation capacity.

The research design is therefore interpretive–critical in nature, in which theory is not used to test hypotheses but to guide reading and organize interpretation. Concepts such as alignment burden, functional displacement, and alignment elasticity are employed as analytical tools to surface relations of power and compensatory logics embedded within the technical language of reform [17]. This approach enables the analysis to be connected to prior empirical findings on the non-linear relationship between alignment and implementation capacity without exceeding what the data can support.

Finally, the study clearly delineates its scope. It does not examine teachers' perceptions or practices, does not conduct classroom-level evaluations of pedagogical impact, and does not propose specific implementation models. Instead, it focuses on reading policy as a theory-laden entity, clarifying how ostensibly technical tools, such as Constructive Alignment, can assume significant political–institutional roles in the process of education reform.

4.2. Data Corpus and Selection Logic

The data corpus of the study is constructed to analyze how Constructive Alignment is established and operates in the process of adjusting Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework. Data are selected according to policy function logic, focusing on documents that play a direct role in establishing competency standards, translating those standards into implementation requirements, and allocating alignment responsibilities to implementation levels.

The first data group consists of core framework documents and legal–regulatory texts, specifically:

- (i) *Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT promulgating the Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam;*
- (ii) *the Draft Seven-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework released by the Ministry of Education and Training for public consultation;*
- (iii) *the Law on Higher Education (amended in 2018) and related guiding documents concerning foreign language learning outcomes in higher education;*
- (iv) *regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and Training regarding learning outcomes, testing, and assessment of foreign language proficiency in general and higher education.*

These documents are selected because they directly encode alignment requirements between training objectives, curricula, teaching, and assessment.

The second data group comprises policy orientation documents and supporting policy discourse, including:

- (i) *reports and explanatory documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Training concerning the development and adjustment of the foreign language proficiency framework;*

(ii) *professional guidance documents on curriculum development, assessment design, and the use of competency frameworks in training;*

(iii) *official reference materials to the CEFR and the CEFR Companion Volume used as the theoretical and technical foundation for the national framework.*

While these documents do not impose direct legal obligations, they play a critical role in legitimizing alignment as a technical solution to implementation challenges.

The logic of data selection is functional and layered, rather than chronological or hierarchical by legal status. Documents are selected because they represent key policy nodes where alignment is mobilized to connect competency standards with teaching and assessment practices under conditions of uneven implementation capacity. This approach enables tracing the functional displacement of alignment without excessively expanding the corpus.

4.3. Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy is designed to clarify how Constructive Alignment is mobilized and how its function shifts in the process of adjusting Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework. Analysis is not organized as a technical thematic coding procedure but as a theoretically guided policy reading, in which documents are treated as crystallizations of assumptions about implementation capacity, responsibility allocation, and feasible reform pathways.

First, the study conducts policy problem reading, focusing on how framework and implementation documents describe the "problem" of foreign language teaching and learning. At this stage, analysis interrogates the types of problems for which alignment is proposed as a solution, such as quality, coherence, or comparability, and the implicit assumptions about resources, capacity, or context embedded in the choice of alignment as a central response.

Second, the study undertakes functional reading of alignment, concentrating on what alignment is required to accomplish across different document groups. Specifically, the analysis examines whether alignment is used to:

- (i) *connect competency descriptors with learning outcomes and curricula;*
- (ii) *legitimize requirements for testing, assessment, and certification; and*
- (iii) *maintain the formal coherence of reform under conditions of uneven implementation.*

This reading makes it possible to identify moments at which alignment moves beyond pedagogical design to assume policy functions.

Third, the study conducts cross-layer tracing among normative requirements, pedagogical practices, and institutional conditions. Using the three-layer model presented in Section 3, the analysis focuses on points of imbalance where alignment demands are intensified at the normative and pedagogical layers while institutional support capacity remains limited. This tracing reveals the compensatory mechanisms activated when alignment is tasked with sustaining reform operability.

Throughout the analytical process, the conceptual tools developed in Section 3, including alignment burden, functional displacement, alignment elasticity, and performative stabilization, are employed as a consistent reading framework to organize interpretation rather than to predetermine conclusions. Claims are advanced only when patterns of alignment use recur consistently across documents, rather than being inferred from isolated examples.

This analytical strategy enables the study to shift attention from describing policy content to explaining reform logic, clarifying how Constructive Alignment actually functions as a compensatory policy technology in the context of Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework adjustment. On this basis, Section 5 presents the analytical findings, organized around the core mechanisms through which alignment operates in policy practice.

5. How Does “Constructive Alignment” as Policy Actually Work?

5.1. *Constructive Alignment as a Policy Promise*

In the process of adjusting Vietnam’s foreign language proficiency framework, Constructive Alignment does not appear as an explicitly named theoretical concept but is implicitly deployed as a policy promise: if the components of the system, learning outcomes, curricula, teaching, and assessment, are consistently aligned with the competency framework, reform will both ensure pedagogical quality and maintain feasibility in implementation. This promise plays a central role in legitimizing the expansion and refinement of competency standards across policy cycles.

At the normative level, competency framework documents, from the Six-Level Framework promulgated in 2014 to the Draft Seven-Level Framework, share a consistent assumption: the more detailed and finely stratified competency descriptors become, the greater their capacity to guide teaching and assessment. Within this structure, alignment is expected to serve as a natural bridge between competency descriptions and educational practice, enabling the abstract standards of the framework to enter the classroom without requiring direct and costly institutional interventions.

The policy promise of alignment becomes particularly visible when the competency framework is linked to requirements for learning outcomes and the recognition of foreign language certificates. Rather than investing in assessment infrastructure, teacher training, and implementation support mechanisms in a coordinated manner, reform is shaped by the logic that correct alignment among the framework, curricula, and assessment will automatically generate quality and consistency. Alignment is thus assigned a dual role: safeguarding pedagogical quality while simultaneously controlling implementation.

At the level of discourse, alignment is presented as a technical–professional solution, neutral in character and universally applicable. It is precisely this appearance of being “non-political” that renders alignment an attractive tool in reform governance: it allows policymakers to assert that reform is guided by professional principles, while minimizing the need for direct intervention in diverse and fragmented pedagogical practices. The promise of alignment, therefore, addresses not only teachers and institutions but also the governance system itself, functioning as a guarantee that reform can operate stably.

However, analysis of implementation documents indicates that this promise rests on a critical assumption: that alignment can absorb diversity and uncertainty in implementation contexts. When standards expand more rapidly than institutional support capacity, alignment is expected to fill the gap by requiring implementation levels to self-adjust to the framework. Within this logic, any divergence between standards and practice can be attributed to “insufficient alignment,” rather than being recognized as an indicator of institutional limits.

In this sense, Constructive Alignment in Vietnam’s foreign language proficiency framework operates primarily as a policy promise concerning the system’s capacity for self-adjustment. This promise enables reform to advance in normative and formal terms while deferring confrontation with difficult decisions related to investment in implementation capacity. Understanding alignment as a promise, rather than as a purely pedagogical solution, is the first step toward clarifying how it continues to be mobilized in mechanisms of responsibility redistribution and reform stabilization, which are examined in the following sections.

5.2. *The Redistribution of Responsibility Through Alignment*

When Constructive Alignment is mobilized as a policy promise of systemic self-adjustment, an inevitable structural consequence is the redistribution of responsibility for implementing reform. Analysis of documents related to Vietnam’s foreign language proficiency framework shows that alignment not only organizes relationships among objectives, teaching, and assessment but also restructures where responsibility lies for realizing competency standards across the education system. This mechanism is consistent with policy literature indicating that technical instruments often carry responsibility-allocation effects that extend beyond their declared functions [7].

At the central level, framework documents such as Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT and the Draft Seven-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework establish competency descriptors and learning outcomes in considerable detail, yet do not provide implementation mechanisms commensurate with the complexity of those standards. Rather than specifying forms of support, investment, or capacity-building trajectories, these documents emphasize requirements of “alignment,” “compatibility,” and “consistency” among the framework, curricula, and assessments. Alignment thus functions as an intermediary mechanism that allows responsibility for implementation to be shifted from policy design to implementation levels without expanding direct institutional intervention [10, 12].

At the level of educational institutions, alignment is institutionalized as an organizational obligation. Universities and schools are required to develop learning outcomes, curricula, and assessment systems that “fit” the national competency framework, and to demonstrate this compatibility through familiar governance tools such as mapping matrices, outcome descriptors, and evidence portfolios. These practices reflect the logic of audit culture, in which the capacity to perform compatibility becomes a central criterion of organizational legitimacy [16, 19]. Alignment thus not only guides learning design but also shapes how organizations account for reform.

At the classroom level, responsibility redistribution becomes further individualized. Teachers are expected to adjust lesson objectives, teaching methods, and assessment formats to reflect competency descriptors, even when supporting conditions, professional training, standardized materials, and assessment infrastructure have not been developed correspondingly. In this context, any discrepancy between standards and practice is easily reduced to a problem of “insufficient alignment,” rather than being recognized as a consequence of institutional constraints. This reduction aligns with Lipsky’s [13] analysis of how frontline actors are often tasked with resolving policy contradictions under conditions of limited resources.

Notably, the redistribution of responsibility through alignment does not occur through direct administrative command, but through technical–professional language that appears neutral. This characteristic makes responsibility transfer difficult to contest, as it is framed as a requirement of quality and coherence. As Bacchi [8] argues, the way policy defines problems shapes the space of possible solutions; in this case, defining reform as an alignment problem narrows the scope for questioning institutional capacity and systemic investment.

The consequence of this mechanism is a structural paradox. In the short term, redistributing responsibility through alignment helps the system maintain operability and preserve reform legitimacy, particularly in contexts of uneven implementation capacity. In the long term, however, it tends to stabilize reform by fragmenting and individualizing implementation burdens, making systemic institutional limitations difficult to identify and address at the policy level. Alignment, within this structure, is no longer merely a bridge between standards and practice but becomes a mechanism for reorganizing reform responsibility.

5.3. The Cognitive Reframing of Reform Through Alignment

When Constructive Alignment is mobilized as a central policy technology in competency framework reform, its most profound impact lies not in organizing implementation but in the cognitive reframing of education reform itself. Analysis of policy documents shows that alignment not only connects technical elements of teaching and learning but also gradually establishes a new understanding of what counts as legitimate quality, improvement, and progress in foreign language education.

Within this structure, educational quality is increasingly understood in terms of formal compatibility among components: learning outcomes align with competency descriptors, curricula reflect learning outcomes, and assessment provides evidence of that alignment. Alignment thus operates as a cognitive frame in which quality is no longer tightly linked to learning experience or pedagogical transformation, but to the internal coherence of descriptive systems. This reframing is consistent with analyses by Power [16] and Ozga [19] who note that governance regimes based on standardization tend to replace rich conceptions of quality with criteria that are auditable and verifiable.

A key consequence of this reframing is a shift in the meaning of improvement. Rather than being understood as the enhancement of teaching and learning practices, improvement increasingly becomes equated with the refinement of standards: adding competency descriptors, expanding proficiency levels, and perfecting mapping tools. Alignment facilitates this shift by turning normative adjustments into visible evidence of progress, even when the relationship between such adjustments and substantive pedagogical change remains unclear.

Importantly, this cognitive reframing also narrows the space of questions that can be legitimately asked. When reform is understood primarily as a matter of alignment and compatibility, questions about pedagogical conditions, institutional capacity, or policy design limits become increasingly peripheral. As Bacchi [8] argues, the way policy defines problems not only guides solutions but also determines what becomes unthinkable. In this case, alignment contributes to making continued refinement of standards the default response, while deeper structural interventions are less readily imagined as viable options.

At this level, alignment not only stabilizes reform in formal terms but also restructures the language of reform itself. It shapes how actors speak about quality, improvement, and success, thereby influencing the long-term trajectory of policy without requiring disruptive decisions. Reform can thus continue to be described as “moving forward” through refinement of competency frameworks, while deeper pedagogical transformations remain outside the horizon of conceptualization.

In this sense, the most significant effect of Constructive Alignment in this context lies not in what it does to the system but in what it does to the system’s understanding of itself. Recognizing this cognitive reframing allows the role of alignment to be assessed beyond technical debates about implementation and situates it at the center of analyses of epistemic power in competency-based education reform.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

6.1. *Constructive Alignment as a Compensatory Policy Technology*

This study reconceptualizes Constructive Alignment not merely as a pedagogical design principle but as a compensatory policy technology. The core theoretical contribution of the article lies in demonstrating that alignment can be mobilized to compensate for limitations in implementation capacity, thereby allowing standards-based reform to continue expanding normatively even when the corresponding institutional conditions have not been strengthened to the same degree.

In the pedagogical literature, alignment is commonly understood as a mechanism for ensuring coherence among learning objectives, teaching, and assessment [6]. This understanding assumes an implementation environment in which basic pedagogical conditions are already in place. The case of Vietnam’s foreign language proficiency framework reveals a different function of alignment: its refunctionalization at the policy level as an intermediary tool for managing the gap between normative ambition and implementation capacity through requirements for self-alignment at implementation levels.

The concept of compensatory policy technology highlights three theoretical features. First, alignment operates as an intermediary mechanism that enables reform to move forward without requiring commensurate direct institutional intervention. Second, the effectiveness of alignment is non-linear with respect to implementation capacity: it is most effective in contexts of low to medium capacity, but its marginal effectiveness declines as system capacity is strengthened (Figure 2). Third, alignment has inherent limits, as prolonged reliance on it tends to shift reform emphasis from pedagogical transformation toward normative and formal stabilization.

Situating alignment within this framework extends theories of policy instruments by showing that technical–professional tools do not merely implement policy, but also shape the trajectory and limits of reform [7]. In this role, alignment functions as a soft technology: it does not impose change through command but restructures how reform is understood, evaluated, and deemed legitimate [19].

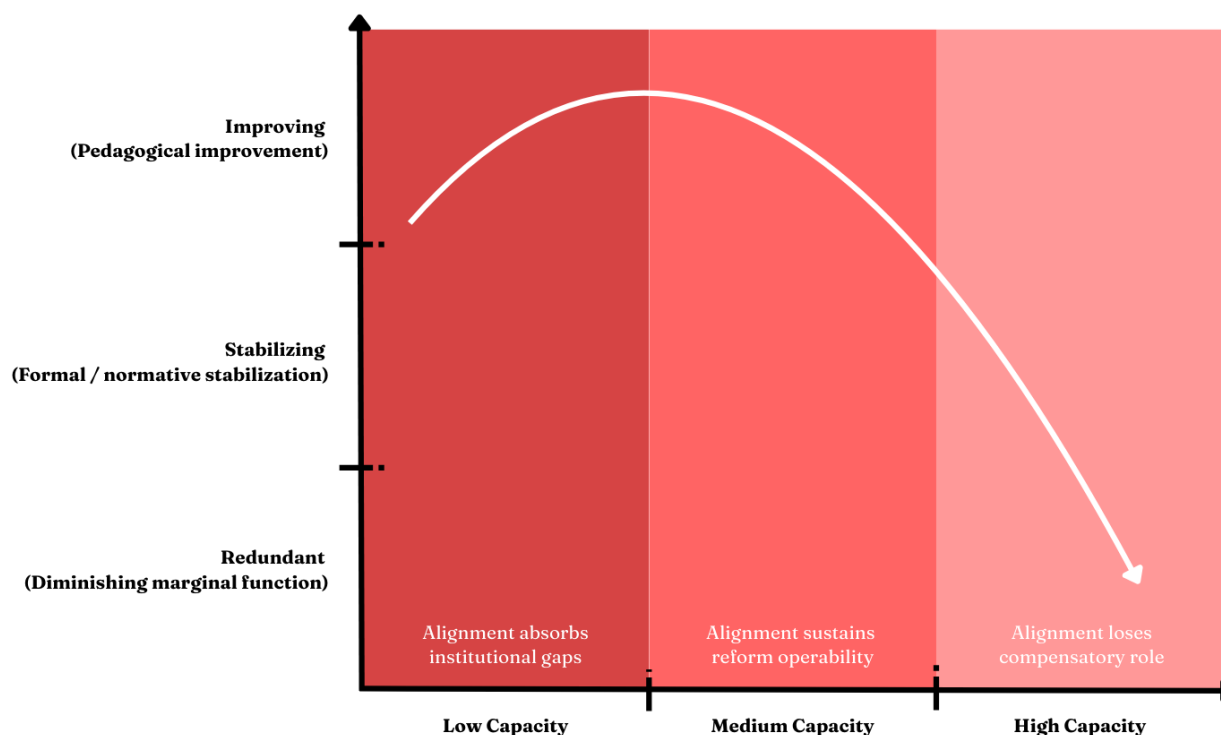


Figure 2.
Constructive Alignment as a Compensatory Policy Technology across Levels of Implementation Capacity.

In this sense, the study's contribution is not to negate the pedagogical value of Constructive Alignment but to situate it appropriately within policy contexts. When used as a compensatory technology, alignment serves both as a short-term resource for sustaining reform and as a warning signal of structural limits that must be addressed if reform is to achieve sustainable long-term transformation.

6.2. *What the Vietnamese Case Reveals: Alignment, Capacity, and Deferred Reform*

The adjustment of Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework highlights a key mechanism in standards-based reform governance: the non-linear relationship between alignment and implementation capacity. When implementation capacity is low to medium, Constructive Alignment can function as a compensatory resource, enabling the system to maintain operability and reform legitimacy. However, as institutional capacity is strengthened, the marginal effectiveness of alignment declines, and continued reliance on alignment begins to defer structural reform decisions.

Analysis shows that alignment becomes an attractive policy choice in contexts of uneven capacity because it allows reform to progress normatively without requiring immediate, coordinated investment in teacher training, assessment infrastructure, or implementation support mechanisms. This mode of operation aligns with the literature on implementation gaps, in which technical instruments are used to "bridge" short-term gaps between policy ambition and implementation capacity [10, 12].

Yet this compensatory capacity simultaneously generates a dynamic of deferred reform as institutional capacity improves. Rather than shifting focus toward deeper interventions – such as investment in pedagogical capacity, restructuring assessment systems, or redesigning support mechanisms – reform tends to continue relying on normative refinement and expansion of competency descriptors. In Vietnam's case, the transition from the Six-Level Framework to the Draft Seven-Level

Framework clearly illustrates this tendency: reform is presented as a technical advancement, while foundational implementation conditions remain insufficiently transformed.

From an implementation theory perspective, this phenomenon indicates that alignment does not merely respond to capacity conditions but actively reshapes how capacity itself is interpreted in policy discourse. When alignment is positioned as the central solution, institutional limitations are easily redefined as problems of incomplete alignment rather than issues requiring structural intervention. This observation is consistent with arguments that policy instruments shape the space of reform options and influence the timing and direction of capacity investment decisions [7, 8].

The significance of the Vietnamese case, therefore, lies not in evaluating the correctness of alignment as a policy choice, but in exposing the logic of deferred reform embedded in compensatory technologies. Alignment is effective when implementation capacity is constrained, but when prolonged as a default solution in contexts of improving capacity, it risks locking reform into a trajectory of normative stabilization. Recognizing this mechanism helps explain why competency-based reforms can sustain a form of progress over extended periods without generating corresponding pedagogical transformation.

6.3. *Beyond Vietnam: CEFR Localization, Alignment, and the Politics of Capacity*

Placing the Vietnamese case within the broader landscape of CEFR-localizing countries reveals that Constructive Alignment is not a neutral solution but a political-institutional choice closely tied to the level and trajectory of implementation capacity development. International experience suggests that when institutional capacity is robustly and coherently invested in, alignment tends to retain a supportive design role; conversely, when capacity remains fragmented, alignment is often elevated into a compensatory technology to sustain reform operability.

In contexts such as Germany and Switzerland, where the CEFR is integrated into teacher education systems, standardized assessment, and regional-level implementation support mechanisms, alignment functions primarily as a pedagogical principle [3]. Alignment among objectives, teaching, and assessment occurs within an established capacity infrastructure, allowing alignment to focus on improving learning design rather than on “keeping the system running” [2, 20].

By contrast, cases such as Japan and South Korea illustrate a different trajectory. In the process of referencing the CEFR to reform foreign language assessment and learning outcomes, alignment has been used as an intermediary tool to connect new standards with existing practices under conditions of uneven capacity across educational levels and localities [21]. Studies indicate that in early stages, alignment helps reforms gain legitimacy and auditability; however, when capacity investment fails to keep pace, reform becomes locked into cycles of normative adjustment and evidentiary compliance [22, 23].

These comparisons clarify a crucial point: CEFR localization is not merely a technical-linguistic matter but a politics of capacity. Decisions about how extensively to rely on alignment reflect implicit choices about where to invest, where to defer, and who bears the residual burden of reform. In this context, alignment can function as a “safe solution” for reform governance, maintaining formal progress and coherence, while simultaneously obscuring the need for more costly structural interventions.

From a theoretical perspective, juxtaposing Vietnam’s case with other CEFR localization experiences enables the generalization of a key argument: the effectiveness of alignment depends on the politics of capacity allocation, not solely on the quality of framework design. Alignment yields positive effects when situated within a strong capacity foundation; when prolonged in a compensatory role, it risks redefining reform priorities toward control and stability rather than pedagogical transformation. Recognizing this logic helps avoid superficial policy borrowing and underscores that CEFR-based reform is sustainable only when accompanied by commensurate capacity investment decisions.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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