

LANGUAGES

An Exploratory Comparison of the THPT English Exam and an IELTS Benchmark: A Question of Equivalence

Khanh Quoc Nguyen^{*1}, Quang Nhat Vo² and Loan Thi Thuy To³

¹The University of Da Nang, Vietnam

²Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam

³University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University HCMC, Vietnam

*Corresponding author:

Khanh Quoc Nguyen - The University of Da Nang.

Email: av32.1b2cva1d047@oncce.udn.vn

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Abstract

This qualitative document analysis with descriptive quantitative mapping examines potential psychometric and pedagogical misalignments in Vietnam's policy allowing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to substitute the official national high school graduation English exam for university admissions. By comparing the lexical, structural, and cognitive demands of the official 2025 Vietnamese National High School Graduation Examination (THPT), and an illustrative international benchmark (Cambridge IELTS 20), the study highlights areas where current score-conversion practices may under-represent the communicative construct intended by the national curriculum. The findings provide preliminary evidence that the THPT exam functions largely as a discrete-point achievement test, whereas IELTS requires integrative skills and a broader academic vocabulary. Drawing on construct validity, principles of assessment design, and the Assessment Use Argument, the paper posits that direct substitution policies overlook the distinct foundational objectives of each test and require stronger empirical concordance support.

Keywords: language assessment; construct validity; test construct; Assessment Use Argument; IELTS; university admissions.

Introduction

Over the past decade, English language education and assessment in Vietnam have evolved within a broader context of educational change and state-led foreign language reform [1, 2]. Within this context, the growing reliance on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has become a defining feature of national policy. Between 2019 and 2024, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) introduced mechanisms allowing students to substitute the English component of the National High School Graduation Examination (THPT) with international certificates [3]. Specifically, an IELTS score of 4.0 provides exemption from the THPT exam with a maximum grade of 10 [4], while many universities now convert scores of 6.5 or 7.0 into perfect entrance scores.

These policies have transformed IELTS from a tool for overseas study into a high-stakes asset for domestic university admissions, particularly in competitive disciplines [4, 5]. This shift has implications for English teaching and learning in Vietnam, particularly as test-preparation pressures increasingly interact with

curriculum-based instruction and textbook-mediated classroom practices in public schools, with prior research highlighting the central role of national textbooks in shaping classroom content [5, 6]. However, the rapid adoption of these score-substitution schemes rests on an implicit assumption of equivalence. By allowing a proficiency test like IELTS to replace a curriculum-based achievement exam like the THPT, policymakers effectively assume that both assessments measure comparable constructs and require similar linguistic and cognitive abilities.

To date, this assumption remains largely untested. While recent scholarship has explored policy implications and stakeholder perceptions of these changes, there is a critical lack of empirical evidence regarding the actual alignment between the two assessments [4, 5, 7]. Without such validation, current conversion practices raise serious questions concerning construct validity and the fairness of the admissions process.

To address this gap, the present study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing qualitative document analysis and quantitative lexical mapping to examine the structural, lexical, and cognitive align-

ment between two specific artifacts: the 2025 THPT English examination (Code 1101) and an international benchmark (Cambridge IELTS 20, Test 1). By analyzing task types, lexical coverage, and cognitive demands, this study evaluates whether current substitution practices are psychometrically justified. The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do the construct representation and cognitive demands of the THPT examination compare with those of an illustrative IELTS Academic sample?
- 2) What are the lexical and structural discrepancies between these two assessments, and how do they reflect their distinct testing objectives?

Literature Review

To evaluate the alignment between national curricula and international assessments, the analysis draws on key frameworks in psychometrics and applied linguistics, specifically grounded in construct validity, the distinction between testing types, and the principle of constructive alignment.

Construct Validity and the Assessment Use Argument

Modern views of test validity draw on Messick's [8] unified framework, which defines validity as the extent to which evidence and theory support the interpretations and uses of test scores. Validity is a single construct centered on construct validity rather than separate categories. Messick identified two key threats: construct under-representation, which occurs when a test fails to capture important aspects of the target language ability, and construct-irrelevant variance, where scores are influenced by factors unrelated to language ability. Building on this, Bachman and Palmer [9] proposed the Assessment Use Argument (AUA), requiring evidence that score interpretations are meaningful, fair, and relevant to the target domain. For instance, if universities treat an IELTS score of 6.5 as equivalent to a perfect score on the national exam, this claim must be supported by evidence that the abilities measured correspond to mastery of the national curriculum; without such evidence, the policy lacks adequate justification.

Assessment Design and Constructive Alignment

The structural design of tests can be examined through the distinction between discrete-point and integrative testing. Discrete-point tests measure isolated language elements such as vocabulary or grammar, an approach criticized for decontextualizing language. In contrast, integrative testing assesses multiple skills simultaneously through tasks that reflect authentic communication. Evaluating the alignment between the THPT 2025 exam and IELTS 20 requires locating their tasks along this discrete-integrative continuum

[10]. This also relates to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) [11], as effective language learning relies on meaningful purpose. When assessments rely heavily on discrete-point items, they risk revealing a gap between the communicative goals of the curriculum and the realities of testing. This divergence signals a breakdown in constructive alignment, a principle proposed by Biggs [12] emphasizing coherence among learning outcomes, teaching practices, and assessment. A curriculum functions effectively only when assessment tasks reflect the intended learning objectives.

Test Concordance and the Research Gap

While IELTS is widely used as an English-language proficiency indicator in higher education admissions [13], psychometric research indicates that substituting scores requires rigorous concordance and linking procedures [14]. Score substitution is most appropriate when tests measure essentially the same construct and target comparable populations [15]. When assessments differ in their underlying constructs, direct substitution becomes problematic. Without empirical concordance studies that statistically link performance, score conversion policies lack strong psychometric support. Despite the need for rigorous alignment, empirical research on the equivalence between the THPT exam and IELTS remains limited. Recent studies in Vietnam mainly examine policy implications or stakeholder perceptions through surveys and interviews, leaving a methodological gap regarding the analysis of actual test artifacts [4, 5, 7]. To move beyond subjective perceptions, this study employs a mixed-methods approach—combining quantitative mapping with qualitative document analysis of test materials—to provide a more objective evidence base for evaluating current policies.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Sources

To examine how the national curriculum is operationally assessed, this study conducted a qualitative document analysis with descriptive quantitative mapping of the THPT 2025 English exam (Code 1101), as compiled from publicly available examination materials [16]. This item-level comparison is exploratory in nature and should be interpreted as an illustrative document analysis rather than a statistical score-concordance study. To ensure rigor and reduce subjective categorization, test items and texts from the THPT 2025 exam and *Cambridge IELTS 20* were imported into QualCoder for systematic coding. Both the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and Cambridge Assessment use formal test specifications that standardize task formats and support structural consistency across different test versions [17]. These frameworks regulate the distribution of task types and cognitive demands, keeping the overall structure of the

tests stable. As a result, patterns such as the balance between discrete-point and integrative items tend to remain consistent. Although IELTS is operationally designed as a four-skill proficiency test, the present item-level comparison is restricted to the Reading module in order to establish the closest analytical match with the THPT English exam, which primarily assesses reading and language form.

Coding Scheme and Analytical Procedure

A deductive coding scheme was established a priori, based on the construct classification framework of Brown and Abeywickrama [10]. The entire dataset was manually coded in QualCoder, a qualitative data analysis software. The process was iterative; the three independent researchers reviewed the data several times to apply the framework consistently. To strengthen reliability and reduce subjective bias, these researchers cross-checked the coded nodes and the resulting quantitative matrix. Inter-rater reliability was established using Fleiss' Kappa calculated via the ReCal web service [18], yielding a coefficient of 0.884 for construct type and 0.917 for cognitive demand. When discrepancies initially arose, the researchers revisited the operational definitions and discussed the cases until full consensus was reached.

The coding procedure followed two specific dimensions:

Construct type dimension. Items were coded as *discrete-point* if they tested isolated grammatical forms or single vocabulary items outside extended discourse. Items were coded as *integrative* when they required the combination of multiple language skills within connected discourse, such as passage-based reading comprehension.

Cognitive demand dimension. Items were classified into four categories: *Literal comprehension* (surface-level recognition or factual retrieval); *Lexical guessing* (inferring word meaning from contextual clues); *Inferencing or synthesizing* (higher-order tasks integrating ideas across clauses); and *Reorganization* (arranging scrambled sentences into a coherent paragraph).

The quantitative mapping utilized the individual test item as the primary unit of analysis. Percentages were derived by dividing the frequency of items by the total number of items in the analyzed section. Lexical complexity was qualitatively evaluated by examining specialized terminology and vocabulary conceptually aligned with the Academic Word List (AWL) framework, supported by automated corpus profiling using the VocabProfile tool on Lextutor [19].

Results

Structural and Skill Coverage Mapping

The structural analysis reveals a divergence in assessment design. The THPT 2025 examination functions as a paper-based achievement test focusing on

receptive reading and language form [20], whereas the IELTS benchmark represents an integrative four-skill proficiency test, although the present analysis focuses specifically on its Reading module. As shown in Table 1, the THPT exam relies significantly on discrete-point items (42.5%) to evaluate isolated linguistic components, while the IELTS module [21] is entirely integrative (100%) [10], requiring the processing of language within connected, authentic discourse.

Table 1: Distribution of Skill Coverage and Test Constructs.

Assessment	Skill Coverage (Overall Test Design)	Test Format (Construct Type)
THPT 2025 (Code 1101)	Reading & Language Focus only	42.5% Discrete-point; 57.5% Integrative
Cambridge IELTS 20	Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking	0% Discrete-point; 100% Integrative (Reading module analyzed)

Note: Construct categorization is based on Brown and Abeywickrama's framework [10]. The data illustrates a distinct contrast between the discrete-point orientation of the THPT exam and the integrative communicative approach of the IELTS benchmark.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of construct types, showing the proportion of discrete-point and integrative items in the two assessments.

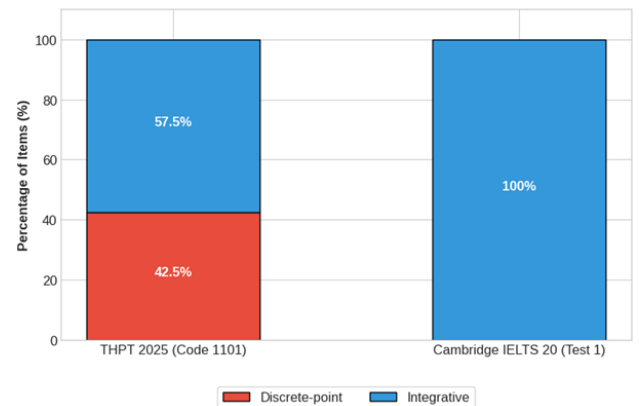


Figure 1: Distribution of construct types in the THPT exam and IELTS Reading module. *Note. Proportion of discrete-point and integrative items across the two assessments.*

Cognitive Demand Hierarchy

The two assessments target different levels of cognitive processing. Analysis of the THPT exam indicates a concentration on lower-order thinking skills [22], with Literal Comprehension (scanning and factual retrieval) accounting for 52.5% of the items. While IELTS Academic assesses four skills, this comparative analysis focuses exclusively on the Reading module to ensure a comparable unit of analysis with the THPT English exam's receptive and structural focus. The IELTS benchmark is centered on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) [22]; 75% of its reading tasks require inferencing and synthesizing information across complex academic texts. Table 2 summarizes these cognitive discrepancies.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Cognitive Demands.

Cognitive Category	THPT 2025 (Code 1101)	Cambridge IELTS 20 (Test 1)
Literal Comprehension	52.5%	25.0%
Lexical Guessing	12.5%	0.0%
Reorganization	12.5%	0.0%
Inferencing / Synthesizing	22.5%	75.0%

Note: Percentages are calculated based on the total number of items (40 per test). Item coding was validated through a cross-rater reliability check, yielding a Fleiss' Kappa coefficient of 0.917 using the ReCal service [18].

Figure 2 presents the distribution of cognitive demand categories, grouping items into lower-order (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

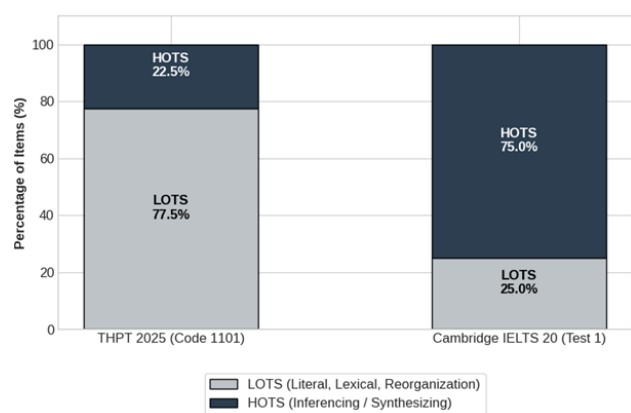


Figure 2: Distribution of cognitive demand categories (LOTS vs. HOTS) in the two assessments. Note. Percentage of lower-order (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) in the THPT exam and IELTS Reading module.

Lexical Profile and Processing Stamina

The discrepancy in linguistic demand is further evidenced through automated corpus profiling via VocabProfile [19]. As detailed in Table 3, the THPT exam exhibits an AWL [23] token percentage of 8.30% and a lexical density of 0.63 within a corpus of 1,591 tokens. The IELTS benchmark [21], by contrast, contains 2,768 tokens, with an AWL token percentage of 6.58%, a lexical density of 0.57, and a higher proportion of Off-List word types (18.62% vs. 17.02%).

Table 3: Comparative Lexical and Processing Parameters.

Parameter	THPT 2025 (Code 1101)	Cambridge IELTS 20 (Test 1)
Total Word Count (Tokens)	1,591	2,768 (Reading only)
AWL Coverage (Tokens)	8.30%	6.58%
Lexical Density	0.63	0.57
Off-List Word Types	17.02%	18.62%

Discussion

Construct and Skill Alignment

The findings reveal a clear skill gap between the two assessments. As shown in Figure 1, the structural design of the THPT exam is heavily oriented toward discrete-point testing, isolating language components outside of extended discourse. This fundamental divergence from the integrative approach of IELTS highlights a mismatch in underlying testing philosophies. Treating a test that evaluates academic writing, real-time spoken interaction, and comprehension of complex lectures (IELTS) as equivalent to a 40-item, paper-based multiple-choice exam that measures only receptive reading and language form (THPT) raises serious concerns about construct validity [8]. In effect, the two tests measure different dimensions of language ability. The absence of productive skills in the THPT exam suggests construct under-representation, making direct score equivalence between the two tests difficult to justify from a psychometric perspective.

The Cognitive Mismatch

The cognitive gap, as visualized in Figure 2, further challenges the logic of current score-conversion practices. Rather than merely differing in difficulty, the two assessments exhibit an almost inverse relationship in cognitive demands; the THPT exam predominantly focuses on lower-order literal comprehension, such as recognizing explicit information or basic grammar rules, whereas the IELTS reading tasks overwhelmingly require higher-order inferencing and synthesizing. A perfect score on the THPT indicates strong control of textbook-level language knowledge. In contrast, an IELTS score of 6.5 reflects integrative proficiency and the ability to interpret complex arguments under time pressure. Treating these as equivalent may disproportionately privilege students with greater access to private tutoring, suggesting a potential misalignment between the constructs assessed and the educational outcomes intended by the national curriculum.

The Lexical Paradox: Familiarity vs. Authentic Demand

A key finding is a lexical paradox. The THPT exam appears more demanding based on AWL percentage (8.30% vs. 6.58%), but this mainly reflects its smaller corpus. With only 1,591 tokens, repeated use of curriculum-based keywords inflates AWL density without requiring a broader academic lexicon. The Off-List measure gives a more accurate view of difficulty. IELTS includes a higher proportion of Off-List words (18.62% vs. 17.02%) across a much larger corpus of 2,768 tokens, exposing candidates to low-frequency vocabulary and abstract polysemy beyond the lexical scope represented in the Grade 12 Global Success textbook corpus analyzed in this study [24]. This

requires stronger lexical strategies [25] and the ability to process texts at around CEFR B2–C1 level [26].

Furthermore, the way these lexical items are assessed differs considerably. In the THPT exam, vocabulary knowledge is mainly tested through discrete multiple-choice questions, such as isolated synonym or antonym items that depend heavily on students' recall of content from the *Global Success* curriculum. IELTS, by contrast, assesses lexical competence in a more integrated way. Candidates are expected to infer the meaning of low-frequency academic words and interpret abstract meanings within longer, more complex texts.

This dual gap highlights the construct under-representation noted in the Construct and Skill Alignment section and challenges the Assessment Use Argument [9]. AWL percentages based on recycled curriculum vocabulary cannot represent the broader academic language ability measured by IELTS.

Predictive Validity and Admissions Policy

The evidence of construct, cognitive, and lexical gaps calls into question the validity of current university admissions policies in Vietnam. Many universities have introduced IELTS-based score conversion schemes for the 2025–2026 admissions cycle [4], yet these scales appear decentralized and inconsistent [27]. This challenges the Assessment Use Argument proposed by Bachman and Palmer [9]. When universities convert an IELTS 6.5 into a perfect score, they implicitly claim mastery of the national curriculum, yet the two assessments prioritize different aspects of language ability. Furthermore, the predictive value of IELTS for domestic academic success is uncertain. A 2025 study by Phan [28] found no statistically significant differences across IELTS score groups in psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in key learning skills among Vietnamese college students. This finding suggests that IELTS scores at admission may not strongly predict certain non-cognitive dimensions of academic success, such as psychological well-being and self-efficacy, in local higher-education contexts. Within the broader context of increasing university autonomy and the market-oriented development of higher education in Vietnam [29], the growing use of IELTS in admissions may also function as a competitive signaling mechanism rather than solely as a psychometrically validated academic benchmark.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Policy Implications

Integrating the Cambridge IELTS test into Vietnamese university admissions as a direct substitute for the national THPT exam raises critical concerns regarding construct alignment and educational equity. Supported by both qualitative structural mapping and quantitative lexical profiling, this analysis suggests

that the two assessments measure fundamentally different aspects of language proficiency. As a result, until large-scale empirical concordance data becomes available, direct score conversion should be interpreted cautiously and accompanied by rigorous psychometric validation. The THPT 2025 exam, aligned with the *Global Success* curriculum, functions primarily as a discrete-point achievement test that measures nationally defined learning outcomes. In contrast, the IELTS benchmark evaluates integrative academic skills and relies on low-frequency, specialized vocabulary not systematically taught in the national curriculum. Treating IELTS scores as equivalent to mastery of the national curriculum risks construct under-representation and ignores the distinct testing objectives of each assessment.

Beyond the immediate psychometric misalignment, this testing practice may generate wider systemic effects. When high-stakes university admissions diverge heavily from the goals of the national curriculum, they risk creating negative washback. This potentially leads to narrowed learning objectives and a growing reliance on private test preparation. Furthermore, prioritizing an international proficiency construct over a public achievement standard may unintentionally widen socio-economic gaps. Future policies must therefore examine not only psychometric equivalence but also the broader social consequences of replacing national assessments with international benchmarks.

While this exploratory document analysis provides essential foundational insights, several methodological limitations should be noted. This analysis focused on only one THPT exam code, Code 1101, and one IELTS Academic Reading sample from *Cambridge IELTS 20*. Although both materials follow standardized test specifications, they do not fully capture variations in difficulty, topic coverage, item design, or lexical demand across test versions and years. The study used the IELTS Reading module as the main comparison point because it is the closest item-level match to the THPT English examination, which mainly assesses reading comprehension and language form. However, IELTS is a four-skill proficiency test, and its Listening, Writing, and Speaking modules assess different constructs that were outside the scope of this study. The study also did not include paired performance data from students who took both assessments. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as preliminary evidence of possible construct, cognitive, and lexical misalignment, rather than statistical evidence of score equivalence or non-equivalence. Future research should analyze a larger corpus of THPT and IELTS materials and collect paired score data from a large student cohort to support empirical concordance or linking analyses.

To address these concerns, several policy directions are worth considering. First, IELTS should be used as a supplementary measure rather than a direct substitute for the THPT exam, forming part of a broader admissions profile. Second, the Ministry of Education and Training should commission national

studies to examine how IELTS scores relate to the competencies assessed in the THPT exam, ensuring that any score conversions are grounded in solid evidence. Third, curriculum developers could introduce bridging modules at the upper-secondary level to strengthen students' academic vocabulary and integrative skills, helping them meet the demands of tertiary English. Fourth, if international tests continue to play a role in admissions, financial support or partnerships with test providers could help reduce barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening local assessment systems, such as expanding the four-skill version of VSTEP, so they better reflect the national context. Overall, a more evidence-based and equitable approach to language assessment would allow Vietnamese higher education to align with global standards while maintaining fairness and coherence within the national system.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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