

Student Language Production, Second Language Tasks, and Instructional Scaffolding in an  
English-based Curriculum in Vietnam: Realities and Hopes

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation investigates L2 student language production, task-based instruction, and teachers' scaffolding strategies in two special EFL classes in a Vietnamese university. Two English teachers and 73 students were studied as they participated in a nationwide educational project known as the Advanced Curriculum (AC), an initiative launched by the Ministry of Education and Training in 2006 to strengthen English capacities of university students and teachers and produce a generation of graduates ready to perform on the global stage. An English-only policy is applied in both language and content classes under the AC, with the expectation

that it will lead to revolutionary changes in L2 pedagogical practices and students' L2 performance. This research explores to what extent these changes are happening with respect to student language production, range of L2 activities in class, and teacher's instructional strategies, especially those that scaffold learning. To do this, the researcher spent three months working closely with the 75 participants in and outside of the classroom, conducted interviews with the teachers, and gathered information from school administrators. Triangulated qualitative data were then analyzed and discussed through the lens of various theoretical frameworks pertaining to complexity, accuracy, and fluency in L2 performance; task-based instruction; and instructional scaffolding. The findings show that the implementation of the AC has resulted in 1) an increase in L2 language production within groupwork despite occasional instances of L1 use; 2) a wider range of collaborative L2 tasks that promote students' communicative skills; 3) a more student-centered interactional pattern between the teacher and students where different scaffolding strategies are used to facilitate learning. These results indicate that the benefits brought to the learners by the AC outweigh its challenges and that revolutionary changes **are** happening—changes that will bring both lessons and hope for a brighter future for English language teaching in Vietnam.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- AC: Advanced Curriculum
- CAF: Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency
- CLT: Language Teaching
- CSU: Colorado State University
- EFL: English as a Foreign Language
- ELT: English Language Teaching
- ESL: English as a Second Language
- ESP: English for Specific Purposes
- MOET: Ministry of Education and Training
- NHU: Northeast Hanoi University
- SCT: Sociocultural Theory
- SLA: Second Language Acquisition
- TTT: Teacher Talk Time

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 The ELT landscape in Vietnam: Global trend and challenges**

#### ***1.1.1 Historical background***

Vietnam has not always been a monolingual country given its strong historical ties to and occupation by the Chinese, and then nearly a century of colonization by France. Together these forced an assimilation of these languages into the indigenous Vietnamese culture, so a great portion of Vietnamese education and culture has been heavily influenced by both China and France. More recently Vietnam underwent a few decades of North-South separation marked by an American intervention in the south that finally ended with the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. It should also be mentioned that before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian was a compulsory subject in many schools in Vietnam. Among the four top foreign languages (Chinese, French, Russian, and English) being taught before the *Renovation* (also known as *Doi Moi*) in 1986, Russian dominated the scene (Hoang, 2013). However, the increasing influence of globalization and internationalization in the years since then, with English gaining its incredibly powerful status as the world's *lingua franca*, has increased the urgency for English language teaching (ELT) worldwide.

#### ***1.1.2 The global trend in ELT***

The integration of Vietnam into the global world was still limited until the Vietnamese government launched sweeping economic and political reforms, opening the door for rapid increases in international trade and other relations in the 1990s. In 1995, Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations with the US, followed by an exchange of ambassadors in 1997. With this restoration of diplomatic ties with the US, and the vigorous attempts to join the World Trade Organization in 2007, Vietnam took further steps to communicate with the world in the

globalized language of English. As an example, in 2006 nearly 98% of high schools in Vietnam had English as a foreign language in their curriculum (Nguyen, 2006). Departments of foreign languages were formed in many more universities and colleges regardless of their specializations. Hence a university that specializes in forestry, such as Northeast Hanoi University (NHU), has its own English department. This is a far cry from the days when all language, math, physical education, and philosophy teachers were placed in the same department, often referred to as “general education.”

In the 2000s, the much greater demand for English language teaching exceeded the capacity of the public school and university system. This led to the rapid growth of private language schools, the recruitment of native English speaking teachers from overseas, and establishment of testing centers to issue English certificates that were increasingly required for employment. This helped alleviate the pressure to develop ELT within public education and respond to the need for a more competitive and capable workforce. This demand has continued to the present day and forced public universities to improve their English education and regain their reputation so that they don't lose their students to the private language centers. It didn't take very long for the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to catch wind of this competition and various initiatives have been proposed and implemented to reform the ELT situation in higher education and keep up with the ongoing process of globalization. However, the implementation and popularization of the English language has been far from expeditious and easy. At every stage there have been trials, errors, and challenges.

### ***1.1.3 The challenges of English education***

The mass implementation of English as a compulsory subject in school has faced numerous obstacles, starting with a lack of qualified teaching staff, and exacerbated by a typical class size of 50-70 students. With respect to the limited teaching staff, there was a period where numerous French and Russian teachers were hastily converted to English teachers through informal training courses provided by either the Hanoi College of Foreign Languages or the University of Languages and International Studies, formerly known as the College of Foreign Languages. These are the two biggest foreign language universities in the country that could offer in-service English teacher education with a certificate. From these programs a generation of language teachers was certified to teach English and therefore were able to maintain their faculty status and tenure, making it difficult for younger or more formally trained English teachers to get jobs. Meanwhile, the number of English learners increased over the years, making class size even harder to manage. On average, a teacher at NHU is in charge of 200-250 students (4-5 classes) each semester, teaching 25-30 hours a week. Any desire for improving teaching methodology or doing research can easily be forced aside to make time for teaching, lesson planning, and grading. NHU's policy is that a full-time teaching load is 450 hours a year, with any additional hours resulting in extra pay. The way the system is set up allows for a situation where the shortage of teaching staff is turned into an economic "opportunity" since the teachers take heavier workloads to receive higher income from the extra teaching hours. Ironically and sadly, the short-staffed situation is a reality that some teachers find more comfortable to live with than to change because employing more teachers means cutting down on teaching hours and earning power.

In short, the opportune global call for international collaboration in education, science, and technology gives us the impetus to change and adapt to the new ELT situation. Vietnam has responded to this call with the launching of various English programs<sup>1</sup> and generous investment in upgrading the teaching and learning conditions as well as teacher training. One of the most well-funded programs is known as the Advance Curriculum (AC) project initiated by MOET to expand Vietnamese universities' international collaboration with a developed country in teaching and research. The purpose of this project is to bring about revolutionary changes in Vietnamese ELT in higher education. The section below provides detailed information about this project and how it led to my dissertation research.

## **1.2 The Advanced Curriculum: Toward an English-only regime in ELT**

The Advanced Curriculum is projected to be a 20-year nationwide project funded by MOET that began in 2006 and has now been implemented in 12 major universities in Vietnam (Le, 2016). The overall intent of the AC is to strengthen the training capacity of universities in Vietnam by developing curricula that are modeled directly after existing majors at universities in developed countries, and developing the capacity to teach these programs in English. Since each AC program will be imported from a well-recognized university abroad, its implementation requires a tight partnership with the originating university. NHU was one of the institutions that joined the project in 2009, and the AC partner is Colorado State University (CSU), from which the curriculum in Natural Resources Management (NRM) is imported. So far it has recruited seven cohorts of undergraduate students and sent five groups of NHU faculty to the CSU for professional training. As the primary English teacher, I was one of the very first faculty to be

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<sup>1</sup> Some other examples of these programs are Learning Box UK for elementary students, Common European Framework of Reference's (CERF) B1-level English, which is required for middle school teachers, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project, and so on.

involved in the AC. My charge was to develop the English curriculum for the AC and teach the first cohort of 31 AC students for approximately 30 hours a week for one year. After I left for my PhD program in the US in 2011, the English teachers appointed to teach the AC courses took over the curriculum and adapted it to fit their teaching preferences.

For the Advanced Curriculum project at NHU, CSU is assisting in the development and implementation of an advanced curriculum in Natural Resources Management. This is designed as a five-year degree program, **with the first year consisting of intensive English language training** and a series of political and self-defense courses (physical education) that are required for all undergraduate degree programs in Vietnam. The curriculum for the next four years copies the NRM major at Colorado State University, entailing multiple subject courses conducted in English such as Natural Resource Ecology and Management, Biological Diversity, Tropical Vegetation Management, and so on. The following goals as set up for CSU students are also applied to NHU students. Upon graduation, the students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of subject areas relevant to the major fields of study in natural resources management;
2. Communicate their knowledge of natural resources both verbally and in written form;
3. Demonstrate learning of subject areas outside of their major study focus, including social science analytic techniques.

*(From the Advanced Curriculum Proposal, original document provided by NHU)*

Overall, the curriculum aims at helping students obtain a broad-based education in the use and management of natural resources, and a more focused field of study in later years. It should be evident that both the overall curriculum and the individual courses have to be adapted to NHU because of the differences in socioeconomic conditions and political structure.

With the agenda above, MOET provided most of the funding for the first four years to establish the degree program and train the Vietnamese faculty who will be teaching in the AC program. The anticipated result is both a modernization and strengthening of the universities in Vietnam, and the continuing production of undergraduates with a strong academic background and competency in English. As MOET envisions a future of joint research and exchange of students and teachers internationally, it asks that all AC's English programs operate on an English-only principle. After 10 years of implementation, the AC and its intensive English programs have presented a wide array of potential research topics that have surprisingly not yet been explored, and this provided the basis for my dissertation research.

### **1.3. Research questions**

The launching of the Advanced Curriculum (AC) in Vietnam brought both excitement and skepticism, and in fact it was the latter that prompted and inspired this research. The skepticism mostly comes from concerns over teachers' and students' English capability, and whether the AC program is capable of giving students what it advertised (improved English proficiency, opportunity to learn with US professors, diploma co-signed by a US university, and so on). As somebody who was deeply involved in the AC as a teacher as well as an English curriculum designer, I had the opportunity to listen to all these concerns coming from students, parents, and administrators. These concerns need to be addressed to justify the AC's governmental funding and reassure all stake-holders, considering the fact that the AC students are being placed on a completely new and different track than the other standard four-year degree programs that have been running for decades.

Lying at the core of the circumstance described above is the exigency of conducting classroom research to investigate and evaluate the outcome of the English curriculum under the

AC project. This exigency was confirmed as I spent time talking with the English teachers and administrators at NHU, meeting with the AC program coordinator from CSU, and attending a kick-off meeting for another AC program at the master's level in summer 2014 with NHU's administrators and leaders. This dissertation reflects my commitment to produce such research to help provide resources to both English teachers and administrators when evaluating the overall efficiency and quality of the AC's English program. Taking all parties' best interests into consideration, I formulated the following research questions for my dissertation:

- 1) To what extent do the students comply with the English-only policy/requirement under the AC project? What is their L2 performance with respect to complexity, accuracy, and fluency and overall L2 production?
- 2) Considering the AC's goal, which is to teach the students both linguistic and communicative skills to perform on a global stage, what methodological changes have the teachers made with respect to the range of L2 tasks and learning activities? To what extent do these tasks and activities facilitate or inhibit the students from achieving this goal?
- 3) To what extent do the English teachers comply with the English-only policy/requirement? What methodological changes have the teachers in the AC program made with respect to their interactional and scaffolding strategies, and what impact do these strategies have on student oral language production?

In finding answers to the questions above, I combined different qualitative techniques such as participatory observation, video-taping, interviewing, gathering classroom artifacts, and taking field notes. These give very detailed assessments of what is happening in class and how this should be interpreted. On this basis, my dissertation serves as both a comprehensive report

and a pioneering research study that will benefit both administrators and EFL teachers at NHU. In a larger context, my research will be of interest for teaching English as a foreign language at other universities, especially those that also have an AC project underway. What we have achieved and what we are still struggling with at NHU are experiences to be shared among all involved and interested parties who have been and will be working together to change the course of ELT in Vietnam for the better in the years to come.

#### **1.4 Chapters overview**

This dissertation is organized in seven chapters as described below.

**Chapter 1, *Introduction***, lays out the macro and micro institutional contexts and historical events that led to the current ELT scene in Vietnam as well as at NHU. It describes the Advanced Curriculum project and its experimental English-only program that prompted this research.

**Chapter 2, *Review of Literature***, draws on existing theoretical and empirical SLA research that correlates with the issues raised in the three research questions. Specifically, it reviews both qualitative and quantitative studies of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in ESL/EFL learners' oral language. From this review, I critically analyze the pitfalls of current metrics used in measuring CAF and described a set of CAF measures I adapted that suit my research objectives. This chapter also incorporates a small discussion of L1 use and humor in groupwork since these elements are, despite their being important indicators of students' learning, often marginalized in formal assessment of student oral performance (i.e., they cannot be categorized under complexity, accuracy, or fluency).

**Chapter 3, *Research Methodology***, explains the procedures that I followed to collect classroom data over my three months at NHU. It also describes how my investigation was

triangulated by converging various sources of data such as video-taping, interviewing, field notes, and classroom artefacts. Other background information about the 75 participants (73 students and 2 teachers) and learning context at NHU is presented in this chapter.

**Chapter 4, *Student Talk: Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency and Beyond***, examines oral language production in three focal groups as well as assessing their L2 performance with respect to complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Student speech was first analyzed in terms of t-units and c-units to measure syntactic complexity, then the number of errors found in these units were calculated to assess accuracy. Finally, four indicators (*self-repairs, repetitions, overlaps, and fillers*) were selected to measure fluency. Other phenomena arising from student speech, such as use of L1 and humor, also were investigated since they emerged as an integral part of learning.

**Chapter 5, *Student Language Production: A Cross-task Analysis***, investigates the correlation between classroom tasks and the interactional patterns they engendered. Differences in cognitive and interactive demands of a task have some bearing on the amount and quality of oral language production. For example, some tasks were found to effectively generate talking, while some others only stimulated regurgitated speech (i.e., students' talk was full of recitations from a text).

**Chapter 6, *Teacher-Fronted Interactional Patterns***, shifts the focus from student talk to teacher talk. It first estimates the overall talking time of each teacher and analyzes their methodological adaption to meet the guidelines of the Advanced Curriculum. More specifically, it reports the different scaffolding strategies used by the teachers during teacher-fronted time and how these corresponded to student language production. These observations of teacher-student interactions allowed me to recognize what has been accomplished and what still requires improvement in the implementation of the English curriculum at NHU.

**Chapter 7, *Conclusions and Pedagogical Suggestions***, summarizes the findings from the three previous data analysis chapters and ties them back to the research questions. Several pedagogical suggestions are offered to help address some of the remaining issues that potentially inhibit student learning. This chapter concludes with both a critical evaluation of the gap between goals and outcomes of the English-only policy at NHU, and a recognition of the English teachers' important contributions to the overall success of the AC program.

The wealth of information and analysis generated by my dissertation goes well beyond the page length that I aimed at, so a selection of these additional materials is included in the Appendix section for the reader's reference. Translated talk is italicized and Vietnamese cultural references are explained in footnotes where necessary.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter brings together different frameworks and theories in second language acquisition (SLA) to shed light on L2 classroom discourse as a multilayered fabric interwoven by student talk, teacher talk and other non-linguistic elements such as task types. The first part reviews the change towards a more communicative teaching approach and the urge to create a more interactive and authentic L2 class in Vietnam. The second part discusses student talk during group work with respect to the complexity-accuracy-fluency (CAF) model that researchers use to measure and evaluate L2 proficiency. The chapter then supplements the CAF model with a review of L1 use in ESL/EFL classes since L1 use has been gaining much attention by teachers and administrators in Vietnam given that they have recently been trying to put forth an English-only policy in the L2 classes. The next section synthesizes task-based instruction studies that focus on the potential correlation between task types and CAF. Finally, the last section gathers thoughts and insights on teacher talk and presents empirical research showing which interactional patterns are more likely to generate student participation.

### **2.1 The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) trend**

With English fever spreading in Southeast Asia over the past few decades, English teachers and administrators in Vietnam have become more informed about the methodological reforms in teaching English as a second and foreign language. While the break up with traditional teaching methods has not been finalized yet, English classes have been moving toward the common trend of *communicative language teaching* (CLT) where student-centeredness and communicative competence become utmost pedagogical priorities. However, in

Vietnam adopting CLT is a process that can take decades to see the end results, and there are historical and sociocultural explanations for this slow transformation.

Historically, the *grammar-translation* method (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) is believed to have left the most profound imprint on teachers' and students' perception of second language learning in Vietnam. Within this method, the students' native language is often exploited by the teacher for explicit explanation and delivery of grammar rules. Full translation from L1 to L2 and vice versa is the main activity through which L2 is taught. As such, the grammar-translation method has long borne the criticism that it only teaches *about* L2, and not L2 itself. Bilingual literacy in this context then can be referred to as "parallel monolingualism" (Heller, 1999) because L1 and L2 are isolated in the mind of language learners. The act of translating a literature text involves working in L2 at one time (to read) and then L1 at another time (to translate). Despite being decried for its seemingly ineffectiveness in teaching L2, the grammar-translation method is still practiced to some extent in many English classes today but often in combination with other methods.

When CLT was introduced in 1970s (Howatt, 1983; Littlewood, 1981; Richard & Rogers, 1986) to improve learners' *communicative competence* (Hymes, 1972), it challenged the long-held principles of both *grammar-translation* and *direct* approaches. CLT places an emphasis on orality, meaningful communication, and collaborative learning. In addition, a CLT approach promotes communicative competence as opposed to grammatical competence. For example, teachers are encouraged to teach communicative skills such as how to apologize, ask for direction, or make a request in the target language. A CLT class is one that ensures sufficient exposure to the target language, presents real-life communicative situations in the classroom, highlights interpersonal activities, motivates two-way conversations, prioritizes fluency over

accuracy and so on. The core principles of CLT places teachers and learners in a learning space where verbal language production becomes both a vehicle and a product of learning. Moreover, it is essential for teachers to use authentic materials and create tasks that resemble those people do in real life. This principle alone leads to the birth of a sub-method of CLT, widely known as the task-based language teaching approach that has been employed in ESL/EFL class worldwide ever since.

## **2.2 Task-based instruction: The counterfeit and the real**

Task-based instruction is known as an approach to syllabus design with an emphasis on performance of a wide range of tasks (Brandl, 2008). Researchers categorize tasks as pedagogical or real-world depending of their goals. For example, Ellis (2003) defines a pedagogical task as “a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically...and is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world” (p.16). This view of task has a focus on language production (e.g., the production of a particular linguistic form) while the real-world view sees tasks in its literal meaning, “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others ...the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between” (Long, 1985, p.89). Brandl (2008) comments that the second view has a non-linguistic outcome (i.e., getting something done), and when transformed from the real world in a classroom context, a task will be pedagogical in nature (p.2). For example, the task of making a hotel reservation in real life can be introduced in class with a communicative goal for students to focus on things such as phone conversation etiquette, but at the same time it can be used to target a linguistic structure such as forming questions rules. Ramirez (1995) also distinguishes academic and non-academic tasks,

but since all of these tasks take place in an academic setting, it is not easy to draw the line between an academic task and a non-academic one.

Having observed task-based instruction in two completely different contexts (EFL classes in Vietnam and ESL classes in the US), I notice that many pedagogical tasks in the classroom were designed to mimic a real-life task such as giving direction, writing to the professor about a late assignment, or calling the plumber to fix a clogged sink. However, for learners at the beginning level, many of these classroom tasks were “watered down” for students to practice certain language structures. As Long (2015) points out, those tasks are rather counterfeit and designed with often simplified rather than authentic language. Long uses the example of a job interview task being carried out in class but the sub-skill behind this is not practicing for a job interview but using the different forms of question in the target language. Advocates of genuine task-based instruction such as Ellis, Long himself, and Skehan label these tasks as “lower-case task-based,” “consciousness-raising” tasks, and “task-supported” activities. Other researchers believe a task-supported syllabus can serve as “a bridge between traditional synthetic syllabi and genuine task-based approaches” (as described by Long, 2015, p.7). Despite the push for authenticity, “lower-case” task-based instruction still confirms its merits as adoptable, beneficial, practical, and valid.

After reviewing multiple classroom excerpts from previous studies and my own data, I find it unnecessary to separate these two functions of a task since no matter what activity is involved, the purpose of an L2 task designed in light of the task-based approach is always twofold. It can aim at teaching a communicative skill to function in a real-life situation and at the same time to teach a linguistic skill to perform the target language more appropriately. L2 classes are a special case because this is where language is used both as a vehicle and a goal. Interacting

with the teacher and peers can also be considered a real-life task although it yields pedagogical and institutional discourse—something quite different from real-life discourse. In fact, when placed in the classroom environment, the students will focus more on the linguistic part of the task since it is the mindset they have when they find themselves in the role of an EFL learner. In the L2 class, learning takes place “as a product of performing task” (Ellis, 2003, p.1) and mainly through eliciting authentic discourse (e.g., linguistic forms necessary to order food in the restaurant). Task-based instruction is not meant to be a place where students learn how to perform a task in real life even though some tasks do engage students to an extent where they feel they are not just learning the language but learning to do things for real life purposes.

This review of literature in task-based learning allows me to understand the subtle differences between the pedagogical goals behind each task (e.g., is the goal to use past tense correctly or to write a report on a home accident?) so that I can avoid misleading and invalid commentaries about the class as a researcher. The relevance of task-based instruction also lies in its methodological principles. Some of these include using tasks as an organizational principle, learning through doing, using realistic, meaningful, comprehensible input, and promoting collaborative work (Brandl, 2015). These principles allow for a learner-centered focus in the L2 classroom and optimize student engagement. Seeing the lower-case version of task-based instruction in the two English classes under the Advanced Curriculum (AC) experiment at NHU was a fulfilling experience as I feel we teachers are on the right track to meet the AC’s guidelines.

## 2.3 Language production: Complexity-Accuracy-Fluency (CAF)

### 2.3.1 Defining CAF

With a task-based approach, L2 classes generally enjoy a more interactive learning space with higher oral language production, and this has changed the way student performance and progress are evaluated. Instead of grading students mostly on paper tests, the teacher now has to expand his or her assessment methods to include students' verbal participation in classroom tasks. The Complexity-Accuracy-Fluency triad (CAF) has emerged as a comprehensive and prominent model to assess language proficiency. This model was first developed by Brumfit in the late 1970s with only two constructs, accuracy and fluency, to differentiate the two trends in L2 class activities as *accuracy-oriented* and *fluency-oriented* (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). It was not until Skehan's (1989) suggestion of the third dimension, *complexity*, was the CAF model completed. Since then, CAF has gained much interest from SLA researchers and teachers with the consensus that a proficient L2 learner should be able to demonstrate accurate, fluent, and complex language use.

In defining the three constructs of CAF, Skehan (2009) proposes that more advanced language constitutes complexity, more attention to avoid errors promotes accuracy, and more fluid, uninterrupted speech flow brings about fluency. Along these lines is Ellis's (2009) elaboration that complexity "involves greater willingness to take risk," (p.475) while fluency emphasizes meanings. Accuracy refers to "the extent to which an L2 performance deviates from a norm" (Housen et al., 2012, p4), especially syntactical and morphological norms. While these definitions are straightforward, tracing the traits of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in L2 classrooms has turned out to be challenging since none of these attributes is static, or inherently measurable. Researchers have been trying to take a more cautious approach when applying CAF

for language proficiency assessment as they see the “multidimensional nature of CAF, the interacting effects of both learner-internal and learner-external factors” (Housen et al., p.16). Similarly, Norris and Ortega (2009) propose a more “organic” approach to applying CAF. The “organic” view here means that researchers need to “capture the fully integrated ecology of CAF development in specific learning contexts over time” (p.556). The writers then detail the various measures that have been used in task-based empirical research to conclude that we cannot expect constant predictive values among complexity, fluency, and accuracy. This study also challenges novice CAF investigators’ assumption that the more measures are used, the more accurate the result will be. In fact, there have been many overlaps identified among the measures, and sometimes, even just one or two indicators for each aspect of CAF would be indicative enough to evaluate a student’s overall performance. For research studies that do not seek to explicate development, or those where the researcher can only have a limited time on site, it might be a worthwhile practice to select fewer measures to avoid the unnecessary workload and overlapping data.

Despite all the challenges in measuring, the CAF triad have traversed a wide area of SLA research, showing their components’ collective practicality as dependent indicators of linguistic proficiency. They have also been used as independent variables in more recent research that is informed by psycholinguistic theories. As such, CAF are believed to originate from the learner’s interlinguistic knowledge such as “L2 rules and lexico-formulaic knowledge” (Housen & Kuiken, 2009, p.462). The implementation of CAF as a principal means of assessment in SLA research, however, has revealed that it is easier to employ and explain CAF as dependent variables than independent variables, considering the common sense that student’s performance is affected by many external factors such as task type, prior knowledge, and planning time.

### 2.3.2 Measuring CAF in classroom data

CAF-oriented research has often been led by the two key questions: what makes an L2 learner a proficient language user and how can L2 proficiency be most adequately (i.e., validly, feasibly, reliably) measured? (Housen et al., p.1). My impression with the CAF measuring apparatuses, as gathered from different studies for this literature review, is that very few of these can be applied in classrooms for teacher to assess their students' language proficiency. Rather these measuring tools are designed for researchers' use since they are more likely to have the motivation and expertise to scrutinize learner speech and evaluate its quantity and quality to gather data about the learner's proficiency. In this section, I outline the issues involved in operationalizing the use of this construct by researchers, in the next, I explain how it is used in this study.

Before measuring any element of CAF, researchers have to find a way to define utterance boundaries so that they can compartmentalize speech into measurable units. Some of the most commonly used segmentation of speech include the t-unit, c-unit, and AS-unit. A t-unit is defined as "one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it" (Hunt, 1965, cf. Foster et al., p.360). Although this definition gives the impression that a t-unit is a longer stretch of speech like a long sentence, in fact, that is not always the case especially when it is applied to examine naturalistic oral speech data. In speaking, t-units tend to come in much shorter chunks such as *I see* or *It's ok*, but as long as there is a clause present, the utterance is qualified as a t-unit. Crookes (1990) argues that researchers who want to use t-units for analyzing oral speech will have to "ignore the speaker disfluencies" (p.191). However, using the procedures in Brook (1962) and Kawauchi (2005), I consider any segment of speech a t-unit even if it contains an incorrect copula, preposition, article, or inflectional morphology (p.152). A multiple-clause t-unit

that contains frequent pauses will also be counted as one t-unit if the speaker manages to complete his or her thought (e.g., *I will save the boy...because he he er has many...er talents*). However, an abandoned clause or any segment of speech that does not express a complete thought will be excluded from the counting, such as the underlined text in the following example: *I think the doctor will—will...er he's way too—he's way too er...um, too too....* This utterance could potentially have had two or three clauses but the speaker did not finish the second one so this t-unit only has one clause.

In oral speech, it is very common to find utterances that do not conceptually fit in the definition of a t-unit, such as *yes* and *not really* since they do not really have the complete structure of a clause with a subject and a verb. In this case, a c-unit is used to take into account all the other smaller segments of speech such as single words, verbless phrases, sentences, regardless of its accuracy as long as they “provide [some] referential or pragmatic meaning” (Pica et al., 1989, p.72). Norris and Ortega (2009) also suggested that the c-unit is a more appropriate and practical index to analyze dialogic or oral data, especially those produced by low-proficiency learners. Yet many see t-units and c-units as equivalent, except that c-units include isolated phrases without a verb and/or a subject. To avoid the overlapping segmentation, in this dissertation I use the traditional definition of a t-unit but a modified definition of a c-unit. This means a t-unit in the data is a speech segment that contains a main clause and all its constituent constructions while a c-unit is basically all the shorter fragmented and verbless responses. There are some other methods of segmenting speech proposed by different researchers such as a *tone unit* (Crystal & Davy, 1975; Quirk et al. 1985), *idea unit* (Kroll, 1977), *analysis of speech (AS) unit* (Foster et al., 2000) that attempt to capture speaker disfluencies and

present oral data in more detail. However, these will not be discussed in this research report due to space constraints and research objectives.

Among the three elements of CAF, complexity seems to pose more challenges than the other two due to its abstractness. Nevertheless, two primary approaches to measuring complexity have been identified and practiced. The first approach focuses more on the length-based metrics, such as mean number of clauses per t-unit while the other approach measures complexity via subordination and phrasal elaboration (Norris & Ortega, 2009; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). A more heuristic view of CAF contends that there are at least three components of complexity, namely *propositional complexity*, *discourse-interactional complexity*, and *linguistic complexity* (Bulté & Housen, 2012). Propositional complexity is related to the number of idea units or amount of information the learner can give in conveying his or her message. Discourse-interactional complexity is still a concept under debate but refers to “the number and type of turn changes that learners initiate and the interactional moves and participation roles that they engage in” (p.25). Linguistic complexity is probably the most investigated aspect of complexity in learner performance as it characterizes speech as having global complexity and local complexity<sup>2</sup>. These refer to the learner’s *breadth* (grammatical diversity) and *depth* (grammatical sophistication) of linguistic competency respectively. In addition to all this, Skehan (2009) makes a point that complexity needs to be supplemented by measures of lexical performance (p.528), which explains the presence of variables such as type-token ratio and lexical sophistication in the CAF-based research. The good news is that lexical density can be largely processed and quantified by text content analyzers available online although their interpretative

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<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as system complexity and structure complexity

power should always be used with care since they tend to be more accurate for written texts than spoken ones.

Fluency, which is often equated with overall language proficiency, is treated as one aspect of proficiency in this research. In CAF literature, fluency has generally been assessed by the fluidity of speech flow and therefore often associated with the quantification of word per minutes and number of pauses in a t-unit or in a turn. One interesting phenomenon in fluency research is that researchers tend to start off aiming at measuring fluency but end up measuring dysfluency traits in the data and use these to determine a speaker's fluency. Skehan (2003) proposes three signs of dysfluency including *breakdown*, *repair*, and *speed* (dys)fluency, which are reflected by the number of pauses, self-correction, and rate of speaking respectively. Earlier in the 1990s, fluency was examined in two categories. *Temporal fluency* refers to the rate of speaking, frequency, length, and placement of pauses, length of fluent runs between pauses. *Vocal fluency* refers to the number of false starts, reformulations, and functionless repetitions (Lennon, 1990, 2000). Both Skehan's and Lennon's methods for measuring fluency place an emphasis on the "exterior" symptoms of fluency, those that are temporal and spontaneous while in fact "the underlying processes and mechanisms [of fluency] must relate to the manner in which linguistic information has been stored and can be recalled from memory systems," as Towell (2012, pp.55-56) points out. It is true that empirical CAF research has not addressed those "underlying processes and mechanisms" very much as most studies on fluency only utilize oral data produced in real time. In fact, this offers a new direction to research in fluency where the focus of investigation can be shifted to how to make learners' prior linguistic knowledge more accessible for them since this will automatically lead to their ability to speak faster and probably with the fewest pauses.

The last element of the CAF is accuracy, something that L2 learners are obsessed with the most. Yet it turns out to be the most measurable and straightforward aspect of L2 performance. To measure accuracy, researchers generally count the number of grammatical errors in a speech sample (Bygate, 2001; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Errors can also be counted in every 100 words (Inoue, 2010) and not necessarily within a t-unit. An alternative way of measuring accuracy is to look at error-free units and lexical errors (Wendell, 1997). Some researchers even focus only on the accurate use of the grammatical feature being targeted (e.g., use of past tense verbs). However, for general measures, Inoue (2010) suggests that calculating error-free clauses is a safe and valid method to use. It should be noted that not all errors are identifiable in oral speech such as the omission of certain morphemes (e.g., *-ed* in the past tense) due to the interference of the learners' L1. For example, when the *-ed* part is not heard, it is difficult for me to decide if it is the student's misuse of tense or if it is pronounced so softly that the recorder cannot capture it. Similarly, other phonological, or pronunciation errors are not documented in many studies due to discrepancies in defining phonological "norms" and quality of recording devices. If one pronounces a word putting the stress on the wrong syllable, should we count it as an error? If we are not sure if the *-ed* part is pronounced or not, should we assume there is no error? It seems that the researcher will have to make his or her own decision when treating unclear speech and stay consistent throughout the coding. We can only catch a morphological error when the mistake is obvious and audible, such as when one says *They have two childs*. Yet the fact is that many teachers are able to guess what their students are trying to say and what they really mean even if their speech is erroneous. It is interesting to see how inaccurate speech does not always interfere with comprehension or communication but still puts

the speaker under more pressure than the other two factors in the CAF, probably due to our long history of accuracy-oriented instruction in L2 education.

### 2.3.3 Summary of CAF measures in task-based research

The following table summarizes the various measures in task-based performance research with the bold text indicating the measures employed for my own research after considering both the learner and task factors.

*Table 2.1 CAF measurements in research*

<b>Researcher</b>	<b>Complexity</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>	<b>Fluency</b>
Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008	Mean length of t-unit; mean number of clauses per t-unit	Accurate use of relative clause	Mean number of word per minute
Inoue, 2010	<b>Syntactic complexity</b> (Analysis unit lengths; number of subordinate clauses per unit); <b>lexical complexity</b>	% of error-free clauses; <b>errors per analysis unit</b> ; % of target-like use of past tense	Mean length of runs; speech rate Hesitation markers ( <b>number of repetitions</b> , false starts, <b>reformulation</b> , replacement)
Tavokoli & Skehan, 2005	Clauses per analysis unit	Error-free clauses; Suppliance of past form of copular, regular, and irregular verbs	Speech rate; total silence; various repair measures
Skehan & Foster, 2005	Subordinate clauses per analysis unit;	<b>Error-free clauses</b>	End of clause pauses; mid-clause pauses; filled pauses; length of run; reformulations; false starts
Yuan & Ellis, 2003	Clauses per T-unit; number of different verb forms; and mean segmental type-token ratio.	Error-free clauses; percentage of correct verb forms	Syllables per min; pruned syllables per min;
Kawauchi, 2005	Number of clause per t-unit; t-unit length; number of subordinate clauses; number of word types.	Past tense markers for copula be; auxiliary verbs; regular and irregular verbs	Rate of speech; repetition;

(3 studies adopted from Ellis 2009, p.478)

To conclude, the overall operationalization of CAF by learners is known to be controlled by the trade-off hypothesis (Skehan 2003; Skehan & Foster, 2001), as revealed in research where findings show the higher performance in one aspect occurred at the decrease of another due to learner's limited mental resources and/or attention span. This competitive relationship between complexity, fluency, and accuracy may also be due to the nature of the task type and learners' preference of which aspect they want to attend to. With that being said, the trade-off effect can be more or less controlled by designing tasks that stimulate a certain domain of CAF. The following section outlines such a relationship between task types and CAF and details some other variables such as learner preference and planning time, those that have been proved to have a direct impact on the operationalization of CAF.

#### **2.4 The relationship between task types and CAF**

In addition to the *trade-off hypothesis* as mentioned in the previous section, CAF-based research also sometimes references the *cognitive hypothesis* (Robinson, 2005, 2007) since these two hypotheses are useful tools for researchers to explain how CAF operates in different task types. Teachers can benefit from being able to see the connections between a task design and its potential to promote one or more aspects of CAF. From there they can structure and sequence tasks to help boost complexity, accuracy, or fluency depending on the goal of the lesson. Some of the research findings, as drawn from Skehan's (2001, 2009) and Robinson and Gilabert's (2007) studies, have generalized the relation between task types and CAF as follow:

- *Personal exchange tasks*: promotes accuracy and fluency but not complexity;
- *Narrative tasks*: yield higher complexity but lower accuracy and fluency;
- *Tasks with ample pre-planning time*: advantage complexity and fluency;
- *Tasks with familiar topics*: promote accuracy and fluency;
- *Tasks with a clear structure*: promote better accuracy and fluency;
- *Interactive tasks*: advantage accuracy and complexity;
- *Tasks that require information manipulation*: yield higher complexity.

It should be noted that the above suggestions do not imply a permanent relation between a task type and the outcome of CAF in the learner's speech because such correlations are always context-dependent and learner-specific. For example, if a learner sees "speaking fast" as an attribute of a proficient L2 speaker, he or she will generally pay more attention to fluency. However, if the learner sees making mistakes as embarrassing, then he or she will attend more to accuracy. Lower proficiency learners often show little interest in elaborating their language and therefore do not attend to complexity. For them, to speak correctly and clearly already makes them feel occupied. Again, this supports the trade-off hypothesis that learner's attentional capacity does not allow him or her to obtain good performance in all three areas of proficiency simultaneously. The generalizations above will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5, where I use my own data to test previous findings in the task type-CAF correlations. I frame CAF findings in Chapter 4 in terms of both of the trade-off and cognitive hypotheses.

## **2.5 Task types and language production**

The discussion about how task types relate to language production is detailed in this dissertation due to its audience's<sup>3</sup> interests in how much talking is generated in the class. As a reminder, the Advanced Curriculum's guidelines underscore verbal language production and this urges teachers to create a more interactive and productive learning space through variegated tasks and activities that promote student talk.

The shift to a more verbally active classroom must have originated from the 1990s with the rising of interactionalism (Long & Sato, 1983; Pica et al., 1993), the school of thoughts that views negotiation of meaning with peers as cognitively beneficial for mutual comprehension.

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<sup>3</sup> NHU administrators, English teachers, AC staff, MOET.

Certain types of tasks have been identified as promoting negotiation of meaning and thus leading to greater comprehension. Some of these include two-way information gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, jig saw, opinion exchange tasks, and so on (Pica et al., 1993). Many of these task types are designed in such a way that each speaker possesses a different piece of information, and they can only accomplish the task if they “negotiate” or share the information they have. However, the design of the task itself is not the sole factor that decides how much talking is going to be generated. There are several factors such as task complexity, planning time, and task familiarity that can be obstructive or conducive for oral language production.

Tasks with high cognitive load understandably slow down language production (Ellis, 2003; Robinson, 2007; Salimi & Dadashpour, 2012). This is because oral production, even when not associated with a challenging task, has to undergo the processes of conceptualization and formulation before articulation. A complex task will generally demand more time and attention in the first two processes and/or cause more hesitation in the last one, which results in an overall decrease in the amount of the language produced, especially for low-proficiency learners.

Tasks with familiar topics, or that have been repeatedly executed in class can also elicit more oral and written language production (Bygate & Samuda, 2005), and vice versa. According to these researchers, the repetition of a task can potentially lead to an increase in language production. This is because when students are exposed to a task type they have had experience with before, they can utilize the discourse structures or vocabulary needed to perform the task from their memory (Bygate, 2001). Task-type familiarity is slightly different from task-topic familiarity because the former suggests a familiarity with the procedures of carrying out the activity (e.g., Vietnamese learners are more familiar with fill-in-the-blank tasks than role-playing tasks) while the latter refers to personal experience with the topic being discussed. As such, a

student's unfamiliarity with a topic may lead them to struggle finding appropriate vocabulary and knowledge to talk about it. Students at NHU have to familiarize themselves with both new topics and new task types under the Advanced Curriculum (AC) program. While this is a whole new exciting experience for the more advanced students in the program, the average and less-proficient students find it a tough transition when the tasks tend to ask a lot more of them than the traditional grammar-drill tasks.

Pre-task planning time is another factor that might have a positive correlation with language productivity, but this has not yet been confirmed by empirical research. In fact, Ellis (2005b) proposes three types of planning including pre-task, within-task (also known as on-line planning), and post-task planning, but his research investigates how these types of planning affect language performance with respect to complexity, accuracy, and fluency rather than the overall amount of talking generated by the task. It is not rare to find similar studies carried out in this vein (see also Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), which suggests that research tends to prioritize the quality of language production more than quantity. However, it can be inferred that if a task accelerates complexity and fluency, it is very likely that it increases overall amount of language being spoken since the two variables, length of t-units and number of words per minute, in measuring complexity and fluency, will inevitably cause a surge in language production.

In short, an ideal task for the AC students is one that fosters verbal interaction among themselves. To achieve this goal, NHU English teachers have been working to design tasks that take students out of their comfort zone so that talking and collaborating is mandatory to accomplish a task. Creating a poster together, forming debating groups, role-playing in hypothetical situations are just a few examples of the interactive tasks that are being

experimented with at NHU. Since these tasks reshape interactional dynamics in the classroom, the teachers are also challenged with a new role besides being knowledge transmitters. With CLT and task-based instruction's tenets, teachers now are interlocutors, facilitators, and scaffolders. In this role, they are faced with the challenge of modifying their talking to create more opportunities for the students to learn. When the floor is shared more evenly between the teacher and students, it is expected that classroom discourse is no longer restricted to the traditional register where student talk often has to wait until approved by the teacher.

## **2.6 Teacher talk and L2 development**

### ***2.6.1 Teacher talk as scaffolding: A sociocultural view***

Most L2 teachers these days have been informed of the acquisitional benefits that they can reap from interacting more with students because this interaction lays the groundwork for *scaffolding* and *co-constructing* meanings, the two activities fundamental for L2 development. These terminologies are utilized from the socio-cultural theory (SCT) originated in the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986) who posits that teaching and learning is a socioculturally situated activity that leads to cognitive development. Development is viewed as transformative, future-oriented, and emergent as Vygotsky further explains “we can take account of not only the cycles and maturation processes that have already been completed but also those that are currently in the state of formation” (p.87). Besides, language is a crucial mediational tool for a learner to develop higher mental functions, and the state of development is never defined only by what has matured but also what is in the process of maturing (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

One outstanding concept in SCT is the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a student has mastered and what he or she can achieve with appropriate

support. The logic of ZPD is that teaching should occur “when assistance is offered at points in the ZPD at which performance requires assistance” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This kind of assistance is also known as scaffolding, a metaphor that basically emerges from the conception of ZPD. It attempts to capture the similarity between providing a scaffold when a structure is being built then removing it when construction is finished, and providing gradual support to assist student performance where necessary, then tapering off support as the student can perform the task on his or her own. It is important that this scaffolding procedure bring out the learner’s potential—knowledge and skills that are in a state of change, and measure their enhanced, instead of static and current, abilities. The more we understand the structure and processes of scaffolding (Walqui, 2006, p.164) the more insights we gain into student L2 development.

While used extensively in SCT research, the term *scaffolding* was never mentioned by Vygotsky himself. The original definition is often quoted from Wood et al.’s (1976) work where it is described as a “process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). This original definition has of course been adopted in a wide array of classroom research. For example, Collins et al. (1991), coin the term *cognitive apprenticeship* and emphasize the “fading” feature of scaffolding, arguing that teacher support should taper off to transfer the responsibility to the learner (p.2). Other findings in more recent research seem to support this view, showing that the amount of guidance should be contingent on the learner’s potential abilities, and too much guidance when not needed can inhibit learning (Kinginger, 2002; Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). Although ZPD is a valuable conceptual tool for me to understand the internal course of L2 development, for the most part, in this research I prefer to use the term *scaffolding* since its

broader sense allows me to focus more on the teacher and their scaffolding strategies instead of the learner's ZPD.

### ***2.6.2 Scaffolding through teacher elicitation and teacher echo***

Elicitation is an instructional technique that involves asking questions to get a more detailed response from students or simply to encourage them to provide more information. While teacher questions have been researched extensively in the field of SLA with focus on their different functions such as maintaining attention, encouraging student participation, and checking understanding, in this study I focus on how teacher questions are used as a tool for scaffolding. Although scaffolded help can be categorized as recast, clarification requests, repetition, and so on (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2006), many of these can be done in the form of a question.

Teacher questions are often classified as display or genuine, open or closed, depending on the kind of response they trigger. Display questions are used a lot more often than genuine questions although the latter are believed to elicit more authentic and natural answers (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). While criticisms towards display questions are becoming more heated, in a scaffolding episode it is common to see both types of questions at work. Asking display questions is a very difficult habit to drop since it has long been an automatic and ritual practice for teachers to control classroom discourse. In terms of eliciting student talk, it is conceivable that genuine questions prompt a more in-depth response (Nunan, 1989) while display questions can be used to check student comprehension and expose them to different incidental learning moments. However, after reviewing dozens of scaffolding instances in SCT-based research, I realized that there is always a place somewhere in a scaffolding stage for all kinds of questions to play their role, and display questions are not an exception.

Another noticeable characteristic in teacher scaffolding is teacher echo<sup>4</sup>, the repetition of student's speech in part or in whole. Interestingly, this kind of repetition is often followed with a rising tone and a pause to invite students to complete the utterance (e.g., *so the washerman got angry and...?*), making it sound like a question more than just repetition. Whether in the form of a question or pure repetition, this technique can be very effective in scaffolding student learning in an indirect way because it allows those with delayed comprehension to have more time to process the necessary linguistic structures in order to respond on their second try. In researching classroom discourse and teacher development, Walsh (2002) argues that echo should be used sparingly or else "it will quickly become a habit with little real function" (p.18). This suggests that a considerable portion of classroom discourse is automatic and habitual. Some instructional practices such as teacher echo can be used more consciously to optimize their effects.

While there are many other discursive features of teacher talk that influence learning, the two techniques mentioned above (eliciting and echoing) are believed to be used more frequently than others and an attribute of teacher talk regardless of what subject he or she teaches. If eliciting is used as an instructional tool to get students to talk, repetition provides "more time [for students] to engage in micro and macro conversational planning" (Skehan, 1998). In Chapter 6 of this dissertation, I analyze teacher talk and provide more evidence of how each type of these techniques can be effective or ineffective at different times as they are employed to scaffold learning and generate student verbal participation.

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<sup>4</sup> There is some overlap between teacher echo and repetition. By using the term *teacher echo*, I want to focus on the positive effects of some repetition and distinguish it from the kind of repetition teachers use to fill a gap.

### ***2.6.3 Teacher talk time and student talk time***

In a pilot study back in 2013, I videotaped several ESL classes in an intensive English program in Seattle and shared the transcripts of these classes with the teachers per their request. Even with a student-centered approach, they were still astounded at how much they talked in their lesson despite all the group work activities. In a teacher-centered class, the amount of talking is inevitably greater. More teacher talk time (TTT) indexes less interaction, which leads to fewer opportunities for learning as seen through both CLT and SCT lenses. These opportunities will be even more severely limited if the students are placed in a large class such as those at NHU. The simple logic here is that the more students practice with the target language in class, the more they improve. Yet practicing cannot happen if their learning space is occupied with teacher talk, and students can only play the role of respondents. Reducing TTT is the very first step we can try to prepare for a more interactive and beneficial learning environment.

Promoting student talk time has been prioritized as a crucial pedagogical objective in most EFL/ESL classes these days due to the increasing awareness that students learn through interaction. Boyd (2012) emphasizes the importance of allowing students to shape classroom discourse and further develop their communicative competence. The author also notes that teachers should “position students to think and compose in-the-moment—to internalize, externalize, and elaborate talk” (p.5). To do this, the teacher might consider some techniques such as extending wait time between questions, restraining from unproductive repetition and overexplaining, and asking more open-ended questions. Another habit that takes away from student talking time is that teachers tend to respond to non-understanding and hesitant students with direct correction and “rarely request speech modification from students” (Musumesi 1996, cf. Walsh 2002). Teachers tend to act fast to fill in any gaps based on “linguistic hints” they hear,

which gives the impression that teachers can understand and elaborate on everything a student says even when he or she has not finished it yet. Walsh (2002) also examines multiple lesson extracts by EFL teachers and points out the numerous ways in which the teachers can act differently to improve the quality of their talking. Instructional patterns that involve turn completion and teacher interruption<sup>5</sup> should be minimized since these diminish student learning potential. Maintaining a balance between teacher talk and student talk is a state-of-the-art that teachers who pursue a direct instructional style can find it hard to adapt.

Talking happens as an integral and obvious part of teaching and this is probably why teachers often overlook how much they talk. In teacher-centered classrooms, talking is seen as the primary means to impart knowledge. Especially in Asian cultures, this belief has been deeply ingrained in the society's perception of the teacher's role. The idea of letting students take over classroom discourse can be worrisome, as if we teachers are not doing our job responsibly or properly. As we move towards a more student-centered approach, teachers become more aware of how much they talk in class, but at the same time talking less is not as easy as it sounds because teachers have to decide what part of their talking should be reduced. Making this decision can be helped if teachers can measure and analyze one or two classes of their own through videotaping or recording. As they review their own class, they will be able to see what is there in their talking and modify it accordingly. This is where teaching needs to be in touch with research, because the latter provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and self-evaluate their teaching.

In conclusion, teachers are encouraged to use more genuine and authentic talk in class to optimize student involvement and enhance complexity. Display questions and other filling-in-

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<sup>5</sup> Walsh also clarifies how these techniques are different from scaffolding since they are more obstructive than constructive to learning.

the-gap talking should be used sparingly since smoothing the flow of discourse is not as important as creating opportunities for student to practice their target language. As teachers become more aware of how learning is contingent on the quantity and quality of their talk, they can decide to what extent they want to calibrate their speech and offer the floor to the students since the monopoly of teacher talk in classroom discourse has proved to be detrimental to interaction and learning.

### **2.7. Beyond the CAF model: The use of L1 in student talk**

Despite having to bear the brunt of criticism over the past few decades, the role of L1 use has started to gain its recognition again in many approaches to L2 teaching. For example, the communicative language teaching method is open to treating L1 as a classroom resource. The idea of learning through absolute immersion in the target language is unrealistic when the learning taking take place in the learners' home country and when their L1 is shared with the teacher. L1 is where and how the students think, and this will be more or less reflected in their speech even if it is expressed in L2 only. SCT is another approach that values L1, seeing students using L1 for private speech as a way of utilizing an available tool to aid comprehension of L2. The integration of L1 has begun to be used purposefully in what has been known as translingual pedagogy where students are asked to “alternate languages for the purposes of receptive or productive uses” (William 1994, cf. Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 20). Lying at the core of all these approaches is the open-mindedness toward L1 use and its contribution to the acquisition of L2. Empirical research findings, as reviewed below, have validated the multiple roles of L1 with positive evidence.

Within a sociocultural framework, Anton & DiCamilla (1998) show that Spanish students use L1 to scaffold their learning, maintain cooperation, and externalize their internal speech. In

the same vein, Swain and Lapkin (2000) find that L1 is used as a cognitive tool that allows French immersion students to accomplish collaborative tasks. The CLT approach suggests a model where “L1 may be used from an introductory to upper-intermediate level on a decreasing scale” (Cole, 1998). De la Campa and Nassaji’s (2009) experiment with German as a second language instructors provides more evidence that L1 is needed for important instructional purposes. From all the data in the research cited above, it can be said that teaching moments and learning opportunities can arise from all kinds of classroom interaction. The benefits of L1 is further emphasized in code-switching studies, another area of SLA research that elucidates the functions of L1 in L2 classes.

Code switching has been proved to be the norm of bilingual practice (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2014) rather than a sign of deficiency in the target language. Multilingual speakers code-switch, which means they alternate variations of languages in the same discourse to serve certain communicative purposes. Unlike the traditional approaches that identify these purposes purely as to hide memory or fluency problems, or to express oneself more clearly (Zentella, 1997), recent studies investigate code-switching with a more holistic lens. The body of more recent research on L1, now often labelled as code-switching or code-mixing research (Ferguson, 2009; Lin, 2013; Moore, 2002), finds a multidimensional function of code switching, including but not limited to building and transmitting knowledge, restoring the flow of interaction (Hosoda, 2000), enhancing an affective environment for learning (Auebach, 1993), and carrying out cognitively demanding tasks (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). All these studies confirm that the use of L1 is an integral part of bilingual interaction and will emerge naturally even if a strict English-only policy is implemented.

In conclusion, the review of literature above has given us convincing evidence that the pressure on completely banishing L1 from L2 classes is unnecessary and even futile. While ESL/EFL teachers and language policy makers do have a point in enforcing an L2-only class, this enforcement is more likely to meet with success if we let it undergo some transitional phases where L1 use can taper off as the students become more proficient in L2.

## **2.8 Conversation Analysis and classroom discourse**

Understanding classroom discourse requires the use of multiple theoretical, analytical, and interpretative tools. One of which is Conversation Analysis (CA), a sub-discipline of discourse analysis that takes into consideration the contextual and interactional aspects of communication in SLA research. The productivity of CA-oriented studies has resulted in a number of byproducts such as the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), adjacency pairs (Clark & Schaeffer, 1989; Sacks, 2004; Schegloff & Sack 1973), interlocking organization of talk with turn-taking rules, sequencing and repairing patterns (ten Have, 1999). While many of these CA legacies have undergone criticisms that question their suitability and validity to research L2 acquisition, their ability to capture highly detailed talk-in-interaction still makes it a practical tool to analyze classroom data. There are many areas in SLA where CA can be used effectively such as studies on recast, input, teacher feedback, oral language assessment (Markee, 2000; Seedhouse, 2004). Since my research is largely concerned with oral language without attempting to track acquisition longitudinally, I adopt CA techniques and language features believing that this approach allows me to perform a wide range of microanalyses of teacher and student talk in the EFL classes. For example, the distribution of turn-taking and the pace of a conversation can provide important data for me to observe the overall language yield and certain aspects of student participation in classroom discourse such as

fluency and accuracy. This information will help answer my research question of to what extent L2 is being used under the Advanced Curriculum and how CAF is manifested in student verbal contributions as they work in groups or respond to the teacher.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 The research site

Northwest Hanoi University (NHU) is located in a bustling suburban town 20 miles west of Hanoi, the capital city. The university was founded in 1964 with a focus on silviculture, agroforestry, and wood processing. However, with an increasing demand for college education in Vietnam in the last two decades, the university has expanded its academics, embracing not only forestry specialized fields, but also closely related areas such as environmental sciences, natural resources management, and business management, just to name a few. Each year the school admits approximately 1,500 students through a national entrance exam administered by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET).

For many years at NHU, English has been required for all students, starting in their first year and continuing into the first semester of their second year. For some majors such as Business Management and Environmental Sciences, the students are required to take an extra semester of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to strengthen reading skills and expand vocabulary in their discipline. Typically, ESP classes are designed for only majors that attract the most students. In addition to the mainstream day time classes, NHU's English department has also offered extra evening classes for students who are interested in bettering their language skills. These evening classes can range from English for absolute beginners, to conversational English, to standardized test (e.g., TOEFL iBT, IELTS) preparation. Currently the only place that provides formal English education in town is the university and this is why all the faculty of the English department have been working extremely hard to offer as a wide range of English programs as possible since students' needs have increased and changed greatly throughout the years.

Despite the growing number of students and English class types, the English department at NHU has always been short staffed. It currently has 12 teachers, four males and eight females. I used to be a faculty member but have been absent since 2011 due to my PhD study in the US. Over the past four years I had little contact with the department but technically I am still on NHU's faculty and expected to resume my faculty status once I finish my program in the US. On average, each teacher has to teach 4-5 classes a semester with a total number of students ranging from 160 to 200 since each class is typically capped at 55 students. Grading weekly papers is definitely daunting, but what is even worse is the time and money that the teachers have to spend on making copies of class materials (outside the textbook) such as handouts and tests for their students. Knowing that this kind of expense will never be reimbursed, some of us would choose to stick with the textbook and minimize bringing in supplementary reading texts or other handouts. In recent years, classrooms have been equipped with projectors and that helps teachers to introduce new materials and activities without having to spend nearly 10% of their salary on making copies of class handouts for their students. Each teacher is also provided with a CD/cassette player which they will have to leave in the department's main office when they finish teaching for the day.

The two classes selected for this research, however, only have 33 and 40 students, respectively, because they are part of a national project widely known as the Advanced Curriculum (AC, see Chapter 1). The long-term goals of this project have greatly impacted the way English is taught in Vietnamese universities and generated a substantial English learning movement among students. Although the AC project has opened up more opportunities for students to gain the skills and confidence to perform on a global stage, it has operated a critical chord among educators and administrators especially in its later phase (after the program had

operated for five years or so). With a tuition fee three times as much as a regular degree program would charge, AC students are often assumed to come from the more affluent families who see the AC model as a bridge for sending their children to study abroad. Meanwhile, the students who do not have as comfortable a background as their peers often experience a hard time trying to stay in the program. Realizing how some students struggled paying the tuition, a few scholarships have been offered by both US and NHU faculty to students with extreme economic situations. However, these scholarships are short-term and symbolic as they only last the students for a couple months or so. Despite the economic pressure faced by students and their families, the thought that they will be awarded a much more privileged degree when they graduate gives them the motivation to keep trying every way they can.

Toward the later phase of the AC project, skepticisms have been arising around the quality of the program as some people see the AC as being created for those who are already better off. Criticisms can go as far as mocking the project as an education party of “the more privileged” but not “the more advanced” students. Conflicts also occurred within departments due to the higher pay that is often granted to those who are selected to participate in the AC project. I believe this criticism should be left for an administrator to handle as I have limited knowledge or information about how the school chose somebody to teach in the AC. I can only make a case for the students and the quality of the education they are receiving. It is true that not everybody in the AC class is academically “better” than students from a regular class, but the top 20% of the AC classes have proved how the project has allowed them to climb higher on their academic ladder. The number of NHU graduates who have pursued a higher degree abroad has accelerated over the years, and this level of academic endeavor rarely happened in the pre-AC time.

## **3.2 The participants**

### ***3.2.1 Teacher participants***

The two teachers participating in this study are both young males who had been teaching the AC classes for more than two years by the time of the data collection. Since the AC English course is an intensive one, both teachers teach 15 hours a week, not including another 15 hours of teaching regular English classes. The extensive working hours, both in school and at home, help explain the absence of research activities among English teachers, not only at NHU but in other Vietnamese universities in general.

For this study, the teachers will be referred to as Mr. Tam and Mr. Ninh, or sometimes as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 for the convenience of coding. Tam and Ninh are 31 and 34 years old, respectively, both with master degrees in TESOL. Tam has worked for NHU for seven years and Ninh nine years and took over the English teaching with the AC program after I left in 2011. The benefit of being chosen to teach the AC classes involves slightly higher pay and most importantly, a training course in an English-speaking country. Both of them were sent to Cleverlearn Language Learning Center in the Philippines for professional training in ELT pedagogy for two months. During this course, the teachers met with other ELT professional in Asia to collaborate in workshops and training sessions where a more communicative language teaching method was introduced. At the same time, the training course helped them strengthen their verbal skills necessary for meaningful and effective instruction. Especially with MOET's policy that all AC teachers use English as a medium of instruction in both English and content classes, the teachers were expected to not only speak English all the time themselves but also minimalize students' use of L1. A monolingual approach is to be strictly practiced to best

prepare students with adequate English proficiency to take classes with US professors in their later years of the program.

Although it was not my intention to choose two teachers with contrasting teaching styles, my initial observation does show a significant difference in the way their classes are conducted. Briefly, Teacher 1's instructional style encompasses various elicitation techniques while Teacher 2 tends to utilize elucidation and repetition to ensure student comprehension. However, both teachers use English most of the time in class and were very open to trying new ways of teaching. Teacher 1 would bring to class fun group work activities while Teacher 2 successfully directed his students to make a short movie in English and organized a little Oscar-like ceremony where the best movie was awarded. Overall, methodologically, the teachers have given up most of their usual absolute control and grant students more freedom and encourage them to engage in higher-order thinking activities. However, this observation is only the "tip of the iceberg"—many other layers will have to be studied in more detail to investigate how the English-only ideology is actualized in classroom interaction.

### ***3.3.2 Student participants***

#### **Focal groups:**

There were 73 students (from two classes) documented in this study; the recruitment of these participants underwent a few modifications. At first, when I suggested that I would like to form a focal group of six students, Mr. Tam said he would prefer to select the focal groups himself. This means by the time I showed up in class I would have everything organized. However, the first day I was there, only four students had been informed of the recording plan, and two additional students volunteered to participate when I asked. In Mr. Ninh's class, participation was done in the same manner; the teacher recommended two dyads and the third

dyad was selected on the first day of recording based on volunteering. I also had one student in each class who volunteered to serve as a substitute when somebody in the focal group could not come to class. In short, I worked closely with two groups of seven students who allowed me to record their talk in all group/pair activities that took place during my time observing the classes.

### **Prior English Education:**

Since NHU is located in a suburban area west of Hanoi, it attracts more provincial than urban students. As such, it was expected that NHU students would have had a later access to learning a foreign language than students who go to bigger universities in Hanoi. However, the following table shows a positive shift in English education in the provinces, where English is now taught in middle school and high school (7 years). Only three students reported that they only started to learn English when they were in high school.

*Table 3.1 Students' prior English education*

<b>Mr. Tam's class (40 students)</b>			<b>Mr. Ninh's class (33 students)</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of English learning</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of English learning</b>
Thu	Female	7 years	Van	Female	7 years
Dan	Male	7 years	Trang	Female	7 years
Chi	Female	3 years	Hanh	Female	7 years
Na	Female	7 years	Phan	Male	7 years
Hien	Female	7 years	Hoa	Female	3 years
Nam	Male	7 years	Mai	Female	7 years
Lan	Female	7 years	Thu	Female	3 years

### **Group dynamics:**

It should be noted that the students in the AC English program spend a fair amount of time in class together. They remain a tight knit group throughout the first year of intensive English learning, and become even closer toward the end of their program after being involved in a lot of out-of-class team work projects, field trips, and other extracurricular activities. Some of them are even roommates. The implication of this familiarity and closeness is that when working together, they do not mind making fun of each other, telling jokes, or bringing in their trivial topics. This results in a very different dynamic in group work interaction, one where interruptions may not be impoliteness, lack of participation may not be harshly judged by peers, and scaffolding may be done in an unconventional manner (e.g., by telling their peer to “use your phone,” “hit you head until you remember it,” “think about it,” “just repeat after me” and so on with a frustrated voice, but nobody would take it personally). The cohesiveness that I observed in some groups seems to have been formed very early on at the beginning of the quarter. Some other groups, however, were not as stable and had its members rotated after each class. Some were quite happy forming groups based on an *ad hoc* basis, which means they could join whoever sitting next to or around them to make a group. It can be seen that group dynamic can be formed either by “initial attractions” among its members, or established through “acceptance” (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003, p.18) after getting to know each other better. Knowing how students would be likely to behave in their group helps me understand the overall climate of the class as well as interpret interactional patterns in group activities more accurately.

### ***3.2.3 Research-participant power relation***

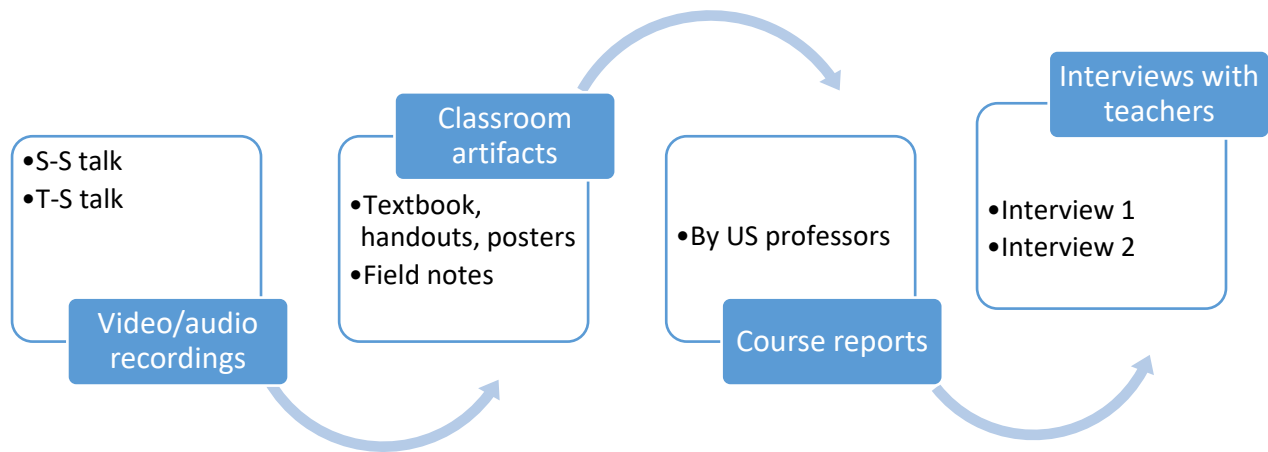
The fact that both teachers and I used to be colleagues (with me being the more senior) before I left for the US may play a role in my accessing their classes and receiving special help

whenever I needed it. For example, they would prepare extra handouts for me, catch me up with what I missed, let me take pictures of the students' work (e.g., posters, free writes, black board presentations), and most importantly, they served as a bridge between me and the student participants. With the help of my colleagues, as the data collection went on, the students became more understanding of my role and work, and seemed to be increasingly supportive. At the same time, my familiarity with the teachers helped reduce the usual formality often found in a researcher-participant relationship. This allowed the teachers to feel comfortable enough to ask me to *not* come on certain days, or even to cancel a scheduled recording day because they themselves changed their own schedule. Although such changes can have a slight effect on the total amount of data I wished to obtain, from an ethical perspective, I see this as an equal distribution of power in the research-participant relationship—the participants should not feel too obliged to strictly follow my schedule. In short, though not absent, the typical power differentials between me as the researcher and the participants blurred with time as both parties tried to maintain a sense of respect for one another's work.

### **3.3 Methods of collecting data**

The following chart represents the procedure through which the data were collected with videotaping being the primary method. Interviews with teachers, compilation of course reports by US professors, and documentation of classroom artifacts added more depth and reliability as the data were analyzed and interpreted.

*Figure 3.1 Methods of collecting data*



### **3.3.1 Video-recorded data and personal voice recorders**

The majority of data for this research project were collected by videotaping and voice recording lectures and group work. Although both classes met 15 hours a week, I only had access to certain hours on certain days for different reasons. My plan was to capture an “ordinary” class, not a test preparation class or presentation day. Following this plan, I videotaped 30 hours of classroom interaction which I later categorized as teacher-student talk and student-student talk. While the camcorder I used allowed me to have a very high quality of sound and image during teacher-fronted time, it could not capture group talk since students were scattered across the room. To solve this problem, I used 6-7 mini voice recorders to record group-work talk. There were 6 students in the focal group and they often sat in pairs, wearing the USB-size voice recorder around their neck. However, the students in the focal groups did not always sit in pairs as I expected because the class is so big that the teacher had little choice but to form bigger groups for group activities. This meant I would often have a third (sometimes fourth) student join the selected focal dyad, making a group of three or four. Since all students gave me consent to

record their work in class, I could transcribe all relevant student talk, regardless of their being or not being selected in the focal groups.

One issue that emerged after the second week is that the students became more familiar with the voice recorder and they would turn it on and off without my prompting. However, when a student forgot to turn his or her mic on, that caused not only lost information but also some discrepancies of starting time, making it more confusing during the transcribing process. For example, within a group activity, one recorder recorded the entire conversation while another only started a few minutes later into their conversation. As such, student A's talk is more complete while student B's talking would not appear for the first couple minutes of the conversation. This discrepancy was not really a big problem because student B's talk could still be recorded by student A's mic as they sat next to each other. When the background noise got too loud, or the mic's battery was too low, transcribing became very difficult, and I had to discard the recording. The selection of the recordings for this dissertation was based on the quality of the recording itself, the suggestion of the teachers as they indicated that they felt more positive about certain classes than others, and/or the relevance of its content to the topic being investigated.

After transcribing, the transcripts were arranged into two sets of data namely teacher-student talk and student-student talk. In the former set I sought to identify patterns and characteristics of language production in teacher-student interaction. Selected excerpts demonstrate patterns of interactivity and response types (discussed in Chapter 6). The interaction between peers, however, was analyzed based on the different task types (or activities) that they were engaged in. The core area of discussion in student-student talk will be the use of L1 and the complexity-fluency-accuracy triad in student language performance. All of these

features of student oral language production have long been of interest to MOET and teachers since everybody wants to know what and how the students are doing with the new English-only policy.

### ***3.3.2 Classroom artifacts***

Handouts for activities, the textbook, snapshots of blackboard presentations, posters, and students' in-class work comprised a valuable source of data. While sometimes students would let me keep their work, most of the time they handed their work to me to take a picture, and I returned it to them. Both teachers made extra handouts for me, and I also had a copy of the textbook they were using. Teacher 1 used the blackboard to give an outline of his lesson, but Teacher 2 often had a blank Word document projected on the big white screen on the wall and typed in the key points he was talking about. This way at the end of the class he could save the document and share it with the students. Blackboard presentations were used too but the teacher seemed to be more organized with his presentation when he did it on the screen than on the blackboard. Posters were used mostly in Teacher 1's class and these documented students' work in groups such as bubble diagrams and drawings.

### ***3.3.3 Teacher interviews***

The interviews with the teachers were conducted at the end of the study and in the teachers' native language, Vietnamese. Each interview took 30-40 minutes. Although it was a face-to-face oral interview, I did send the interview questions (see Appendix 1) to the teachers two days before we met. Most of the questions were open-ended, and as the interviews went on I asked a few more questions that were not on the list but were necessary to keep the conversation going smoothly. The interview was video-taped and I did very little note taking so that I could fully engage in the conversation with the teachers.

The purposes of the interview were 1) to gather information about the teachers' teaching experience and their transition to the English-only method; 2) to understand how they treated student's L1 use and their own methods to promote L2 production in class; and 3) to investigate the actualities and prospects of the English-only ideology in Vietnamese universities under the Advanced Curriculum project. Field notes from talking with the teachers during breaks were also analyzed as an extra step taken to ensure a thick description of the data.

### ***3.3.4 Course reports by US professors***

This set of data is based on five written reports by four US<sup>6</sup> professors who came to NHU to teach different content courses. After each course, the professors are asked to submit a report of their teaching experience to the AC program coordinators, including their personal assessment of their students' English skills. The assessments, however, are for institutional/departmental use only and have always been kept confidential. I could only have limited access to these reports since some professors chose to not disclose theirs.

It should be noted that the evaluations documented in this study are for previous cohorts (coded as K56, K57, and K58, equivalent to 2011-2015, 2012-2016, 2013-2017 classes) and not the one I observed. This is because the cohort I worked with was still in their first year studying English (the 2014-2018 class). Although the professors' reports are for previous cohorts, they can still reflect an objective assessment of AC students' English proficiency in general and offer insights into what needs to be done to improve student language production in class.

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<sup>6</sup> Five reports from only four professors because one of them taught two courses

### **3.4 Conversation Analysis: A dynamic approach to classroom discourse**

Conversation Analysis (CA) is no stranger to SLA researchers and much research has utilized this dynamic and powerful analytical tool to demystify classroom discourse. This approach has endured nearly five decades of utilization as well as criticisms. Yet it remains a practical and widely used apparatus across various academic disciplines for its ability to deconstruct social interactions for interpretative purposes. In the eyes of conversation analysts, speech-exchange systems, turn-taking organization (Schegloff, 1999), orders of talk-in-interaction (ten Have, 2007) are the lens through which we can gain a systemic understanding of what often appears as mundane and chaotic in conversations that occur in a natural setting.

I adopt a CA paradigm in analyzing and interpreting data in the transcription coding scheme and the segmentation of speech such as into turns, t-units, and c-units. Having a consistent coding scheme before transcribing the data allowed me to determine what could be excluded and what should be detailed in the transcription without overlooking factors such as pauses and fillers that may have some bearing on student language production. Transcription is vital to the study of classroom talk and there are many transcription traditions. For this research, I used CA transcription conventions (see Appendix 2), to capture not only the different lengths of pauses, but also overlapping speech and laughter. I also included transcriber's comments and guessed words to provide contextual clues for a more accurate interpretation of the data. I also switched between the audio and video recording to best achieve the requirement of accuracy in my transcription.

### **3.5 An ethnographic perspective**

This study is framed within a qualitative paradigm using ethnographic methods to allow for an in-depth description of teaching and learning events. My methodology meets the following criteria of an ethnographic study: 1) an extended exposure in the field; 2) an emic perspective; 3) an interpretive, reflexive, and constructivist process (Whitehead, 2005); 4) and a triangulation in the process of collecting and analyzing data (DuFon, 2002).

My data collection can be traced back to the days when I was videotaping ESL classes at an Intensive English Language Program (IELP) in the US in 2013. It was a quarter-long pilot study when I learned to see and listen as a participant observer and familiarize myself with the recording techniques and processes. As the study progressed, I realized that the subjects of these pilot studies, a diverse group of international students whose cultural backgrounds I did not share, posed a challenge for me to develop an emic view on what was going on in the class. This is what took me on a trip back to Vietnam where I spent another quarter observing and videotaping two EFL classes. Although very little of the first set of data at UW is used in this study, the immersion in these ESL/EFL classes over a long period of time allowed me to develop an appreciation of the importance of the various components of language exchanges in the class and helped me to develop a way to study and discern the classroom data both etically and emically, laying the foundation for a thick description of events and behaviors.

It was remarkably strange for me to have such a sense of detachment in the classroom where I used to teach after being abroad for four years. Clearly I was not stepping into a new culture, but the ways things have changed at the university did make me feel more or less alienated. Class size has dropped, teachers are no longer using L1 to teach, students seem to be more confident, teacher-student power relation seems to be more blurred. Such initial positive

observations inspired me as I knew my preconceptions and prior experience about teaching English in a Vietnamese university would be challenged.

In conclusion, I am convinced that my study can fit comfortably into the category of ethnographic research design. The interpretative, constructive and flexible nature of ethnography requires researchers to think and rethink, establish and reestablish their position according to emerging patterns. The extended engagement and participatory observation in the two classes gave me the opportunity to capture all the “mundane day-to-day events” (Dufon, 2002) within which a wide spectrum of linguistic behaviors is present. A database that provides a window into classroom interaction and all the nuances of language production like this is highly important for the implementation and modification of a nationwide English teaching reform such as the Advanced Curriculum project.

## **Chapter 4: Student Talk: Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency, and Beyond**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter investigates complexity, fluency, and accuracy as the three principal constructs of language performance in L2 learners' speech. It also traces and analyzes L1 use in oral speech during group work and across different tasks to inform teachers and administrators of how far we have gotten with the English-only policy that has been piloted in the Advanced Curriculum (AC) project at Northwest Hanoi University (NHU). The last portion of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of humor in student talk since this emerged as one of the most distinguishable events in the data and has been proved to have pedagogical value. The discussion of findings hinges on a literature review of complexity-accuracy-fluency (CAF) in oral speech, task-based instruction, and use of L1 and humor in L2 classes. The variety of tasks recorded in the data surprised me and challenged my assumptions of what the students would be doing in an EFL class in Vietnam when I saw that a majority of these tasks require collaborative work and use of oral language. There mostly went the days when teachers would come to the class with handouts full of grammar drills and the students would work quietly and individually until the teacher called on them. Here comes an era of multimodality, creative task design, and critical thinking-oriented activities—all happening with the implementation of task-based instruction.

#### ***4.1.1 Task types in English classes: Before and now***

For context, English curricula in Vietnam at the university level have always been composed of two primary missions. One is to cover things in the textbook—something required by the school and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and the other is to get students to work on reading and grammar drills for the end of year tests. These tests are rather uniform in format, typically consisting of the following question types:

- Multiple choice (assorted grammar tests)
- Reading comprehension (followed by multiple choice or full answer questions)
- Rearrange words to make a sentence
- Find and correct mistakes
- Finish an incomplete sentence
- Fill in the blank with a suitable word
- Construct a full sentence based on suggested words and phrases
- Rewrite sentences in such a way that their meaning stays the same
- Finish an incomplete sentence
- Write a paragraph about a particular topic

Since most teachers are informed about test question types, it is understandable that their instruction, as well as the materials and activities they bring to the class, is test-oriented. It is also understandable that teachers would like to help their students best prepared for the tests, especially when English accounts for the most credits in the curriculum. A typical test will include reading, grammar, and writing. It is not until the Advanced Curriculum program that teachers and administrators have taken a serious step toward adding on listening and speaking. Otherwise, the test bank questions would be recycled over the years with minimal revision.

However, with the *communicative language teaching* (CLT) turn in L2 education in the past few decades, the task types above have been slowly disappearing from English classes due to the increasing criticisms toward their rigidity and impracticality. Globalization in education has marked an evolution in SLA pedagogy all across the world. This evolution encompasses not only the quantitative change in the L2 learner population but also the qualitative transformation of the teacher's methodology. Such task types described above have gradually been replaced by

collaborative output tasks (Nassaji & Tian, 2010), where students actively exploit each other's personal resources and skills through verbal interaction to complete a task. At NHU, such a transition is taking place and the immediate impact on classroom atmosphere and student engagement is very positive. It would be safe for me to make the following statements based on my initial observations: 1) there has been a significant reduction of grammar lecturing; 2) there has been a higher level of interaction in class through group work and pair work activities (not saying they are equally successful or effective); 3) there has been a variety of materials brought into the class to make learning more interesting and engaging. These initial observations, though have not yet validated by empirical research, are generally agreed to by other fellow teachers who have lived most of their professional life at NHU and witnessed generations of students and changes. However, it is imperative that empirical research be done to confirm these observations so they will not be simply impressionistic. Such research will reveal what is beneath the seemingly successful implementation of the new teaching methods under the AC project.

To the best of my knowledge, this research study will be the first to investigate student language production through a myriad of talk-in-action samples extracted from a naturally occurring setting in Vietnam since the beginning of the AC project. The extracts are purposefully selected from different kinds of tasks that require collaborative work. The list below shows the different types of group work activities that were recorded over a semester.

1. Brainstorm ideas on a poster using bubble diagrams. Students can choose between two topics: teenage fashion and things to do at the beach;
2. Create a list of common teenage abbreviations used in texting and social networks, create a list of activities to keep fit, create a list of words relating to air transportation;
3. Find three adjectives that best describe your personality, share these with a partner;

4. Learn to make a compelling argument by engaging in an imaginary or dilemma situation;
5. Learn to reason and think critically when writing through the challenge of finding two things alike among three (e.g., the sun, the moon, the stars—what are the two things alike among these?) [Multiple correct answers are accepted based on strong arguments.];
6. Write collaboratively with a focus on the use of simple, complex, compound, compound-complex sentences. All groups start with a simple sentence that reads “It was a stormy night at NHU,” then each writes their own sentence and passes the story along until time runs out;
7. Retell a story together. This task type occurs repeatedly in both classes. The two samples I chose to analyze include one about an air passenger complaint and a folk tale about a dog and a donkey;
8. Make a conversation with your friend(s). Practice how to open and end a conversation naturally. This is like an open conversation for students to feel more comfortable conversing with each other;
9. Work with a partner to find the odd one out;
10. Work with a partner to compare two paragraphs to decide which one is more coherent.  
The students are also supposed to identify the elements that tie a paragraph together.

While this is not an exhaustive list of task types that were brought to the class, they emerge as the most often used group work/ pair work tasks. It is interesting how the same task is given regardless of the skill (reading, writing, speaking, listening) being taught. In other words, the notion that students only talk in a speaking lesson seems very dated now. They get to talk (if they choose to!) before, during, and after many activities and in every skill practice.

### ***4.1.2 Procedures***

The 10 selected task types are arranged in chronological order (i.e., Task 1 is recorded on day 1, Task 2 the next day and so on). It is not easy to arrange them in order of complexity, because a task can appear “complex” to one group and not so for another. An assumed complex task can still be adequately handled and even enjoyed when the group collaboratively works on it. On the other hand, a task that is deemed easy can surprisingly silence the whole group because they do not know how to turn it into a group work activity when everybody already has an agreeable answer in their head.

Tasks can vary greatly in time duration (from 5 to 20 minutes); I preferred to analyze tasks of 10 minutes or more to assure more substantial language use. I approached my data analysis from two pathways. First, I chose one task and analyzed how different groups perceived and executed it (cross-group analysis). Second, I chose one group and analyzed how they tackled different tasks (cross-task analysis). The different types of analysis yield different kinds of insights. In the case of the cross-group analysis, they all do the same task on the same day, same setting, same instruction, and same outcome expectations, which provides a kind of reliability. On the other hand, observing students across tasks allows me to see if there is any consistency in the groups’ performance. This approach to data analyzing, cross-task, (one group, different tasks) also offers some advantages that the first approach (one task, different groups) cannot. For example, observing a group work together over a long period of time and collaborate in a wide range of activities can provide information about the relation between task complexity and language yield. As I categorize the data into different modules to illustrate different facets of student language production, I will be alternating the two approaches to make full use of the data

I have gathered and to achieve the most complete picture of task-in-progress moments in the two EFL classes.

Some of the activities that were not chosen to be discussed in this study involve those that resemble the grammar-translation method's activities, such as "Put the verb into the correct form" or "Fill in the blank with a suitable preposition." I am not including episodes of students working on grammatical issues although some of them were also done in pairs. The reason why I did not analyze these tasks is that they did not yield much talk. Typically, the students will work quietly and independently on the task and then check their answers with each other by exchanging their work and making sure they finish with the same answers. Most of the other tasks that yielded real interaction were selected for transcribing.

#### **4.2 The "The Survivor" task: A cross-group analysis of CAF**

While the three traits of CAF sound straightforward, they actually have posed many challenges for researchers since there have been no fixed parameters to measure such fluid factors as complexity in language production. A comprehensive analysis of CAF is attributed to Larsen-Freeman's (2006) study where CAF is examined both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is highly important to approach and examine CAF as "multilayered, multifaceted, and multidimensional constructs" (Housen et al., 2012, p.5). Similarly, Norris and Ortega (2009) argues for a multidimensional and organic approach when measuring CAF since they are "developmental in nature...growing and changing all the time" (p.556). These insights suggest that CAF measurement practices and interpretations should always be carefully and critically handled due to its dynamic nature.

This study is situated in a context where initial empirical classroom research data are lacking. Metaphorically speaking, this will put down the first brick for the foundation of research

on English-only EFL classes within the AC project, responding to the concerns and interests of school administrators and language policy makers. While the common trend in studying CAF is to measure each component to trace language development, this study uses CAF as descriptive criteria to analyze and assess student’s oral language performance to provide a report for administrators about the ongoing language policy that has been applied at NHU over the past six years.

The activity chosen for this discussion of complexity is one from Teacher 1’s class called “The Survivor” which aims at teaching students to make a persuasive argument and support it with logical reasons. In the “The Survivor” activity, the groups were given a dilemma that involves a sinking ship with six passengers on it (see Table 4.1). The last life boat can take only one more person and the students have to pick one from the list whom they think deserves to be the last survivor.

***Table 4.1 Who should be the survivor? (Class handout)***

<b>No</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
1	A CEO of a large corporation (very rich)	Male	55
2	A hero of the country	Male	39
3	A doctor—the only one who can cure a fatal cancer	Female	60
4	A very beautiful and famous actress	Female	25
5	A talented boy	male	10
6	The vice president of the country	Female	45

Except for Group 1 (which comprised only two students), the other two groups had three students, two of whom were selected for my focal group (those who always wore a voice recorder on the day the class was observed); one was an ordinary student without the voice

recorder. Some students were not miked because students in the focal group did not always sit together, and most group-work activities required groups of three or more due to the big class size.

**Group 1:** Lan (female, focal group) Yen (female, focal group)

**Group 2:** Dan (male, focal group), Thu (female, focal group), Hien (Female)

**Group 3:** Kha (male), Chi (female, focal group), Linh (Female, focal group)

#### ***4.2.1 Complexity***

Quantitatively, complexity has been measured by number of t-units and clause types, and type-token ratio to evaluate a text's grammatical complexity and vocabulary complexity, respectively. Norris and Ortega (2009) argue that this practice of complexity measurement can be worrisome if it is limited to structural/syntactic variety (p. 567). The authors call for a multidimensional and organic practice of measuring complexity—one that “is conditioned by the realities of learning contexts” (p. 574). In general, complexity has to deal with both the breadth and depth of one's language repertoire, which are commonly reflected in students' lexis and syntax, or the richness of their vocabulary and sophistication of syntactical structures in their speech.

Lexical complexity reflects the wealth of student's vocabulary and their ability to mobilize it. A typical way to measure lexical complexity is through the calculation of lexical density, type-token ratio, and number of distinct words. However, the existing metrics used to measure complexity of language production have been developed mostly for analyzing written language. (Dobao, 2012; Friginal et al., 2014; Kormos & Denes, 2004; Robinson, 2007). These metrics, if hastily applied in oral speech, can yield a misleading and unreliable interpretation of language production since spoken and written language differ greatly in their structure (syntax).

For example, in a conversation recorded between the three students of Group 3 in my data, there were a total of 521 words counted by a text analyzer<sup>7</sup>, among which only 262 are distinct words. The complexity factor (lexical density) calculated was only 50.3% which indicates a very low level of complexity and almost a problem if this were an essay because nearly half the words were repeated. Analysis of Group 2's lexical density revealed an even lower number of lexical density with 233 unique words over a total of 917 words recorded in the same activity. However, this is one of the most productive group-work performances in the data, and the content of the talk is not as simple or shallow as the complexity analyzer suggested. Oral speech seems to use a more limited range of lexis than written speech and this should be accepted as a norm rather than a sign of low lexical complexity.

Another aspect of complexity is syntax, which is often measured by the “range of forms” and their “degree of sophistication” (Ortega, 2003, p. 492). In the same vein, Ellis (2003) defines complexity as the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied (p. 340). To investigate this range of forms and degree of sophistication, researchers have developed several systems of parameters that gauge syntactic complexity based on the number and types of clauses in a turn. More specifically, recorded speech is broken down into smaller linguistic units, such as the t-unit and c-unit, and then calculated in terms of mean length and types. However, when applied to examine complexity in student talk, the idea of using t-units and c-units still poses challenges for counting since they are often interrupted by fillers and/or pauses. Looking back at examples of t-units and c-units in the literature, it seems that a t-unit is often equated with a complete clause with a subject and a verb, as in Crookes (1990):

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<sup>7</sup> This is a text analysis software/website that allows you to run any text less than 10,000 words for an analysis of lexical density (complexity factor) and readability (<http://textalyser.net>)

*Mary hit John*= 1 t-unit

*Mary hit John but she is my friend* = 2 t-units

In the data, there are many places where such a definition of a t-unit can be identified, such as in the following excerpts:

***Excerpt 4.1a***

Thu: I choose CEO (=1 t-unit)  
Hien: I choose the doctor (1 t-unit)  
Thu: Oh maybe I choose the president. Did you choose the actress hahah? (2 t-units)  
Dan: No! the boy  
Thu: I think the CEO  
Hien: No I strongly disagree with you  
Thu: ((laughing)) strongly disagree with me?  
Hien: no, because=  
Thu: = you know if the CEO survives, the economic is very important with a country, is it right?  
Hien: Yes

However, the data also contain speech that is a lot more fragmented and that makes it much harder to pinpoint a t-unit boundary:

***Excerpt 4.1b***

- Thu: =no but wait wait a minute, I think the doctor will—will...er he's way too—he's way too er...um, too too...
- Hien: No! I think it's the talented boy, er he er maybe if he, if he er survives he will be...
- Linh: I choose CEO because he can er...
- Linh: He helps the economy and he helps (interrupted)<sup>8</sup>

Technically there is one t-unit in Hien's turn in Excerpt 4.1b when she said *I think* but the rest of the thought is unknown although it has the potential of being a t-unit if Hien tried to complete her thought or if she was not interrupted. These incomplete t-units should also be distinguished from c-units (e.g., *wait a minute*) because the latter still expressed a complete thought while the former did not. In other words, short phrases such as *wait a minute* and *yes* can

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<sup>8</sup> Bullet points indicate non-sequential talk.

suffice to convey a meaningful sentential meaning even if they contain only one or two words, as research in speech's non-sentential elements has suggested (Ginzburg et al., 2014; Schlangen, 2005). Meanwhile, a longer string of speech can still appear incomprehensible if it is not completed. With this realization, I decided to count only the complete t-units and c-units in the data, but at the same time I do want to emphasize that the incomplete t-units should not be seen as a sign of low proficiency at all because paradoxically enough sometimes students have to abandon their thought just because they are trying so hard to express it in a complex way. More advanced students are more willing to take risk in trying to express their complex thoughts even if their language abilities have not been able to accommodate such thoughts. This is why complexity should be discussed in not only linguistic terms but also in cognitive terms (Towell, 2012, p.54). Yet CAF-based research seems to focus more on the linguistic elements of student talk such as number of clauses and difficult words while often ignoring the cognitive factors. Cognitive complexity is manifested in "the relative difficulty with which language elements are processed during L2 performance and L2 learning as determined by the learners' individual background" (Housen et al., p.4). For example, when a student uses the *if-then* sentence structure, it can be analyzed in terms of linguistic complexity as having two t-units. In terms of cognitive complexity, it would be relevant to think about how much a student has been exposed to this structure before it "collapses into fewer, larger, and faster procedures...and become[s] integrated and automatic" (Towell, 2013, p.54). The cognitive procedures that lead to the internalization of a more complex structure and then the ease or automaticity of using it indicate another dimension of complexity that quantitative-oriented research often fails to capture. Recognizing cognitive complexity in student speech allows us to assist student with the

necessary linguistic structures so that they can articulate their complex thoughts more willingly and clearly.

Counting only complete t-units is a way to get at cognitive complexity (accuracy and automaticity). With all incomplete t-units excluded from counting, overall the data show that complexity in Group 2 speech is by far higher with 94 instances of t-units, nearly doubling that of Group 3 with 59 instances. Students of Group 2 were more successful in putting their thoughts in complete utterances, showing a greater effort in constructing an argumentative discourse through the use of logical reasoning and counter-arguing expressions.

In addition to counting the total number of t-units, it should be noted that not all of these t-units are stand-alone simple sentences. Many of them are tied together in longer stretches of speech, forming highly structured syntax such as compound and complex sentences. For example, when the students have to express their opinion and support it with reasons, they have to direct their mind to a higher level of syntactic complexity since only a more complex structure can help them to fully deliver their thoughts. The skill in question in this case is giving opinions and reasoning, and it is understandable how a typical compound sentence structure (with use of such coordinators as *and*, *but*, *or* and so on) will not be able to accommodate a complex thought that contains a hierarchy of ideas, both an opinion and a reason like the example below:

***Excerpt 4.2***

- Hien: Maybe you are right, however in my opinion the talented boy should be the survivor maybe when he grows he er er he a hero of the country, a doctor, the only one who can cure the cancer, or the president of the country.
- Chi: A hero of the country I think he is I think he should be saved because he has helped our people

An interesting pattern that arises in the data is that even when the students used L1 throughout to discuss the task such as Group 1, their sentence structures did not get any more complex. This suggests that having to speak in L2 may not be the primary hindrance to obtain complexity in the students' oral language production. It is suggested by recent research (Robinson et al., 2009) that increasing complexity in the task itself can result in more complexity in L2 learners' speech production<sup>9</sup>. Another factor that may have a positive correlation with speech complexity is pre-task planning time, as proposed in Ellis's (2009) study. Based on the video recorded, the students in "The Survivor" activity did not have much time to think through the task before they started discussing. There was one or two minutes of silence across the groups at the beginning of their conversation, which indicates some planning/thinking time. However, just like many other activities carried out in class, the "The Survivor" activity was not designed with a pre-task planning time built in despite the fact that the task itself poses a dilemma that typically requires more thinking time before making a decision. The lack of preparing time might also help explain why students kept changing their minds over and over again through the conversation. For example, Dan first chose the child to be the survivor, then changed to the doctor, then decided again that the child was the one he would save. By bouncing back between choices, Dan was not able to form a focused line of reasoning or argument and did not meet the requirement of the task. This calls for a need to better structure the activity so that more pre-task planning time is added. Unlike other regular classes at NHU, which meet for 45-90 minutes each time, this intensive English class has at least a budget of three hours, four days a

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<sup>9</sup> However, it is not consistent in my data (the next chapter "Across-task analysis" that there is such a correlation between task complexity and speech/syntax complexity.

week. Therefore, giving students more time to think things through before tackling the task is a very feasible solution that NHU teachers may want to consider.

Another subtle aspect of complexity that was found in the data is students' ability to simultaneously utilize both their non-linguistic knowledge and linguistic knowledge to complete the task. Non-linguistic knowledge can be recognized through the way the students disclose their worldviews, values, and beliefs. This shows that they were not totally preoccupied with their linguistic performance—they coordinated their other knowledge to communicate meaning as best as they could. Meanwhile, there are students who can only direct their attention to form (grammar) and are often preoccupied with the fact that they are speaking a foreign language and would be judged for how well they speak the language. That said, their mind is constantly in search of vocabulary or grammar rules. Their other knowledge and skills are buried, or temporarily “locked” somewhere when they have to concentrate on their pronunciation, grammar, and so on. This mindset isolates the language learners from their other “selves,” causing a loss in not only speech complexity but also the totality of their communicative competence.

To be more specific, in the data, speech complexity occurs when a student decides to expand his or her search beyond their language “zone” in their memory. The liveliest moments of the talk reside in instances where the students display their non-linguistic knowledge and strategies. For example, Hien expressed her belief that a vice president is often of more importance to a country than a hero so she is more “worthy of living.” Another time, Hien argued that she would save the boy because when he grows up he could be any of the other people: a president, a CEO, a doctor, and so on, and that will replace the loss of any talent that the people on the boat possess. This viewpoint is grounded in the Vietnamese ideology that

children should always receive first priority. In another episode, the group are making the point that if the president is someone as influential and respected worldwide as Obama, then they would consider saving him. However, if it is the president of a much less powerful country, or the president of a country that is in political conflict with Vietnam, such as China, then they would not save the president. This reasoning shows how the student is aware of the current political tension between Vietnam and China and was not too afraid to tell others about her stance. All in all, the discussion opens a window into not only the learners' language competency but also their values and beliefs. Speaking activities, therefore, should allow students to not only engage with their English-learner self, but also embrace the entirety of their cultural and personal identity.

#### ***4.2.2 Fluency***

Fluency is not always the most teachable aspect of language proficiency for many L2 teachers yet it is the most mentioned construct in the CAF triad. The notion of fluency itself encompasses a vast array of definitions and measuring methods. Researchers have proposed several criteria to measure fluency and at the same time pointing out their problems. Kormos & Dénes (2004) suggest using speech rate, the mean length of utterance, phonation time ratio and the number of stressed words produced per minute as predictors of fluency scores. Larsen-Freeman (2006) measures fluency quantitatively in her study counting the average number of words in a t-unit. Skehan's (2003, 2009) work offers a more detailed categorization of fluency that includes speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency. More specifically, this method still employs the calculation of linguistic units (rate and density), pauses, false starts, self-corrections, misformulations, and repetitions. Earlier research in the 1990s proposed the

inclusion of “interactive features” such as topic initiations, back-channelings, substantive comments, latching and overlapping (Riggenbach, 1991) as predictors of speech fluency.

All the proposed variables above were measured and analyzed by different quantitative methods, which set aside the psychological and other non-phonological features of student talk. These features are concerned with the student’s unique speaking style, the linguistic characteristics of his or her first language, the circumstances in which he or she is performing the task, and most importantly, the perception of the listener. For example, a study suggested that “fluency, like beauty, may be in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder” (Freed, 2000, p.245), depending on what the listeners or readers attend to. In that study, speech samples were given to a panel of judges, both native and nonnative speakers, so that they could evaluate the students’ fluency without being given any specific instruction. The judges’ job was to rate the speech sample using their own opinion, and later they were asked to report on what factor(s) influenced them the most while they evaluated the speech samples. The results show that different judges steer their attention to different aspects of the sample such as “richness of vocabulary,” “clarity of voice,” “rhythm of phrase,” “enunciation,” and so on (p.261). The relevance of this study is that it points out how different native speakers of the target language can perceive fluency differently. This implies we can expect people to have different, even contradicting impression of one’s fluency, making us more aware of the impressionistic attribute of this construct while working with it.

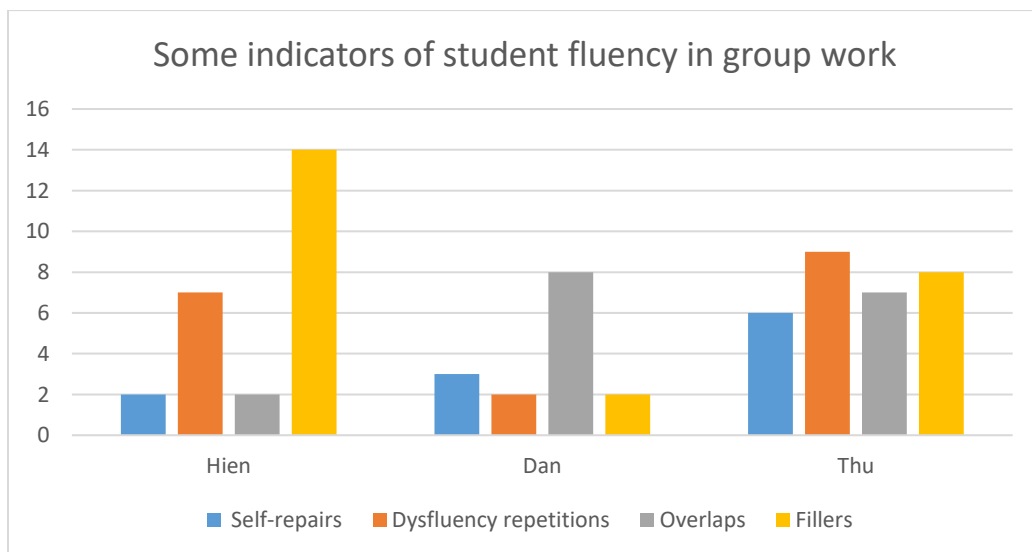
Nevertheless, my depiction of oral fluency among L2 learners in group work was guided by two analyses. The first one adapts the conventional measurements that can reveal the smoothness of speech (fluency in a narrow sense) while the second one is a qualitative analysis of US professors’ evaluation of the students’ overall English proficiency (fluency in a broad

sense). To begin with, I selected a set of quantitative descriptors that effectively discloses the different aspects of fluency as follow:

- 1) Number of self-repair/reformulations instances;
- 2) Number of natural pauses and fillers (Chambers, 1997) instances;
- 3) Number of overlapping instances;
- 4) Number of dysfluency repetitions;

While the first three factors are the “norms” of fluency research, dysfluency repetition is only present in recent studies to distinguish between the repetitions caused by linguistic issues and those by speaking habits (i.e., we cannot count *no, no, no, no* as a dysfluency repetition). Only repetitions that show struggles to complete an idea or search for vocabulary are counted as signs of dysfluency. Overlapping is also a little different from the other three factors because it does not necessarily indicate a problem with disfluency. Instead, it provides a hint of fluency when the speaker is eager to voice and not afraid of interrupting others. Graphically presented, all the four factors are distributed as follow:

**Figure 4.1 Fluency in the “The Survivor” activity**



One of the classic reasons for students to fear speaking in class is making mistakes. The flow of their speech is disrupted when they are too obsessed with making and then correcting errors. Among the three students, Thu seems to be the most cautious about what she wants to say by making more self-repairs than the other two peers. The following examples show the moments when she tries to reformulate her utterances:

***Excerpt 4.3***

- Thu: No no, before he sinks he can tell about his purpose er, oh no er his method... his method to others.
- Thu: Yes! He should be die ((girls laughing)) he should be dead, not die.

My everyday observations, as well as the teacher's opinion, make me believe that Thu is the most fluent in the class. However, a close analysis of her talking shows that the flow of her speech is often disrupted by efforts to fix her self-recognized mistakes. She also has the most instances of dysfluency repetition while attempting to straighten out her thoughts but most of the time she finishes with a complete thought, or a comprehensible point while the other two tend to leave their utterances unfinished after the repetitions. Despite all the seemingly negative data, Thu demonstrates high engagement and enthusiasm in the conversation and excellently plays the role of a group leader by keeping her groupmates on task and initiating ideas for moving the conversation along.

My impression of Hien's oral English was also a positive one, but the breakdown of her fluency shows a different pattern than Thu's. What stands out in Hien's speech is the ease and willingness to voice and be involved despite the imperfections in her pronunciation and grammar. If Thu's attempts to self-correct interfere with her fluency, for Hien, it is the density of fillers that affects the flow of her speech. For example, among all the 24 fillers (e.g., *um*, *er*) counted, 14 are found in Hien's turns. She is also the one who has the most pauses, yet being the

most productive speaker among the three, not in terms of the total turns, but in terms of contributing the most long, complete sentences.

Dan's participation somehow reinforces the gender stereotype of men interrupting more than women. He had the least turns but the most overlap instances. It is noticeable that Dan produced shorter chunks of words than his two partners. Many of his responses were to show disagreement, typically starting with "no."

#### *Excerpt 4.4*

- Line 33: No, the boy!
- Line 62: No, I don't think so.
- Line 71: No no, just think about vice-vice--, V-I-P.
- Line 75: Oh no no, he is mine, he is mine.
- Line 103: No no no no, no wifi.

At other times, Dan had a special tactic of directing the conversation and expressing agreement. Through the repetition of the word "ok", Dan seems to signal that he wants to close down the topic and move to a new one. In the excerpt below, Dan's contribution was limited within just the repeated "ok" and not until a few turns afterward did he really say something.

#### *Excerpt 4.5*

- Thu: Ah sick, so many—so many doctors are there.  
Hien: But he is the only one (.) who could cure  
Dan: Ok, [ok  
Thu: [but there are so many good doctors there  
Dan: ok ok ((sounds like he wants his peers to finish their conversation))  
Thu: =no but wait wait a minute, I think the doctor will—will...er he's way too —  
he's way too er...um, too too=  
Dan: =ok ok ok

Based on these accounts of pauses and reformulations, it would be reasonable to conclude that Hien's fluency is not up to par. Repetitions and restarts also occurred in Hien's speech, but many times they coincided with reformulations when she repeated part of the sentence before finishing it. This finding also suggests that fluency measures such as restarts, reformulations, or

self-repairs should not be used together since they overlap to an extent that makes coding burdensome. Self-repair behaviors can contain restarts and reformulations. This is why I tried to choose a set of four measures that capture the four distinct attributes of fluency instead of using as many measures as possible as do other studies in fluency.

While the measuring methods above have become conventional, they are too concerned with mechanical aspects of fluency and do not capture the range of things people attend to in real life. An average listener may not conceive fluency solely using the above-mentioned descriptors. Since everybody has their own feel for language, listeners will use what they see as their own commonsense criteria to decide if a speaker is fluent or not. The following summary of US professors' comments/evaluation of the students' fluency can well explain how fluency can be "in the ears of the beholder."

*Table 4.2 US professors' comments on student fluency*

<b>US Professors</b>	<b>Comments after 4-6 weeks of interaction in class</b>
Professor 1	"Excellent during student presentations and by some students in class...it [fluency] depends on planned or unplanned talk..."
Professor 2	"Only a few of the students have what should be the required English fluency level... about 35% can explain themselves fairly well in spoken English when they are called on."  "Part of the issue [with fluency] may be that it is difficult to sit through 3.5 hours of lecture in a second language."
Professor 3	"I worked with the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cohort and I was impressed with their capacities especially in language-proficiency. Like any class, there was a bell-curve of effort and aptitude, but the top 15% of the class were truly exceptional students given the challenges of the Advanced Curriculum program (and incidentally, nearly all were female)"
Professor 4	"Most of them are not so good...no practice or experience... no big active vocabulary... often use Vietnamese grammar and construction and direct translations."

These comments reveal the professors' tendency to perceive fluency in its broader sense (fluency=proficiency). This is why they only give general comments about the students' proficiency level relative to the requirements of the course and their expectations. For the professors, fluency is more associated with intelligible speech, or the meaningfulness of communication. One of them was "impressed" with the students' English, while the others were more negative. The comments also point out what the professors think as primary factors that affected the students' fluency. The factors mentioned here include "3.5 hours of lecture in a second language," "no big active vocabulary," and "often use Vietnamese grammar and construction and direct translations." Those comments are very constructive for language policy makers and teachers to rethink the overall structure of the imported curriculum and how "intensive" the Advanced Curriculum's English program and content courses should be<sup>10</sup>. These findings seem to suggest that the current program is already very intense, to a point that it has an adverse effect on student performance. Another comment comes from Professor 4 pointing to the issue of students translating words directly from Vietnamese into English. This comment helps explain the lack of ease and spontaneity in student's speech because they are trapped in their efforts to translate their thoughts. This is evident in Group 3's talk, where students stopped a number of times to ask about the translation of a word they forgot:

***Excerpt 4.6***

- Kha: *negative*, what does this mean? (.) *Negative* what does this mean?  
Chi: Phủ định. *Negative*
- Kha: Người nghèo là gì nhỉ? Nghèo ý. *What is "ngươi ngheo"? "ngheo"?*  
Linh: Rich (1.0) oh no poor poor poor. ((All 3 busy thinking about how to reason their choice and using their smart phone to look up word translation))
- Linh: Kinh tế, kinh tế là gì? E::conomic. *What is "kinh te"?*  
Kha: [President, president là chủ tịch [đúng không? *Is it the chairman?*

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<sup>10</sup> The content/subject classes taught by US professors are also intense because they want to pack everything into 4-6 weeks instead of teaching a few hours a week over the entire semester.

Linh:  
*the prime minister, oh the president*

[ờ chủ tịch nước, à tổng thống chứ. *Uh*

(Group 3, Jan 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

If fluency is measured by means of “smoothness, ease, and effortlessness” (Chamber, 1997, p. 535), the students in this study may not be deemed fluent. The excerpts above show more halting than smoothness, more struggle than ease and effortlessness. Compared to Group 2 we can see that better fluency was attained in this group because they focused their talk on the content rather than word search or translation. This suggests that fluency may refer to one’s ability to use whatever is available on the surface of his or her language repertoire to get a task done and the willingness to let go of the impulses to find a perfect translation or grammar. This will partly help improve the spontaneity dimension of oral language production.

In summary, both analyses—with one looking at mechanical characteristics of oral delivery such as repetitions, self-repairs, overlaps, and fillers, and one relying on general impression of student’s fluency—reveal the multidimensional nature of student fluency. To help students improve their fluency, it is important to see the difference between the kind of fluency expected in a standardized test such as the TOEFL iBT, and the kind of “all-around oral proficiency” (Lennon, 2000, p. 25) that is often judged by one’s common sense. For example, on the TOEFL speaking test, an excellent score is granted when the tester can demonstrate a generally well-paced flow (fluid expression) and clear speech. However, the speech may still include minor lapses, or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation patterns, which do not affect overall intelligibility (TOEFL’s Independent Speaking Rubric). In real life, the “outward manifestation of fluency” (Towell, 2012, p.55) can be judged solely by one’s common sense without a specific set of criteria. To help students perform better in the first scenario, the standardized test, we teachers can share more concrete tips in improving clarity and pace in

talking. To improve fluency in the second scenario, everyday life, we can encourage students to immerse themselves in frequent low-stakes speaking activities in class such as team working, debating, reading aloud, and role playing. That said, improving speech fluency is concerned with meeting two goals. The first goal is to teach students basic speaking skills (e.g., English sound patterns, intonation, and stress) so that they produce clear and meaningful speech. The other goal is to normalize speaking and listening in English so that they speak naturally and responsively. While nothing can substitute for practice, it would be a logical step to start with driving away fears and shyness in students before engaging them in a speaking task. This can be done by minimizing teacher correction, since this will only reinforce students' inherent insecurities about their accuracy, which in turn will result in even more hesitation.

#### ***4.2.3 Accuracy***

Another dimension of the CAF triad is accuracy, the correctness of grammar use in spoken language, or “the extent to which an L2 learner’s performance...deviates from a norm” (Housen et al., 2012, p. 4). Unlike complexity and fluency, accuracy enjoys less controversy and comes out as the most consistent construct of the CAF framework. However, in the landscape of L2 teaching in Vietnam, accuracy has always emerged as a major concern for both teachers and learners since the L2 testing system in Vietnam is very accuracy-oriented. It places a clear emphasis on grammar accuracy not only in written tests but also in oral tests. Knowing what is waiting for them at the exit tests, both students and teachers will understandably prepare themselves accordingly, and this gives a rational explanation for why accuracy-focused curricula still exist.

To examine accuracy in student talk, I marked all the errors found in the transcripts, including those followed with self-repairs. The excerpt below shows some typical grammar errors in student speech:

***Excerpt 4.7***

- Thu: = you know if the CEO survives, the economic is very important with a country, is it right?
- Hien: If your man of you were sick, or you, who can cure you?
- Hien: I talk about the ((inaudible)) man, if someday he is sick or ill who can cure his sick?
- Hien: If he don't want he should be die
- Thu: Yes! He should be die ((girls laughing)) he should be dead, not die
- Dan: Um then maybe Ho Chi Minh, he should be survive.
- Hien: If they save the beauty famous actress, maybe er maybe she will make-make a romantic story like er the Titanic hihi.<sup>11</sup>

(Group 2)

While most of the errors are concerned with the misuse of a word form or verb tense, the intended meaning is not completely obscured. The more profound problem is that when there is an instance of inaccuracy, there will also be an instance of dysfluency if a student notices the mistake and tries to correct it. Hien's utterance "If he don't want he should be die" contains errors yet she did not go back to correct it while Thu tried to do so and as a result her turn was coded with "self-repair," a marker of a dysfluency issue. Now we can see a mutually exclusive relationship between the accuracy and fluency construct. It seems that the two of them cannot co-exist except in highly proficient speakers. At this level it seems that one has to be more or less sacrificed for the other to thrive. If the student wants accuracy, that interferes with their fluency and vice versa.

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<sup>11</sup> Bullet points indicate that the excerpt is a non-sequential conversation.

There have been some theories that explain this phenomenon in beginner level student speech, one of which is the *Trade-off Hypothesis* (Skehan, 2007). This hypothesis puts complexity, accuracy and fluency in a competing relation, where an area of performance sinks for the other two to emerge. Ellis (2000) takes the same position on this issue and points out that an investment on accuracy can result in a loss of either complexity or fluency. This implies that it is very unusual for learners at this level to be proficient in all three areas at the same time, except for when student speech contains formulaic language —“the linguistic units often memorized as a whole rather than generated from individual items” (Myles, 2012, p. 72). The following examples in Myles’s study of 16 French beginner learners in the UK are considered formulaic language:

Comment t’appelles tu? (What’s your name?)

Où habites-tu? (Where do you live?)

Quelle est la date de ton anniversaire? (When is your birthday?)

The finding from Myles’ study raises some hope that formulaic language, if purposefully and intensively integrated in the syllabus, can help improve student’s accuracy. One very common trait of Vietnamese learners is that they adapt very well to any form of rote learning, and if these common expressions can be internalized, they can form a “backbone” of grammar accuracy for the students to draw the rules for themselves and distinguish between standard and non-standard forms. For example, if students have familiarized themselves with frequently used questions such as “Where do you live?”, “What do you think?”, “How about this one?”, they will later on figure out that they cannot say “What you think?”, “where you live?” and so on. When their vocabulary and grammar knowledge is expanded, they can look back at these formulaic structures and plug in new items following the syntactical rules that now have been part of their subconscious. For example, once they are able to draw the formula for a *Wh*- question, they can

ask “Where does your cousin work?”, “What did your mother think about the movie?” and so on. Many English textbooks used in Vietnam still present grammar items in formulaic chunks, and over time that has shaped an ELT pedagogy that relies on such chunks to teach and learn English.

Looking back at the data, it is true that instances of formulaic expressions often co-occur with instances of accurate speech. While most contemporary methodologies are refraining from teaching formulaic language, it is worth considering bringing this idea back to the classroom to at least build the foundation for student’s immediate retrieval of vocabulary and structures. Since this formulaic language enhances accuracy and is easier to learn, the students tend to internalize and then use it very naturally, making their talk appear more fluent than it actually is. For example, Group 2’s talk demonstrates an effective use of formulaic language with 34 instances that allow students to express themselves with familiar structures

***Table 4.3 Types of formulaic language found in the two groups***

<b>Formulaic Structures</b>	<b>Examples from data</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>
<i>How about</i> + Noun Phrase (NP)	<i>How about all 6 people?</i> <i>How about the beautiful famous actress?</i> <i>How about now?</i> <i>How about next?</i>	All instances are accurate
<i>It’s</i> + adjective/NP	<i>It’s impossible</i> <i>It’s a good idea</i> <i>It’s the talented boy</i>	All instances are accurate
<i>There is/there are</i>	<i>There are many good doctors there</i> <i>There was sharks in the sea*</i>	All instances but one are accurate
<i>Wh</i> -questions + Verb/N phrase	<i>Which country?</i> <i>What is “talent”?</i> <i>Who should die first?</i>	All instances are accurate
Other common expressions	<i>I think/ I don’t think so</i> <i>I agree with you</i> <i>No idea</i>	All instances are accurate

All the formulaic structures above can be acquired by most students after one semester even if not all of them are aware of the grammar content embedded in these structures (i.e., not all of them can generalize and extrapolate the rule to produce more sophisticated utterances).

However, the benefit of learning chunks lies in the fact that they can be memorized and recalled more easily and offer quicker access for the learner when he or she needs to use them. Besides, according to Swan (2008) memorization and recall are “cheap in terms of mental resources.” At the beginning level, student may not be able to afford the most scientific or sophisticated way to reach their L2 storage. There should always be something right there, in the front of their brain, and at surface level, for them to quickly grab and use, such as these simple prefabricated language chunks. This not only allows a higher chance of accuracy but also requires less processing and searching time, thus helping with fluency as well.

Another issue related to accuracy in student talk is that most of the erroneous utterances are comprehensible. The examples below are typical mistakes identified in the “The Survivor” activity but it is not difficult to understand what the students meant despite the errors.

***Excerpt 4.8***

- ...the economic is very important with a country, is it right?
- If the man of you were sick, who can cure his sick?
- Lifeboat can carry one person. Then everybody die.
- If they save the beauty actress maybe er maybe she will make—make a romantic story like the Titanic hihhi

(Group 2)

- He helps the economy and helps...er so we should save he.
- He can er help er people um rich

(Group 3)

While I am aware that my statement about comprehensibility may be biased because I share my native language with these students and can mostly always figure out what they mean regardless of the mistakes, I believe research has shown that a great proportion of errors do not interfere with listener’s comprehension. For example, Pallotti (2009) distinguishes error *per se* with errors that obscure comprehensibility, and it is the latter that really affects one’s impression of proficiency (p. 225, cf. Tonkyn, 2012). The errors identified in the examples above are mostly

associated with a wrong word form and word order and not necessarily grammar. For example, it should have been *economy* instead of *economic*, *sickness* instead of *sick*, *beautiful* instead of *beauty*. Since the Vietnamese language does not change the spelling of a word when it is used in different parts of speech, the students do not have the habit of alternating between word forms. As long as they know one form of the word and its meaning, then the wrong form does not affect their understanding. This facet of accuracy that has not received enough attention is because grammar teaching in Vietnam tends to exclude morphological accuracy or label most errors as grammatical errors. This is why when we talk about accuracy we only look for errors that are explicitly defined as grammar by the textbooks. For example, most textbooks used in Vietnam define grammar as primarily involving correct use of plurals, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and different types of subordinate clauses. Meanwhile, the data clearly show that speech accuracy was affected by the violation of both syntactic and morphological norms of the target language. What the students are struggling with is not just grammar, but also the lack of awareness and practice of English morphology in the current English curriculum. My only concern is how such errors, if not pointed out, might be repeated in student writing later on, and how they might gradually form a distinct kind of Venglish that deviates from English grammatical norms, one that can be easily understood by English-speaking Vietnamese, but not so by native speakers. At the same time, we do not want to be too corrective toward student errors since that discourages them from making their voice heard. With this dilemma, perhaps it would not be a good idea to teach morphological knowledge explicitly or intensively. Instead, small portions of morphology knowledge such as word formation can be introduced briefly in writing lessons to raise students' awareness of English inflexional morphemes such as *-ed*, *-er*, *-est*, *-tion*, *-ity* and so on. We can also hope that being more aware of morphological forms in

writing will eventually have an echoing effect in speaking and thus improve student's overall speech accuracy

#### **4.3 The use of L1: Because everybody cares**

In transcribing the data, I realized that there are other meaningful aspects of language production that are not covered in the CAF package. One of these aspects is the use of L1-the classic concern of both language teachers and learners. Students' use of L1 has sometimes been hastily judged as an indication of improper teaching and unsuccessful learning of the target language. I keep in mind that this research goes parallel with the practice of the English-only policy in EFL classes nationwide, and obviously the question that comes to everybody's attention is how much L1 is still being used in class and when. Although the data can only reveal L1 used within the focal groups due to the big class size, the findings are still very informative and are suggestive for future research since they are the very first findings of L1 use in the English classes under the Advanced Curriculum project.

L1 use identified in recorded group work and teacher-fronted time is documented by its occurrence(s) in each turn and the counting of one occurrence is bounded by L2 use. For example, if an utterance starts with L1, then L2, then L1 again, that would be counted as two L1 occurrences in one turn. All L1 instances are then examined in light of the following questions: 1) When do teacher and students use L1?; 2) Why do they use it?; and 3) Does it correlate with task complexity? It should be noted that teachers and students in this research study share the same first language. Besides, they are in their homeland, where it just feels natural to speak L1 despite all the English-only restrictions. Such a learning condition makes it irresistible for both teacher and students to switch to L1 when communicating in L2 becomes too difficult or

awkward and maybe that is why all parties involved in the AC project are interested in finding out how much L1 is still being used and how to reduce it.

Groups 1 and 3 used a surprising amount of L1 to get their conversations going in the “The Survivor” task. Most strikingly, in Group 1 there were 81 instances of L1 use that is shown in 101 turns that comprise their 12-minute discussion. In reviewing these L1 instances, many of them are very simple questions or expressions such as *Who do you choose?, I choose the boy or He’s old*. Since the recording was conducted when the students were in their second semester, I have no doubt that they could have said many of these sentences in English if they had chosen to do so. Even in Group 2, the group that has the fewest L1 instances (6/114 turns), the L1 use seems to have very little to do with the complexity of their language production. The six instances of L1 found at the beginning of Group 2’s talk are translated below:

***Excerpt 4.9***

*Thu: Who agrees that the actress should be the one who should sink first?<sup>12</sup>*  
*Hien: We save whoever is the youngest!*  
*Dan: Right, save the youngest!*  
*Hien: This boy is only 10.*  
*Thu: Who?*  
*Hien: 10 years old.*

Interestingly, after this very brief exchange in Vietnamese, Group 2 switched to English and the entire discussion after that was free of L1, and they even produced more sophisticated sentences in English toward the end of the conversation:

***Excerpt 4.10***

- *Thu: No no, before he sinks he can tell about his purpose er, oh no er his method, his method to others.*
- *Hien: Um I also think the vice president of the country should be the survivor, because he is very very important of the world.*

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<sup>12</sup> Italicized transcript means the text was originally conducted in L1 and I am just providing a translated version

Meanwhile, in Group 1 and Group 3, the students were clearly aware that they were using L1 but did not show any intention to revert to L2 even when one of them explicitly said “No Vietnamese.” Since there was no response to that prompt, the group continued on using L1 to complete the task. During the entire activity, the teacher took little action to make sure L2 was used in groups and only circulated to help clarify the task. The teacher said that after the first semester he applied the 10,000 VND<sup>13</sup> rule to enforce L2 use and therefore cut down on reminding the students of the English-only policy verbally in class.

The prevailing argument in L1 literature that L1 is used more in unattended group work is also not consistently supported by the data. While it has always been a reasonable hypothesis that the students would use more L2 when the teacher is around, Group 2 provides considerable counter-evidence since the video shows the group is not supervised during the task. On other days, this group consistently complied with the English-only rule with a minimal amount of L1 use. Interestingly the group (Group 1) that used L1 all the time in this task switched to using L2 in other tasks. Although the moments when a student chooses to use L1 seems to be very arbitrary in the data, I propose two hypotheses to explain the students’ choice of L1 in this activity.

First, the first group consists of two students I chose for the focal group and there is no “outsider” to witness their performance. On the contrary, the other two groups have an ordinary student join them and this probably adds some pressure on the four focal students, making them more aware of their being “role models” for the class. Second, I believe that when the group has a member that is firm on the English-only rule and keeps using it regardless of what language

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<sup>13</sup> VND (Vietnam Dong) is Vietnamese currency, 22,000VND=\$1. Students were charged money if they spoke Vietnamese in class.

others are using, he or she will eventually “pull” others to the same playing field where the same language is necessary for people to “blend” in. Similarly, if a member keeps using L1 all the time, that can also steer the group to the easier path of using L1 more. In short, a group is not only a place of negotiation, but also an encounter between rule conformers and rule breakers, whose language choice can dominate or lead others.

L1 use in Groups 1 and 3 is very perplexing since it is hard to decide what the main role L2 is playing in the activity. It is often expected that with all the benefits that L1 offers, the groups should be able to produce a more interesting and complex discussion since L1 allows them to do a lot more than L2. However, the data show that the groups used L1 for the same purposes as they did with L2, except that L1 allows them to add more humor to the conversation than when they use L2. The different functions of L1 have been addressed in various research as establishing interpersonal interaction, moving the task along (Swain & Lapkins, 2000); providing a cognitive and psychological tool for scaffolding (Anton & DiCamilia, 1998); reducing anxiety and enhancing an affective environment for learning (Auerbach, 1993). In the data, L1 is used mostly for the following purposes: 1) to collaboratively execute the task by clarifying what they are supposed to do (e.g., *each of us should choose one, let's choose one, mark this*); 2) looking up the translation of new words (e.g., *what is vice president? How do you say “quyen gop”?* *what does “talented” mean?*); and 3) providing reasons for their choices (e.g., *this person can cure cancer; this guy is rich*). This means that L1 use in the three groups is strikingly unusual in the way the students utilized their native language mostly to make jokes and to ask vocabulary questions while the other functions of L1 seem to be overlooked. This raises the question of how we can guide students to use L1 in a more strategic way to aid learning and build rapport since research has proved that translingual negotiation strategies, as demonstrated by Groups 1 and 3,

can “play a significant functions for voice, values, and identity” and enables the L2 learners “to develop repertoires and practices that allow shuttling between norms” (Canagarajah, 2012, p.13). For example, even with L1, Group 1 did not produce more speech than the other two groups, and overall their conversation shows much less coherence with discontinued topics, interruptions, random think-a-louds, and off-topic comments. There were 12 instances of using L1 to ask and answer questions about vocabulary—something they could have done easily using L2 (e.g., *What does X mean?*, *What is X?*). If L1 is only used at the same basic level as L2, it is reasonable to say that it may not be more conducive to learning than L2. In this case, I would recommend that the teacher be more firm in encouraging the students to use L2 to complete a task. This supports the view that “L1 is only beneficial to learning when it is carefully managed” (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), otherwise it will turn into a lost opportunity for L2 practice as in the case of the first group.

The data seem to contradict previous L1 research findings that L1 is often used when the students lack vocabulary or grammar required to express their ideas at a more complex level. The three transcripts of the same activity (“The Survivor”) show consistent evidence that the students were not using L1 as the last resort. With 16 instances of laughter and jokes that co-occur with L1 use, it can be said that L1 does have the credit for reducing anxiety and establishing interpersonal relationship among the students. It is the relaxed atmosphere that encourages the student to become more involved in the task, and banteringly moves it along. Once the students are able to create a safe and comfortable space, they feel more confidence to tackle the task the way they choose. Moreover, many of the off-topic discussions and jokes in L1 carry interesting sociocultural information that helps understand what factors are driving what students say and think. Let us examine the two following examples:

#### *Excerpt 4.12*

- Thu: *Spiderman does not need to be saved hihhi... A hero should not live, a hero often sacrifices isn't it? ((laughter))*
- Lan: *I want to save this man but he is too old hehehe... Old people are ok to die. I am young and beautiful so you guys should let me live. Save me and I will make a movie about you hihhi*
- Lan: *I have money so I have the right, got it? If I am rescued I will spend money on finding your dead bodies in the sea ((giggling))<sup>14</sup>*

While Vietnam is long known as a country that celebrates aging and venerates the elders, the recent motto “children are the future of the country” is also deeply grounded in contemporary Vietnamese society. This justifies Lan’s reasoning that if she had to save only one person, she would choose the young boy over the doctor who is 60 years old<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, with the digital boom and exposure to western capitalism, a lot of people now believe in the idea of “money talks.” Lan also considers saving the richest person, implying that he can use money to buy his life, and later on honor his companions by coming back to the ocean to find their dead bodies. With L1 and within the group, the students are willing to reveal a more honest or innocent part of their thinking, also a part that is culturally shared. However, when the group has to report their conversation in front of the class, in L2, not all these jokes or thoughts are included. The students tend to choose to report the standard path to reasoning, by saying they would save the richest because they will eventually contribute to the nation’s economy. However, these jokes did not come out of the blue, but are rooted in the students’ psychology which may have some influences on how much they want to engage with the task. Therefore, their wittiness can carry certain a pedagogical value that teachers should not take lightly. The next section seeks to explore what that value is.

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<sup>14</sup> Italics indicate translated talk

<sup>15</sup> In certain rural areas in Vietnam, people even celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday as marking a milestone that places them into the “old people” group. This explains why 60 is considered “very old” by these students.

#### 4.4 Interpreting humor in student talk

Humor instances are found in all three groups in both L1 and L2, as well as across all task types, which suggests a positive and healthy interpersonal relationship within the group. In the case of L2 use, it can also mean that students are confident enough about their language proficiency to successfully deliver the joke. In the following extracts, Hien was using a joke to make her argument that the doctor should be saved:

##### *Excerpt 4.13a*

- Line (1) Hien: But if your man is sick, who can cure him?  
Thu: What?  
Hien: If your man of you were sick, or you, who can cure you?  
Thu: It is a good idea too but I don't understand you  
(5) Hien: I talk about the ((inaudible)) man, if someday he is sick or ill who can cure his sick?  
Thu: What?  
Hien: Sick  
Thu: Sick?  
(10) Dan: sick, illness  
Thu: Ah sick, so many—so many doctors are there  
Hien: But he is the only one who could cure!  
Dan: [Ok, ok  
Thu: [but there are so many good doctors there.  
(15) Thu: No no, before he sinks he can tell about his purpose er, oh no er his method, his method to others  
Dan: No I don't think so, if he don't want to tell to anybody, ok?  
Hien: If he don't want he should be die.

Hien challenges Thu by putting her in a hypothetical situation where Thu's boyfriend may be very sick and the chance is that she will badly need the doctor to save her boyfriend's life. Unfortunately, it takes Thu a couple moves to understand the point and she responds very reasonably to the joke by arguing that there are many good doctors out there and she is not too worried. The joke triggers this reasoning, and Thu becomes more certain that she does not want to save the doctor no matter what. Very soon after that Thu picks up on the joke and starts to

elaborate on her reasoning, pointing out that the doctor could tell people about the method to cure cancer before she dies. In other words, the death of the doctor does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the cancer treatment. Therefore, Thu is not too desperate to rescue the doctor and feels justified to choose another person to save.

It would be interesting if this conversation continued a bit more so we could see more of what a joke can lead us to, but Dan chimes in and wants to steer his group mates to another topic. Maybe he feels that such a conversation is out of place and leading them to nowhere. However, just a minute after that, he becomes very involved in the joke by challenging Hien *What if he<sup>16</sup> doesn't want to tell anybody about his method*" Hien reacts very sharply and quick to that question with her verdict *if he don't want he should be die*, approved by Thu repeating *yes she should be die*. Notably Thu catches the mistake and tries to correct it. This talking-things-through process finally takes the two peers to an agreement where they can move on to the next topic.

Although some jokes during students talk are trivial, sometimes they serve as a channel for conveying thoughts and easing any tension that comes from doing the task. In another instance, Lan (Group 1) uses humor to keep her peers on task while not appearing too controlling:

***Excerpt 4.14***

Lan: *No, in the end you have to give your reasons why your person deserves living. A hero should not be rescued in this case. A hero often sacrifices hihhi.*

Chi: *No, let him live so he can protect the country.*

Lan: *Oh well there's been enough time for the ship to sink if we continue to argue like this.*

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<sup>16</sup> The doctor in the task is a female but the students sometimes refer to her as "he."

Since the time is nearly over and the group has not been able to decide which person to save, Lan decides that she and her peers should not bounce around different ideas any more but focus on one specific person. It is not the right time to argue whose person is more worthy of living (e.g., a hero or a doctor), but why that person is worth saving. This is actually a necessary step to take when time is running out. Lan's use of humor here not only adds some zest to the conversation but also nicely prompts other members to get back on track without sounding too bossy.

Studying the use of humor in student L2 talk also offers some insights into student language proficiency. I believe that when a student uses humor for a purpose, he or she is advancing to the next level of language learning. As Cook (2000) comments:

“Knowing a language, and being able to function in communities which use the language, entails being able to understand and produce play with it, making this ability a necessary part of advanced proficiency” (p.150).

This does not mean only advanced learners use humor or make jokes since humor has little to do with using complicated vocabulary or perfect grammar. It has more to do with the ability to sense and react quickly with a zest to what is being said by others. The presence of jokes and humor during peer interaction is not always innocent or meaningless. They have certain functions and some of which directly have an effect on learning, whether it is to ease anxiety and tension or to offer new ideas. This has been studied in Swain's (2013) research where she makes a plausible point that emotion is an integral part of learning (p. 197). She suggests that scholarly research should pay more attention to the possible interrelationship between emotion and cognition (see also Krashen's, 1985, hypothesis of an affective filter).

In retrospect, when my EFL class was observed in 2010, my students were at the same stage in their English study as the students in the data here. The observers then came to the definite conclusion that the students were still at the very beginning level and might not be able to take classes with US professors. This conclusion was reasoned by the students' vocabulary and grammar being limited to only "common/simple words and short sentences." The joyousness of the class atmosphere, as I clearly remember now, and the repartee between the students, myself, and the co-teacher from New Zealand, was of course considered a sideline and not pedagogically beneficial. This is because a one-hour observation cannot allow us to penetrate the multifaceted realm of student talk and understand the role of the many different factors there. False starts, pauses, laughter, silence, jokes, frustration, confusion, self-correction and so on are indispensable parts of conversational interaction in an L2 class—just like all the dots, lines, curves, shades, and colors that make a picture. It is just about time to bring this picture close up for colleagues, school administrators, and myself to fully appreciate the multidimensional nature of student's speech and the different modes by which L2 acquisition may take place.

## Chapter 5: Student Language Production: A Cross-Task Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter scrutinizes 11 collaborative classroom tasks to examine the relation between task designs and the amount and nature of students' oral language production. Student performance will still be discussed in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), but the focus will be placed on the interactional patterns in student speech as engendered by different task designs. Most of the tasks chosen are meaning-focused and aim at honing communicative skills such as negotiating, defending an argument, disagreeing politely and so on. Some form-focused tasks are directed at discrete grammar skills were also documented but in fact there were not many of them.

Among a few dozen tasks that I observed, many were accomplished in a standard way with the students doing what they were supposed to do and with the task achieving what it was supposed to achieve. However, the 11 tasks selected for this chapter stand out due to the unique interactional patterns that they triggered. Many of these patterns were unexpected, in both negative and positive senses depending on whether student performance of the task exceeded or failed to meet its pedagogical goals. For example, some tasks derailed from their original intent and steered students to interact in a certain way that could either disappoint or surprise the teacher. This mismatch between goals and outcomes is reflected in three outstanding linguistic phenomena namely *echoed speech*, *self-directed speech*, and *metalinguistic speech* that will be discussed in sections 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 respectively in this chapter.

The list below shows the range of tasks that contained the three interactional patterns mentioned above. The tasks are presented in the order of their appearance in the chapter (e.g., Task 5.1 is the first to be discussed, then Task 5.2 and so on).

**Table 5.1 Selected task types in the two EFL classes**

Task 5.1: Create a list of common teenage abbreviations used in texting and social networks
Task 5.2: Brainstorm ideas on a poster using bubble diagrams. (Students can choose between two topics: teen fashion and things to do at the beach.)
Task 5.3: Discuss past experience with drama with a partner. (This is a pre-reading activity that the students do before reading a long passage about the development of drama).
Task 5.4: Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of small cars and big cars.
Task 5.5: Work with a partner to figure out how to set a dining table in Western style.
Task 5.6: Retell a story together: The folk tale “The Washerman and his Dog and Donkey.”
Task 5.7: Collaborative writing with focus on the use of simple, complex, compound, compound-complex sentences. (All groups start with a simple sentence that reads “It was a stormy night at NHU,” and within their group students take turns to add a sentence and pass the story along to another groupmate until time runs out.)
Task 5.8: Rearrange jumbled paragraphs to make a complete story: Another folk tale.
Task 5.9: Fill in the blank with a suitable word
Task 5.10: Work together to find the topic sentence for the given paragraphs
Task 5.11: Underline and correct the mistakes in each sentence (70 items all together)

Unlike other task-based studies which place a focus on a systemic classification of task types and their characteristics (Pica et al., 2006, with three types of information gap tasks; Skehan, 2001, with personal task, narrative task, and decision-making task), the selection of the tasks below are driven by the similarities in their outcomes. In other words, while many task-based studies choose a top-down approach to classifying tasks, my analysis employs a bottom-up approach, where I look at the outcomes/patterns first and trace the kinds of task that lead to these patterns. That said, the chapter does not categorize tasks, but it identifies speech patterns across task types and tries to understand what factors affect the way tasks are transacted. Needless to say, there are always a handful of variables beyond a task design that affect the outcome of a task. Within my data, *topic familiarity* and *pre-task planning time* seem to play a significant role in determining the quantity of language production. For this reason, these two variables are also

discussed to offer an all-encompassing description of the relation between a task design and the linguistic pattern it engenders.

## 5.2 Familiar and unfamiliar topics in L2 tasks: The mixed outcomes

L2 tasks in the data come with a spectrum of topics relating to various aspects of modern life. The relation between topic familiarity and language production as well as comprehension has been addressed in earlier research (Gass & Veronis, 1984; Newton 1991). More recent research has not only confirmed previous findings but also expanded on the relation between topic familiarity and particular aspects of language performance such as complexity, fluency, and accuracy (Lange, 2000; Rahimpour & Hazar, 2006, 2007). It should be noted that at NHU, we import English textbooks originated from Western cultures and written by foreign authors. This explains why some of the topics hold little familiarity for the students.<sup>17</sup> The discussion below will examine what effects topic familiarity/unfamiliarity can have on language production.

Whether or not a topic is familiar depends on the student's personal experience and reading habits. Because of this, students may have different perceptions of familiarity with a topic. For example, a student can do reasonably well with topics that require *environment* vocabulary, but struggle talking about *health* and *education*. In this discussion, I focus on topics that were familiar/unfamiliar to most students. For example, most students find *teen codes in texting* and *things to do at the beach* familiar topics—ones that keep them talking with some excitement and confidence. However, they feel awkward to deal with topics like *air transportation* and *setting a dining table in the Western style*. While there were many topics

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<sup>17</sup> The topics in high school English textbooks in VN are either universal or Vietnam-focused, often written and edited by Vietnamese authors. We only use foreign text books in colleges, and this is where the students are exposed to unfamiliar topics

introduced in the class, I selected two tasks with familiar topics and two tasks with unfamiliar topics to evaluate L2 production across the tasks.

One of the familiar topics that immediately enlivened the class was teenagers' texting and internet language (Task 5.1 from list). This task was structured into two parts with the first part being individual work where the students created a list of teenage abbreviations that they often use while texting or chatting with friends. The second part asked students to "share the list with your partner and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of teenager language." Since all students have experience with texting and/or using a chat application, I anticipated that it would lead to a lively group discussion and possibly a better performance in complexity, fluency, and accuracy in general. However, my anticipation was only half correct: the groups did have an animated and cheerful discussion, but their performance dropped in both complexity and fluency aspects. In other words, the topic invited more turns, more contribution from the speakers but each turn was very short and simple such as in the following excerpt:

***Excerpt 5.1***

Thu: Oh and OMG  
Mai: Là cái gì?  
Thu: Oh my god  
Dan: Số hai, số hai ý|| (*two, number two*)  
Thu: good night, ah good night  
Dan: Ồ đúng rồi G9 ý (*yeah right G9*)  
Mai: G9 à?  
Dan: L-u-2  
Thu: BFF  
Dan: What?  
Thu: Best friend forever  
Mai: 4u  
Dan: Yeah, that one.

The best part of this discussion is that the number of turns distributed nearly evenly among the three speakers, which indicates a high level of involvement. Moreover, each student shared his or her part with confidence with only 3 instances of long pauses and 2 instances of

self-repairs over a total of 158 turns within 8 minutes. The conversation was fast paced, efficient, and relaxed. Since the participants could make an equal contribution to the conversation, they could also enjoy a workspace where power and ownership of their work were evenly distributed. They also expanded their horizons in the world of secret language in texting and internet slang since each student seemed to have their own set of acronyms they often used within their group of friends.

So, if we only set our ultimate goal around the idea of how much students talk and how long their utterances are, we will be blinded from seeing the other benefits that a conversation like this can bring to our students. One benefit is that with a familiar topic the students get to use and share their authentic experience in a stress-free conversation. They don't have to worry about having nothing to say or only saying silly things. Another benefit is that being familiar with a topic can cut down on the encoding time or "reduce the processing loads of the task" (Rahimpour & Hazar, 2007). This can be seen in the second task with another familiar topic where students draw a poster with activities on the beach (Task 5.2). As soon as the blank posters are handed out to the groups with instruction, the students quickly fill up their list with ideas and apparently, a pre-task planning time is not necessary for this activity since the student can just start right away without having to think hard about the topic. After five minutes, there are already many sketches of beach activities on the poster. However, the trade-off here is that when a student in the group draws, their conversation is paused, and that affects the fluency aspect of their speech as well as the overall amount of language produced. In 8 minutes, the group's conversation only has 84 turns with frequent pauses for drawing and these turns are distributed unevenly among the participants depending on their role. For example, Dan is in charge of drawing so he was not able to talk very much. Meanwhile Thu and Hien by default

played the role of brainstormers so that they could contribute as many ideas as possible for Dan to draw on the poster. This result informs us of how a task design can vary the opportunities to talk among speakers depending on what role they are assigned within a task.

Despite enjoying a higher participant involvement, tasks with familiar topics present a paradox in the constructions of CAF since the increase in participation does not necessarily lead to an increase in language production, nor does it have a positive impact on CAF. Too many c-units and few t-units mean there is a lack of complexity in the speech. Yet, the limited and simple construction of c-units allows the conversation to proceed with fewer errors and less hesitation. This is where the interpretation of the correlation between task familiarity and CAF becomes challenging since the three variables diverge in different directions with complexity going down and accuracy and fluency going up. At this point it is only safe to say that in this data, topic familiarity generates more active engagement and therefore more fluent and accurate language production at the expense of language complexity.

The pattern of CAF found in L2 tasks suggests that the topic itself is not the sole reason for the greater amount of speech or the lack of complexity. The execution requirements for these tasks involves non-talking activities (e.g., making a list, drawing) that take away time that could have been spent talking. This means there could also be external factors that influence the operationalization of tasks with unfamiliar topics, too. Trying to refrain myself from accepting a priori all the assumptions about unfamiliar topics and its possible effects on language productivity, I carefully reviewed and selected three topics more specific to Western cultures to examine their associated amount of oral output. The table below shows the turn counts and length of each task; there was only a sharp decrease in oral speech produced in the first two although all the topics are identified as unfamiliar:

**Table 5.2 Language production in unfamiliar topics**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Time recorded</b>	<b>Number of turns</b>	<b>CAF</b>
Task 5.3 Experience with drama	5 minutes	11 turns	5 t-units, 11 c-units
Task 5.4 Small cars vs big cars	10 minutes	19 turns	12 t-units, 24 c-units
Task 5.5 Setting up a dining table	7 minutes	122 turns	36 t-units, 119 c-units

Classifying the first two topics, *dramas* and *cars*, as *unfamiliar* can initially cause some confusion for those who have been so accustomed to having those things in their life. Yet strange as it may sound, *dramas* and *cars* are not a popular entertainment form or means of transportation for an average Vietnamese. The task with the *dramas* topic was created for a pre-reading activity, and the *cars* topic was raised as a debate in a speaking class. Both activities were adopted from a textbook used in a major foreign language university in Hanoi where the students have the advantage of enjoying a more urban life and are therefore more familiar with these topics. However, most students at NHU come from suburban areas and therefore do not have the same set of experiences. The first task, for example, asks students to talk about their experience with a drama, or a play they have seen recently, then read a paragraph on the history of drama, starting from the Greek until Elizabethan time. My recording shows nearly no talking for this activity in many groups, even when the teacher started to call on the students and ask them directly, they just shrugged with a guilty smile, “I have never seen a real play.” Even Dan and Thu, who would usually be more talkative, ended up with a very brief conversation:

**Excerpt 5.2**

- Dan: Drama like what?
- Thu: Um ||
- Dan: or just read?
- Dan: I don't like plays || old people watch plays
- Thu: Plays on TV cũng chán (*Plays on TV are also boring*)
- Dan: No no no, dramas are expensive, like in Hanoi Opera House
- Thu: No plays there

Dan: Yes!  
 Thu: Um (3.0) just read  
 Dan: Ok ok, just read. Shh... I can't remember  
 Thu: I don't er er don't don't have anything to remember hihhi

The other task, discussing *cars*, was slightly better in terms of language production, but most of the time students worked really hard on looking for information on their phone and even trying to convert kilometers to miles. The following excerpt was one of the most “talkative” parts of the entire task:

***Excerpt 5.3***

Thu: I only ride motorbike hihhi  
 Dan: um (4.0) ((looking at his phone))...big cars have...er  
 Thu: more economical, small cars more economical  
 Dan: mileage ||  
 Thu: say something say something  
 Dan: BMW, big cars...more...more comfort[able  
 Thu: [small car more economical, here  
 ((hold onto handout))  
 Dan: No no no no no (3.0) 180 kilomet—kilometre per hour là bao nhiêu dặm, tìm đi tìm đi  
 (*How many miles is 180 kilometres? Look it up, look it up*)  
 Thu: Nói kilomet cũng được (*Just say it in kilometer*)  
 Dan: No no ||  
 Thu: All cars are good (2.0)? ||

Apparently this topic about cars was discouraging for Thu since she does not have much experience with cars and the excerpt shows a lack of interest as well as some frustration on her part. In Vietnam, except for a very small portion of students whose parents are wealthy enough to buy a car, most would commute by bicycle, moped, or public transportation. The unfamiliarity with a topic takes its toll on L2 production in two different ways as can be seen in the excerpt. First, it causes resistance to talking since the speaker's limited knowledge on the topic can be easily used up in one or two utterances. This is what happened to Thu since she only knows that “small cars are more economical” thanks to the handout. After echoing that she did

not know what else to say or do, she wanted to throw the ball to Dan by asking him to “say something.” She even switched to L1, perhaps out of frustration or a lack of commitment to the task. Second, this unfamiliarity can drive students to resort to any means available to familiarize themselves with the topic, such as what Dan did. Dan had a very different approach to tackling the topic: he was more in his exploring mode, using his phone to find information about mileage and makes. While this can be considered a good learning strategy when this student shows his ability to work independently to self-familiarize himself with a difficult topic, it is done at the cost of not being able to interact with his peer and complete the task the way it is supposed to be done. As a result, Dan spent a fair amount of his time looking up information on the internet, and in the end the entire task was processed individually rather than collaboratively.

The drop in language production in the two tasks above almost tempted me to make a generalization about the effect of unfamiliar topics in L2 tasks. However, when I came to analyze the last task, with the topic *how to set up a dining table in Western style* (See Appendix 3), I was both stunned and perplexed by the way the conversation turned out. Despite the lack of vocabulary for Western dinnerware such as dessert knife, salad fork, as well as little to no experience with a properly laid out dinner table in Western style, the students were apparently intrigued with the topic and ended up with a lively conversation. While the students’ modest knowledge about all three topics is understandable, their performance when tackling the task showed different levels of comfort, interest, and engagement. Looking back at all these tasks and the way they were structured, I believe the last one invited more talking because of the activity that came with it. This activity involved using available classroom objects such as pens, pencils, paper, notebooks, water bottles and so on to pretend that they were knives, forks, plates, glasses, and napkins for their table setting task. This part of the task not only allowed them to have a

more real experience but also simplified the task in an interesting way where students were drawn to participate since the task now became more like a game to play:

#### ***Excerpt 5.4***

- Dan: Big plate here ah ((grab bigger piece of torn paper and put it in front of himself))  
Thu: Crazy dinner ((laughter)) (1.0) I only need one glass ((points to biggest one))  
Dan: Uống rượu với nước chung à dở hơi (2.0) Maybe red wine plate—er red wine glass on the right ((Thu moved the water bottle to the right))  
Thu: Fork on the right, spoon on the left ((placing two pens each on one side))  
Dan: Huh? Wait wait wait, the wine (1.0) um the glass all on the right ||  
Thu: Too many things on right. Napkin should go left.  
Dan: Um no no no no, dessert... dessert can put far away haha  
Thu: Uh huh  
Dan: Checked  
Thu: What? Oh, my water glass on the right. Boys...er men drink wine so wine glass on right. Because um er (1.0) thuận tay phải là gì nhỉ?  
*How to say "right-handed"?*  
Dan: Oh oh oh I see haha ((grabs paper cup, moves to the right))

The “game” keeps going with students moving stuff around and putting them where they think it should be. It is very clear from the conversation that they are very inexperienced with all these formal table setting rules. Just like Dan and Thu, most other groups ended up with at least one incorrect placement of the silverware items until the teacher gave them the answer and asked them to complete the task using taught transition words (e.g., *first*, *second*, *then*, *next*, *finally*, etc.) However, the lack of real-life experience with the topic did not prevent them from talking. This is possibly due to the way the task is set up and the inherent interestingness of the topic itself. I also note that one of the two topics discussed earlier on is gendered<sup>18</sup> (i.e., automobile is often believed to be a men’s topic) which might have partially affected the outcome of the task. Besides, most students are familiar with the table setting as an everyday chore so they were not as clueless as when they had to deal with the cars topic. The only challenge here is to figure out

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<sup>18</sup> While table setting might be seen as gendered, it is not as much so as for cars. In modern times, a typical scenario would be for a wife to cook while the husband sets the table (but doesn’t wash dishes!).

how to do it in a different way and the eagerness and curiosity to find out how much difference there is between Vietnamese table setting and Western table setting style was possibly what brought about that joyous group discussion.

It is worth noting that, when the students seem to be talkative, the teacher tends to give them extra time to continue their discussion. Contrarily, when the groups appear to be struggling, the teacher will cut the group discussion short and move to a whole-class report. This classroom task management approach is worth exploring since a teacher could also do the reverse, which is to give the students more time to work on the task when they struggle instead of cutting it short. One of the tactics to handle an unfamiliar topic that many students use is to use their phone and browse the topic on the internet. This may prepare them for the task should they have some more time at the end and is probably a good strategy in developing independent learners.

The remaining question is how teachers make decisions about introducing, or revisiting a topic in class. At NHU, there seem to be three main paths for a topic to enter the classroom. First, the topics most likely come with the textbook or a readily established syllabus. Second, they are brought in by the teacher as “outside” or “extra” classroom materials. Third, they are borrowed and adapted from standard test preparation books such as the TOEFL iBT and IELTS. While the scope of this research does not allow me to assess which of those topics are more “authentic” and which are just “bookish,” I notice an effort by the teachers to orient students to more real-life topics. This helps prepare students better for the standardized tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS since these tests often contain real-life problem solving situations (e.g., how to appeal your grade, get along well with your roommate, visit a doctor’s office, and so on). These tests will also be used as the students’ exit exams from the Advanced Curriculum program, and also the requirement for pursuing overseas studies. Therefore, topic familiarization

deserves better attention by L2 teachers in Vietnam and the range of topics introduced in class should cover both test preparation and real-life communicative purposes.

### **5.3. Text-generated tasks and echoed speech**

Among the many patterns found in students' oral speech, there is one phenomenon that has not been addressed very much in task-based instruction research. It is the production of "regurgitating", or echoed speech that often comes with a text-based task. For example, when the students are given a text such as a story to work on, their speech is full of recitations from that story. Echoed speech therefore can be defined as either the reproduction of speech based on memorization and regurgitation. Since this speech is not spontaneously produced by the students themselves, it often appears as fluent and accurate and therefore can be misleading for the interpretation of L2 classroom data. At the same time, so long as the students aren't reading directly, but speaking from recall, it would also be unfair to dismiss this possibility for fluency. Classifying this as a special kind of speech captures the realities of this phenomenon.

This phenomenon in student speech was discovered when I was compiling data for the previous chapter on CAF. One day I came across transcripts that looked fairly neat with denser text and longer utterances. This made me want to claim these tasks as recommendable since they yielded so much more fluent speech than others. However, when I studied the excerpts more closely, I realized that these utterances were not spontaneous dialogic speech but something that the students echoed from either a handout or textbook. Therefore, the "fluency" that I saw was a false, or at least mediated, fluency and it happened across tasks that were designed based on a text. Tasks 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8 can best exemplify this feature of student language production when they consistently show that student speech was text-generated rather than original.

In Task 5.6, each group was given a piece of paper with a short story (most of them were fables). They read the story quietly first and then worked in pairs to retell the story in their own words turning the handout upside down so they would not see the words there. Hien and Thu, two students in my focal group, worked together to collaboratively retell the following story:

***Task 5.6 Read the story with your peer and together retell it in your own words.***

Once there lived a washerman in the town. He had two pets- a dog and a donkey. The dog used to keep watch. The donkey used to carry the washerman's clothes or load. One night a thief broke into the house. The washerman was sleeping soundly. The dog too was fast asleep. So, he did not bark at the thief. The donkey saw the thief and wanted to awaken his master, so he began to bray loudly. The thief took to his heels (ran away). The washerman could not sleep. He came out. The washerman could not understand why the donkey brayed so loudly. Therefore, he beat the stupid but dutiful donkey very badly. But the washerman's house was saved. It was the duty of the dog to keep watch and not of the donkey.  
(February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

As soon as Hien and Thu finished reading the story, they started to retell the story trying their best to follow the instruction-- that is, to not look back at the handout and reproduce the story in their own words. In about seven minutes, they managed to retell the story collaboratively, finalizing their talk with 52 turns, punctuated by four long pauses and eight instances of L1 use. The 41 t-units counted in their speech indicate a high level of syntactic complexity since a t-unit contains at least a complete simple sentence with a subject and a verb, not to mention the t-units that entail more than one clause or s-node. The following excerpt shows the kind of speech that makes data coding easy but is not an accurate representation of the students' fluency:

### Excerpt 5.5:

- Line (1)<sup>19</sup> Hien: He comes out  
Thu: He comes out and (5.0)  
Hien: he didn't, he couldn't, he could not... understand?  
Thu: He couldn't understand why donkey er wakes, so um (6.0) ((helpless  
(5) laugh)) I can't talk (8.0) ((looks at handout)) um and he brays so loudly. He  
beats, so he beats the dutiful donkey very badly  
Hien: He beats the stupid but dutiful donkey very badly  
Thu: then washerman's house was saved. It was the duty of the dog to watch  
but not the donkey (3.0) I still don't understand the end of the story.  
(10) Hien: Uh me too. Have to learn by heart  
Thu: ((speaks softly)) I don't understand why donkey was beat.  
  
Hien: Because he is stupid. He...er...um... not have to *gì ý nhĩ, xem nào* hihì ((take a  
peek at the handout)) he should not bray  
Thu: But I don't understand the end. (3.0) Ok ok your turn.  
(15) Hien: Me? *Nhanh thé!* Ok ok, once upon a time um (2.0) a washerman live with two  
pets. Er...one is a dog and one is a monkey=  
Thu: =Donkey! Donkey not monkey  
Hien: ((giggling)) ok ok the same the same  
Thu: Yes nearly same, but DON--, don, not MONkey. Next?  
(20) Hien: Next is one night they were sleeping=  
Thu: =But the dog, the dog has to er [keep watch=  
Hien: [oh keep watch, yes the dog keeps watch and the  
donkey has to carry things. What is the thing?

While Hien and Thu had only about three minutes to read the story quietly and internalize it, it is still amazing how much they remember. The only places where the speech seems to be original are when Thu said “I can't talk”, and “I still don't understand the end of the story.” The rest of the excerpt mostly echoed the exact words from the story. It even seems that they tried to stay as close to the original text as possible as in Line 7, Hien reformulated Thu's last sentence adding the word “stupid” so that the sentence sounds exactly the same as how it is written in the story. This memorization is possible for three reasons: first the story is short with a simple content; second it is often easier to recall things stored in short-term memory (i.e., it is easier to retell a story right after reading it); third, there has been a long tradition of rote learning among

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<sup>19</sup> Line numbers are added only for longer excerpts of 20 turns or more

Vietnamese learners and the more accurate they can copy the text, the better they learn. This allows a low-proficiency speaker to occasionally be able to perform very well in a task when it involves memorizing like this. It is less clear why the students resorted to the memorizing skill for this particular task, but it may be precisely because they did not understand the story and so did not feel confident using their own words.

What emerges as a pedagogical concern here is the presence of rote memorization that has been lying at the very core of the skills that we set the students to practice in these tasks. It is easy to misconstrue that the task is triggering much talking and more interaction, but inherently we are directing the students to a skill set (rote memorizing) that has long been known as a block to critical thinking and does not reflect the ability to interact in a second language.

Nevertheless, there has been supportive opinions toward these tasks, claiming that such a task design can help measure “reconstructive implicit knowledge” in L2 learners (Erlam, 2006). While it is true that some repetition-oriented tasks can tap into the learner’s prior knowledge and allow for a reconstruction of that knowledge when he or she performs the task, in many other cases, the repetition is simply an effort to echo what has been stored in the learner’s short-term memory. As in the case of Task 5.6, there is even no memorizing or recalling needed because the students could simply read their work straight from the handout even if they were not supposed to do so. If the goal of oral production tasks is to elicit as much spontaneous and communicative speech as possible (Norris & Ortega, 2003), this task type may not be relevant for such a purpose since it constitutes neither original nor genuine speech. Besides, it results in a speech performance that is not relevant for assessment purposes because most exit tests required by MOET do not require memorization skills. If we do want to study students’ L2 performance by analyzing complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) in their speech, we might have to disregard

classroom talk that contains echoed speech like in the excerpts above. The higher lexical density, the faster pace, and the error-free utterances found in the excerpts above do not accurately reflect the speaker's actual proficiency. Therefore, teachers and researchers alike should keep in mind this feature of text-based tasks when assessing students L2 performance.

To design tasks that allow students to take advantage of their rote memorizing skills, recent research in elicited imitation tasks (Erlam, 2006; Spada et al., 2015; Tracy-Ventura et al., 2014, Wu & Ortega, 2013) distinguish which task types are “reconstructive” and which only lead to parroting. For example, if we intend to design a task that involves memorizing and repetition, it is important that the task focus primarily on meaning and there has to be “a delay between the presentation of stimuli and repetition” (Erlam, 2006, p.472). In Task 5.6 (collaboratively retelling the story of the washerman, the donkey, and the dog), there was clearly an opportunity for Hien and Thu to perform the task using reconstructive knowledge since the instruction clearly asks that they tell the story in their own words. However, since the time lapse between reading the story and retelling it was too short, it is understandable if the students echo what they have just memorized since it is convenient for them to do so. However, if the task is revised by adding a longer delay between the stimuli and the response, the repetition in the students' talk may appear the same, but the processing of the task will probably involve more sophisticated brain/mental activities than just copying and parroting. This is where the learner can still benefit from a memory-based task. When under time pressure, it is reasonable that students resorted to a “shortcut” so that they could more or less accomplish the task within the time allowed.

Another class activity that generated the same echoed speech pattern is Task 5.7 where students were asked to collaboratively write a story beginning with this opening sentence “It was a stormy night at NHU.” According to the instruction, each student would add one sentence to

the story and then pass it along to the next person for the next sentence until time ran out. It was not clear to me if the students were expected to talk during the completion of the task or not since the teacher only asked them to practice the three sentence types (simple, compound, complex) and past tense in their writing. Nevertheless, it was quite evident that students did not keep quiet when they performed this task, which motivated me to transcribe their work and what I found was this particular speech pattern where student talk contains echoed speech.

### ***Excerpt 5.6***

- Hien: it was a stormy night at NHU. There were two, two what?  
Thu: shadows, I wrote shadows  
Hien: shadows on the road. You and your boyfriend hehehe (.) my turn my turn ((Hien adds her own sentences while other waiting excitedly) ||  
Dan: Done? They were going up the hill ((Read Hien's sentence)), too easy, *chả gay cần gì cả*  
*Nothing excited yet*  
Thu: when they were on the top they looked around and said "Great." Hahaha boring too. Make them do something ((laughter)). I'll make them do something. ((Thu writes her sentence)) ||  
Hien: OK, why delete this, suddenly they saw a white... *sao không viết nốt đi*  
*(why not write the rest of this?)*  
Thu: *Kê tao (leave me alone)*, I have another idea  
(Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 2015)

I had seen this task type before and used it myself several times. Yet I don't remember asking students to work orally to complete the task so the above conversation was not expected. I was not surprised when Teacher 1 did not require group discussion before or during the task. At the end of the class I asked some groups if I could see their story and they handed them to me and generously said I could keep it. I had four stories all together and the excerpt above was from the group with the most elaborate story. While it didn't take long to realize the clean and long utterances in the excerpts were mostly read from peer's writing, the comments alongside such as "boring", "too easy", and "make them do something" served as a form of feedback that helped their team develop a more captivating storyline. It is interesting to see how the entire class perceived the prompt as expecting them to produce a thriller genre considering the classic

opening scene of a “stormy night.” The narration on all four stories given to me followed that motif of a ghost or murder story. Reading peer sentences aloud might have helped the students tie the details together and figure out the best way to proceed. After a few sentences, both Dan and Thu felt that they should spice up their story and urged each other to make their characters “do something.” At the same time Hien was questioning Thu for abandoning what she thought could have been a good idea (Thu wrote “suddenly they saw a white...” and then crossed out that line). It can be seen that in both Tasks 5.6 and 5.7, echoed speech might be misleading when we research classroom talk for CAF assessment purposes. However, in terms of acquisitional benefits, echoed speech in the task above constituted a linguistic frame around which students’ talk was developed and modified.

To sum up, among the myriad of classroom activities, there will be ones that turn on the students’ dependency on memorizing and reciting such as the tasks above. Yet rote memorization is not anathema to learning nor should it be excluded entirely from the curriculum, especially when we are talking about a curriculum that is situated in a culture where rote learning has always been a dominating model. While the Advanced Curriculum project is designed with a huge reform effort to change the ingrained learning habits of Vietnamese L2 learners, it should take into consideration well-developed indigenous learning resources and the “cultural mismatch.” When pedagogical initiatives conflict with the learners’ preferences and cultural values as well as the traditional teaching practices, it will face greater resistance.

#### **5.4 Collaborative tasks and self-directed speech**

In the next series of tasks (5.8, 5.9, and 5.10), variances of self-directed speech were found despite the fact that the tasks were intended to be collaborative. In task 5.8 below, the students were asked to rearrange a number of paragraphs in the correct order to complete a story.

There were six paragraphs altogether and each of them contained two or three sentences. This task appeared to be a little tricky to be done dialogically since it required more reading and thinking than other tasks. This is why when the conversation really started, it was filled with thinking-out-loud utterances by both speakers, and one turn did not seem to respond strongly to the one preceding it. At the same time, it yielded a special kind of speech that I first described as *monologic* speech, yet later on I came to refer to it as *self-directed* or *private speech*, as used widely in the works of Lev Vygotsky (1980) and his successors (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lee, 2008 among others).

### ***Task 5.8 Rearrange paragraphs to complete the story***

**Rearrange the following paragraphs in the correct order**

2 a) He caught the small creature and was going to crush it under his heavy paw. The mouse begged pardon and requested the lion to let it go. It also said that it might be of any help to him in future.

6 b) The lion became free and thanked the mouse for its timely help. Now he realized that even a small creature could be of help to the stronger and bigger animals.

4 c) Shortly afterwards, the lion was caught in the net laid by the hunter in the forest. He tried his best to free himself from the net but all his efforts remained fruitless. So he began to lament.

1 d) One cold winter a lion was lying asleep in the sun. A mouse came out of its hole and began to jump over the body of the sleeping lion. This woke up the lion.

3 e) The lion simply laughed. He could not imagine that it could be of any help to him. He however, was moved to pity and let it go.

5 f) When the mouse heard his lamentation, it came out with its young ones. They sat to work and it did not take them long to nibble at the ropes and cut them with their sharp teeth.

### ***Excerpt 5.7***

- Dan: D is one. One cold winter a lion was lying asleep in the sun ||  
 Thu: He caught the small um, a two (1.0) the lion simply laughed, three here  
 Dan: Um one d, two a  
 Thu: Then then shortly afterwards, the lion was caught in the net ((lowering her voice as she read the sentence)) laid by the hunter in the forest, here is 4?  
 Dan: The lion simply laughed, simply laughed um ok ok three.||  
 Thu: and...and then b next

Although the task was intended to be dialogically performed, and the excerpt shows what looks like dialogic talk, there is actually very little mutual communication between the speakers. Except for the first two turns when Dan and Thu seem to be on the same page. From the third turn, Dan was slightly behind, still working on the second paragraph while not realizing that Thu had done it. Thu moved on quickly, putting the third and fourth paragraphs into the right place while apparently Dan was still figuring out paragraph 3. If their interaction were mutual, Dan would know that he was expected to work on the next paragraph, 5. Since the video recording shows them looking at their own handout while speaking, it is not likely that Dan was responding to what his classmate was saying.

The underpinning theoretical frame that can elucidate the one-way interaction in the conversation above can be associated with the idea of private speech in a sociocultural paradigm (Diaz & Berk, 2014; Lantolf & Thorne 2006; McCafferty, 1994; Ohta, 2001 and so on). Authors specializing in private speech have gone a long way in their research to come to some important conclusions about how private speech can serve as a mental/psychological tool for L2 learners to deal with more cognitively challenging tasks. In the excerpt, Dan and Thu are charged with the task of rearranging the jumbled details of a story and this requires some logical organizing to put these details into the correct order. After a couple turns managing to work together, they then slide into their “private” thinking zone where each starts to work independently and at different paces. Their speech contains many thinking-out-loud episodes, but unlike other private speech that is often an “original” thought, the speech articulated in this excerpt is mostly copied from the handout<sup>20</sup>. However, after the reading-out-loud step, both Dan and Thu ended up with a correct answer to mark next to each paragraph. This means their echoing of the text was not

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<sup>20</sup> In some way the kind of speech recorded here can also be considered echoed speech (see 5.4 this chapter).

mindless or useless. It might have played a role in leading Dan and Thu to a real result, an effective solution to the problem they were solving. They could have chosen to work quietly and independently as they would sometimes do in other tasks, but for this task, in which they had been instructed to work together, they chose to articulate their thinking process.

The phenomenon of self-directed speech was also found in two other selected tasks but it is hard to find anything in common between these task types. For example, Task 5.9 was carried out in a speaking class while Task 5.10 was selected from a writing session, both of which ended up with minimal interaction between the participants as if they could have been naturally done individually.

Task 5.9 was an information gap activity with six items, each containing a blank that could only accept one correct answer.<sup>21</sup> This task was centered on the environment theme; all of the items made a statement about an environmental issue. Except for one group who was able to tackle the task the way it was intended (i.e., by discussing and negotiating their answers), the other two focal groups mostly just let the time elapse while doing the task individually and quietly. Even when they found out that their answers were different, they went back to work on their own handout instead of talking about how they came to make their choices.

***Task 5.9: Discuss with your peer and fill in the blank with a suitable word. If you think there are two or more possible answers, write them down as well.***

1. Biking is much healthier than driving, and it doesn't \_\_\_\_\_ the air.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ rain occurs when pollution in the air is absorbed by water droplets in clouds
3. Oil \_\_\_\_\_ pollute sea water and kill marine life.
4. Everyone should learn to \_\_\_\_\_ energy. Using lights/lamps only when needed is a good way to do this.
5. Many unethical companies \_\_\_\_\_ their waste into rivers.
6. \_\_\_\_\_, which is partly caused by exhaust fumes from cars, is a very big problem in many big cities across the world  
(Dan & Thu Feb 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

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<sup>21</sup> However, later on the teacher found out that there was an item where two answers were correct so he accepted both.

### ***Excerpt 5.8***

Dan: um (3.0) pollute || pollute the air  
Thu: save, number 4 || (looking at each other's handout) here, what is this? unethical?  
Dan: Er (5.0)  
Thu: ok...waste into the rivers, waste, their waste. I see um ||  
Thu: ((erasing an answer)) one word, only one word (3.0) hey, er...ok..ok  
Dan: ((using his phone)) marine life (4.0) the sea, sea ((inaudible))

While the excerpt above appears as a “conversation,” the participants actually were not talking to each other. They were murmuring to themselves, each at their own pace and in their own “world” since their speech does not seem to correspond to each other. A lot of long pauses were recorded with several instances of inaudible utterances since they were mostly whispering. In terms of language production, this task yields the least speech with only 24 turns in about 8 minutes.

Similarly, in the last Task (5.10), the outcome of the group discussion was not at all satisfactory in terms of producing speech. This task is a writing activity based on a four- page handout where the students have to read multiple paragraphs and decide which among the three sentences given can be the topic sentences for these paragraphs (see Appendix 4). It was expected that the students read the questions and discuss their answers. They were seated in groups and instructed to talk about why they would choose sentence A, B, or C as the topic sentence for a particular paragraph. Instead, as soon as they received the handout, they immediately slid into their reading mode. After a couple minutes, some started to circle their answers, and others did the same. Noticing the silence that had reigned in the classroom for too long, the teacher prompted his students to start talking, but most of them were still reading the paragraphs and not ready for any discussion. In another attempt to get the students to talk, the teacher read the instruction again and only then did the students start to turn to their partner and

initiate a conversation. Unlike other groups, who only checked their answers, Dan and Thu managed to compare their answers and discussed the differences as in the following excerpt:

***Excerpt 5.9***

Dan: B, it's B  
Thu: Because of firstly, next, and third? (3.0)  
Dan: Yeah, Ned Kelly is only here, at the bottom, one line, so A "Ned Kelly was our most famous [bushranger  
Thu: [ok ok can't be topic sentence (4.0)  
Dan: Only B, B is correct I am sure  
Thu: ((underlying transitions on her handout)) C is wrong uh um, yeah, they don't mention difficult  
Dan: Right, here, exciting life, free, oops, wait wait wait.  
Thu: What?  
Dan: So er... they rob, they sometimes rob, here, third group ||  
Dan: Still B, because only sometimes they rob (.) and ...and only rob rich people haha, like Robin Hood?  
Thu: Difficult, oh yeah it's difficult for police to [catch them  
Dan: [yep not difficult to make a living, not C, not  
A, B, it's B

The next excerpt, from another pair, is quite different.

***Excerpt 5.10***

Hien: Firstly || um bushranger ((looking at phone for translation))  
Kha: A or B or C|| topic sentence ((reading)), no, not this one||  
Kha: This...Ned Kelly (.) no (.) no || groups  
Hien: Done? ((no answer from Kha, both keep working their own pace)) ||  
Kha: Maybe B...yeah...um..ok ok, camping...cheapest way ||

The two excerpts show a difference between the amounts of interaction between the two speakers in each group. While Dan and Thu managed to make it a dialogue by switching turns and contributing to the discussion, Hien and Kha were completely on different pages as they carried out the task. Dan figured out the answer is B and did not just stop at circling his answer. Instead he shared his thoughts with Thu explaining why A and C cannot serve as topic sentences for the paragraph. He indicated that Ned Kelly is only mentioned once at the end of the paragraph so the sentence in A that reads "Ned Kelly was our most famous bushranger" cannot be the topic sentence. They then collaboratively figured out C is not an acceptable topic sentence

either. On the contrary, Hien and Kha let their 5-minute pre-task discussion pass with minimal talking. They were both focusing hard on the task, but would rather work silently to find out the answer. Other groups in the class were also heads down, quiet, and whispered some random words from the text.

In these latter cases, while it seems convenient to make the claim that the students were using private speech to accomplish the task, such a phenomenon demands a more critical explanation since it reflects a mismatch between the teacher's and the learner's conceptualization of the task and the potential strategy they need to utilize to perform that task. It is not unusual when an activity does not turn out as planned, but the disappointment should not be blamed on the students (e.g., for not following the instruction or not doing what they are supposed to do). The problem may lie in the task itself because some tasks have no or very little interactional demand. For example, circling an answer from a multiple-choice task while having to read lengthy paragraphs (Task 5.10) makes it unlikely to communicate verbally. There is no need for information exchange either since the students can just take a look at each other's handout to check their answer.

This suggests that we teachers may need to rethink the notion of "collaborative tasks." It is not all about having students work in pairs or in groups to solve a problem. "Forcing" a task into a pair work format without considering its inherent potentials and constraints can lead to negative or unsatisfactory results. And these results have often been (mis)interpreted by the view that Vietnamese students are shy—they just don't talk much. However, the data show that the students did talk in most other tasks in their writing class, so in general the lack of interaction in this task cannot be explained by characterizing students as shy. At the same time, the blame should not be placed on the teacher for choosing the "wrong" task for his writing class. The

traditional view that a writing session typically does not require much verbal interaction is dated. So is the view that writing is inherently an independent and quiet process. In fact, much research in L2 collaborative writing has proved that engaging in speaking prior to writing can help students compose with more ease and at the same time develop other competencies (Storch, 2013). For example, by discussing the topic and brainstorming ideas together, the students deliberate about their language choices (Swain & Lapkins, 2001) and utilize different levels of scaffolded assistance, also known as collaboratively constructed scaffold, provided by their peers (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001). While it is true at NHU that warm-up activities in a writing lesson often face silence, this doesn't mean silence is meaningless. In the excerpt above, the silence is punctuated by occasional seemingly random utterances that show that the students are focusing hard on their work. From a sociocultural perspective, these thinking-out-loud episodes could mean that the students are using private speech to regulate their thought processes (De Guerrero, 2012; DiCamilla & Antón, 2004; Lee, 2008; McCafferty, 1994). As such, the task types described above would still be beneficial even if they had not been intended to be collaborative tasks.

One relevant point to mention here, however, is that although Dan and Thu's work meets the requirement of "talking," it actually did not meet the teacher's expectation for the task. According to my field notes on that day, the teacher said that ideally, he would have liked the students to say sentences such as *C is not the topic sentence because it is not relevant*, and *A is too broad to be a topic sentence*, and so on. It seems that the task's goal is geared toward building some metalanguage vocabulary in writing. However, this was not clarified up front and the students assumed all they needed to do was to identify the topic sentences for the paragraphs given. Even if Dan and Thu accomplished the task with more talking than other groups, their

speech is content-focused, not metalanguage-focused. This again reminds us to be clear and specific about our goals before assigning our students a language task because some tasks do need more modeling and facilitation than others. Many writing activities are preceded by some form of speaking to generate ideas and retrieve the vocabulary needed. In this case, the teacher may want to explicitly explain the purpose of the task and provide the students with sufficient vocabulary to conduct such a complex task. For example, in Task 5.10, if the students are not familiar with the writing jargon (e.g., *topic sentence*, *thesis statement*, *supporting detail*, *relevant*, *specific*, *broad*), it will be very difficult for them to accomplish the task as expected.

To summarize, the tasks that seem to “freeze” interaction as described above still have much pedagogical value and should not be excluded just because of some initial discouraging outcomes. Most of these tasks can be restructured to some extent including adding more pre-task planning time, making goals and expectations transparent, and providing more modeling during-task if necessary. This means teachers cannot escape from their job as mentors and facilitators after assigning a task. In other words, putting the students into group work does not free the teacher. Overseeing tasks-in-action to make sure students are on track and to provide additional clarification when needed is what we can do to allow for more efficient group work. Finally, transitioning to an English-only and a more communicative language teaching method will benefit from a gradual adapting, rather than an aggressive adopting, in which teachers receive adequate training and support, and appropriate materials are made available. It is not necessary to put teachers and students in a swim-or-sink scenario under the weight of the Advanced Curriculum, especially for the first two or three cohorts since they are most likely to experience and endure the trial-and-error phase of the project. As such, a close examination and documentation of classroom tasks and classroom talk is most beneficial when carried out in a

timely manner to identify “errors” and improve “trials” each time we try something new with tasks.

### **5.5 Metalinguistic tasks and metalinguistic talk**

This is a task type used sparingly in both classes, which shows a significant transformation in the L2 teachers’ methodology under the Advanced Curriculum (AC) program. Tasks that have a focus on form have always been the dominant task type in L2 classes in Vietnam, and this helps build up a firm metalinguistic knowledge among L2 learners although this knowledge is not always used explicitly in class. In the case of the AC English class, grammar is not tested separately as a skill but it helps with writing and speaking so it is still integrated in the syllabus to bolster the accuracy aspect of student speech. Much research has been done on the grammar-heavy English curriculum in Vietnam as well as the task types that involve grammar drills, but very little is known about the metalinguistic knowledge accumulated in the L2 learners and how they can take advantage of this knowledge to analyze and understand the target language.

It should be clarified here that a metalinguistic task is not necessarily a grammar drill. In fact, as the term is used here, it involves a conversation where the students make use of “technical or semi-technical terminology employed to analyze or describe language” (Hu, 2002). In other words, it is the students’ ability to internalize and then verbalize the technical vocabulary that will not get used elsewhere outside of the L2 classroom. Since recent research (Hu, 2011; Roehr, 2008) is bringing back the role of metalanguage awareness in L2 development, it is relevant to reconsider task types that employ metalanguage to have the fairest understanding of this aspect of language that has been suspected and marginalized for a long time.

We do not explicitly teach metalanguage. Students pick it up from their textbooks, homework, lessons as a means to tackle a task. For example, when we want them to distinguish

the present perfect and the present perfect continuous tense, they should be able to notice that the former has a past participle (also known as PII), while the latter has a gerund (V-*ing*). Without metalanguage, L2 teachers find it impossible to explain the grammatical rules in a systematic and concise way. Similarly the students, especially beginners, should have a vehicle to help them make sense of the target language and organize their knowledge. Hu (2010) contends that it would be difficult “...to see how an explicit discussion of complex structures, such as unreal conditionals and relative clauses, can be conducted without recourse to metalanguage” (p.65). Such an argument rings true when it comes to an L2 activity such as the one below:

**Task 5.11 Underline and correct the mistakes** (Full handout has 70 items, see Appendix 5).

1. He used to working in a factory that makes cars.
2. Does he got a new watch?
3. I am sorry I am late
4. That is the pub which I usually go for meals
5. James had to do his homework again because he did so many mistakes.
6. He said me that it was good for him.
7. Although he was rich but he was very mean
8. They are very good friends, don't they?
9. He is sleeping when you came, didn't you?

Error correction is a task type that has always been used in the first semester's periodical and final tests in other English classes at NHU, and I didn't expect to see it in the AC class. It seems that the teacher only uses it as a back up when a lesson plan does not work out the way it is supposed to. However, as I observed this activity and transcribed the talk, my skepticism about metalanguage and the utility of grammar lessons disappeared since the data convincingly show that this aspect of the students' L2 knowledge is their strength, but a strength that has not properly been recognized.

### Excerpt 5.11

- Line (1) Dan: Underline trước nhé (*Underline this first*)  
Thu: OK || ((3 minutes))  
Dan: OK?  
Thu: So...who first? (1.0) me again?
- (5) Dan: Uhm  
Thu: first, made cars, not makes because past tense?  
Dan: Um you did that?  
Thu: Yeah, “used to” is past tense, đã từng mà (2.0)  
Dan: But it’s “used to do”, not used to doing
- (10) Thu: What?  
Dan: Er...see, look  
Thu: [used to working, right right. Used to verb and to be used to Verb-ing  
Dan: Oh yeah delete -ing (4.0)  
Dan: me? Yeah my turn, has he got a new [watch?
- (15) Thu: [or does you have. Next.  
Dan: Underline “make”, do the shopping  
Thu: Idiom..er idiomagic—idiomatic haha, idiomatic expressions  
Dan: What?  
Thu: Teacher said—teach idiomatic expressions *do the shopping, make the bed*
- (20) Dan: I don’t care I don’t care heheh...shhh  
Thu: ((both look at each other handout)) ok ok, same  
Dan: more idioms, cái gì nhỉ, idiom? *Đây này* made mistakes, not did mistake  
(*Here*)  
Thu: Yeah idiomatic expression

(January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

This conversation went on for nearly 15 minutes with 208 turns and 34 instances of metalanguage (4 were in Vietnamese). The overall quantity and quality of talking is on the higher end as can be seen in an all-encompassing increase in CAF. While some metalanguage vocabulary such as *idiomatic expressions* and *collocations* are new, most of the basic terms such as *tense, subject, object, sentence, adjective, noun, verb* and so on were introduced to the students when they were in high school. We often complain that students forget what they learn from their high school English classes too quickly, but there are things that are retained in their subconscious, like metalanguage. The only way for Dan and Thu to accomplish this task is to mobilize this language if they do not want to switch to L1.

Another notable phenomenon in the data is when students code-switch from L1 to L2 when they need to refer to a metalinguistic concept such as *indirect object* and *direct object*. The translation of these concepts in Vietnamese is rarely used, and often times they sound too awkward for a casual group discussion. However, this awkwardness is eliminated when those concepts are spoken in English because English as a foreign language helps normalize all those “foreign-sounding” concepts. This caused a very interesting phenomenon in student code-switching behavior in class where they switch to L2 instead of L1 like they often do when they struggle:

**Excerpt 5.12**

Thu: Don't they, cái này mình phải dùng to be này  
*For this we have to use to be*  
 Dan: Yeah  
 Thu: They are very good friends  
 Dan: =don't th—oh oh oh yeah aren't  
 Thu: aren't they  
 (skip 18 turns)  
 Dan: Ten. Đi nước ngoài bao nhiêu lần này, sai ở đâu?  
*It's how many times you've been abroad, where's the mistake?*  
 Thu: Time là uncountable đúng không?  
*Is time an uncountable?*  
 Dan: Countable mà, kiểu như cái này. How many times...  
*It's countable, like this one*  
 Thu: Cả hai à, cả countable và uncountable à?  
*Both? Can be both countable and uncountable?*

In this episode, Dan and Thu had to find and correct the mistake in sentence number 10 “How much times has he been abroad?” and the confusion lies in the noun “time.” For Vietnamese L2 learners this is a tricky noun since it is defined as a both countable and uncountable noun (*danh từ đếm được và danh từ không đếm được* in Vietnamese respectively). They were discussing the sentence in Vietnamese but when it came to a place where they needed to use metalanguage they switched to English without any hesitation. Unfortunately I was only able to record this activity for less than 10 minutes, when the students did 15 sentences out of 70

on the handout; therefore, it would be a hasty conclusion to say metalanguage knowledge can change students' code-switching patterns. However, this phenomenon has the potential of being the topic for further research in metalanguage and code-switching behaviors.

In short, being able to describe language using metalanguage, Dan and Thu were able to execute the task more cooperatively than other groups who were able to find the mistakes but did not initiate a conversation about what caused them. This could be due to a lack of metalinguistic resources, or the student's preference to work on the task alone. While there hasn't been consistent evidence about a correlation between metalanguage proficiency and L2 proficiency, it is safe to say metalanguage tasks allow students to tap into what used to be their strength (formal grammar) and enhance the "consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (Carter, 2003). In addition to formulaic sequences (see Chapter 4), this data suggests that an occasional revisit of metalanguage can bolster the accuracy aspect in the CAF component and therefore improve the quality of student L2 proficiency in general.

## **5.6 The learner factor and other affective variables**

Apart from the obvious factors within the task itself such as cognitive load and communicative demands, the outcome of task performance was greatly affected by other affective factors within the learners. The differences in students' working memory capacity, motivation, interests, personalities, life experience, anxiety, and even their mood on a particular day are important variables affecting the linguistic outcome of a task. These variables are generally referred to as the "affective dimension" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Gabrys-Barker, 2013; Pavlenko, 2013) of L2 attainment.

The impact of these factors could be seen across most tasks and particularly in tasks with unfamiliar topics where students could not relate to what was going on in the task. The comfort

students felt with his or her partner was also contributive to the productivity of the talk, since the focal groups who worked together for the entire quarter tended to have a more relaxed and chatty conversation than other groups in the class. Type A students such as Dan and Thu fit well into most team work models with their outgoing, achievement-oriented personalities and flexible negotiating skills. There were not many “moody” days that I know of during the three months working with Dan and Thu, but there were moments of boredom when a task failed to bring out their strengths as described above. Levels of stress and anxiety and their effects on language production were not measured, but with time the students became more comfortable being video-taped and interacting with me. The stress from being observed lessened although the transcripts would occasionally show that they were self-conscious that they were being recorded. I myself was also self-conscious that my presence in the classroom with the camera might have been the cause of some ongoing inhibition but tried my best to reach out by chatting with the students during breaks, serving as a judge for some of their extracurricular activities, and so on.

In short, understanding the theoretical principles about affective factors helped me minimize the anxiety and/or stress entailed by my continuous presence in class as an observer. This was a necessary effort to make since learning is an affectively loaded process (Sylwester, 1994) at its very core and emotion is always involved as a manipulating factor of the learner’s attention and engagement, the two crucial conditions for learning.

## **5.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter has examined three L2 task types used in the AC classes and two related features (task familiarity and pre-task planning time) and their relation to students’ language production. The data show that certain task types tend to affect the amount as well as characteristics of student speech. First, text-based tasks tended to yield “parroting” speech which

caused a false impression of the speaker's fluency but created opportunity for shy or less proficient students to speak since they could hold onto the text and echo parts of it. Second, there are task types that did not seem to fit comfortably in a dialogic or interactive model since parts of the task inherently do not require, or invite, much interaction. The remarkable occurrence of self-directed speech in student talk is also worthy of further investigation since it can inform us of the learner's cognitive processes. Finally, an occasional use of metalanguage-eliciting tasks was facilitative to L2 development considering the way these tasks attend to form and consolidate knowledge of forms in the learners. As long as the task can bring out any strength in the learner's language repertoire, it should have a place in the class regardless of what linguistic skill it prioritizes. The chapter also taps into some prohibited practices (e.g., rote learning, use of L1, form-focused tasks) and attempts to bring them back to the table for a reconsideration so that teachers and students can better adapt to the new English-only policy that comes with the Advanced Curriculum.

## Chapter 6: Teacher-fronted Interactional Patterns

*“It is essentially in the discourse between the teacher and the pupil that education is done, or fails to be done.” (Edwards & Mercer 1987, p.101)*

### 6.1 Introduction

Among the different factors that weave classroom discourse, teacher talk is often overlooked by the overwhelming attention and interest that has been revolving around the learner and tasks. In an EFL class, the interaction between teacher and students is of even more tremendous importance considering the fact that the teacher is the primary learning resource for the learners. In evaluating the teaching and learning of English under the Advanced Curriculum (AC) project, we consider all the factors *teacher, learner, task* as the three sides of a triangle and therefore they deserve equal attention. Thus, this chapter is devoted to examining teacher’s talk to better understand the possible interdependence between teachers’ interactional patterns and learners’ oral language production. More specifically, it attempts to identify teacher’s language patterns that potentially inhibit or facilitate learners’ participation in class.

The data selected for this chapter contain eight lessons from two teachers with each contributing four. These four lessons represent the four language skills being taught, namely reading, speaking, writing, and listening. The reason why I took samples of teachers’ speech in every skill class is to investigate the multi-facetedness of their communicative and pedagogical strategies. Examining teacher talk across the four skills also allows me to find out if their speech patterns are consistent throughout the different skills/lessons they teach and whether and/or why these patterns change between the lessons. The selection of the lessons for this analysis was based on the overall satisfaction of the teachers themselves about the lessons and the quality of recording (e.g., those with minimum “inaudible” comments).

My initial plan was to document how much L2 was used by the teachers during their instruction since this will be a point of interest for MOET and school administrators to evaluate the newly launched English-only policy at NHU. Yet it turned out that both teachers comfortably used L2 most of the time, so the quantifying of their L2 use would just be redundant. What I see as potentially beneficial to investigate is a close analysis of the teachers' talk and its relation to student *participation* opportunities. It should be noted that the emphasis here is placed on *participation*, not learning since a research model for studying a correlation between teacher talk and student learning/comprehension (e.g., found in the work of other researchers such as Pica et al., 1987, or Walsh, 2002) is not yet feasible within the scope of my research although in participation learning can take place.

To accomplish the goal above, I first looked at the distribution of teacher talk with respect to both time and amount to see, for example, what percentage of teacher talk goes to lecturing and what percentage is devoted to interacting with students. As a result, I could investigate the moments when an opportunity to speak arises and how classroom interaction stalls or is expedited as the discourse patterns between teacher and student develop. I then examined the amount and length of student responses in relation to the question types that the teacher used to better understand and evaluate the interactional strategies that the teachers used in their classes.

Both teachers in this study not only participated in all classroom video-taping, but they also offered extra insight into their teaching preferences and reflected on how they had adjusted and adapted to their new teaching context in a 30-minute interview at the end of the semester. This interview allowed for a deeper and well-rounded reflection of their pedagogical practices and uptake on the requirements of the Advanced Curriculum program.

## 6.2 The eight selected lessons

While both teachers suggested that I could choose a class that best spoke to my research objectives, they did articulate their preferences<sup>22</sup>. For Mr. Tam's (Teacher 1) class, we decided on a speaking lesson about personalities, a listening lesson about the most important item one possesses, a reading lesson about different types of friend, and a writing lesson about brainstorming. Although the English syllabus is the same for both teachers, their lesson plans and pace were different. The four classes with Mr. Ninh (Teacher 2) included a speaking lesson on air transportation, a listening lesson on health problems, a reading lesson on watching TV, and a writing lesson on coherence. The table below shows the topics and approximate duration of the eight selected lessons:

*Table 6.1 Topics and lengths of the 8 lessons*

	<b>Skill Focus</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Appr. Length</b>
Teacher 1	Listening	Your most important item	35 min
	Speaking	Teen codes	35 min
	Reading	Types of friend	37 min
	Writing	Brainstorming	40 min
Teacher 2	Listening	Health problems	42 min
	Speaking	Air transportation	33 min
	Reading	Watching TV	40 min
	Writing	Coherence	40 min

Since this is an intensive English class, the duration for each day is 2.5 hours or more which means the teacher can move from teaching one skill to another without having a break in between. For example, the teacher would teach two skills in an hour with the first half focusing on listening and second half on speaking. The ample time of meeting in class everyday also allows the teachers to do all four skills in the morning, and repeat one or two in the afternoon.

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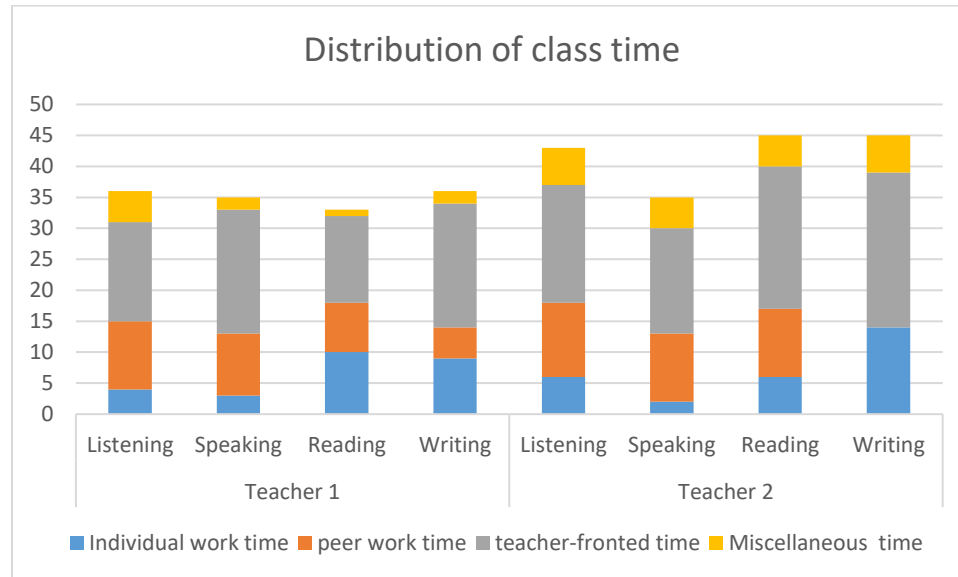
<sup>22</sup> I also tried to make the most out of my data by not reusing the transcripts that I had used in previous chapters

Sometimes a teacher can choose to spend the whole morning on one skill only, such as writing, but this did not happen very often.

### **6.3 The distribution of class time**

Teacher talk time (TTT) has been found in L2 pedagogical literature as affecting student involvement and opportunities for learning, and different suggestions have been made for teachers to self-monitor their talking time better. In the data, teacher use of class time can generally be broken down into four categories. *Individual work time* is measured when the students are asked to 1) read a text silently in preparation for a discussion or to understand the instruction for a task; 2) draft a paragraph or brainstorm ideas; and 3) complete a grammar exercise. *Peer working time* is counted when a group work activity starts. *Teacher-fronted time* accounts for both lecturing time and teacher-student interaction with the teacher leading the talk. *Miscellaneous time* refers to the subtracted minutes for such activities as handing out work sheets, playing the tape, writing on the board, and arranging students in groups. While this category does not have much to do with learning in general, classroom management in a large class can be challenging and time-consuming. The graph below shows how each teacher utilized their class time in the eight lessons chosen.

**Figure 6.1 Distribution of class time**



It should be clarified that teacher-fronted time does not mean there is no peer interaction that simultaneously takes place. Similarly, peer interaction can also sometimes be interrupted by teacher’s talk. The classification above is observational, sometimes dependent on signals that come from the teacher. For example, when the teacher said “Let’s spend 5 minutes reading the text quietly” or “OK let’s come back together to check these answers,” that signals the mode of interaction that can be placed in one of the four categories above. However, TTT in this study involves both lecturing time and teacher-student interaction. The gray area in the figure therefore is not labeled as TTT but teacher-fronted time in order to include their interaction with the whole class.

Overall, the amount of teacher-fronted talk in both classes suggests a breakaway from the *chalk and talk* teaching tradition, which can be recognized as a step closer to the AC’s methodological reform. The next step is to have a review of teacher talk quality-wise since it is the characteristic and patterns of a teacher’s verbal interaction that have a more direct impact on

student participation. The next section scrutinizes each teacher's talk, its interactional features and how they elicit or obstruct student verbal response.

## **6.4 Teacher 1: Questions and Elicitation**

### ***6.4.1 Listening: Your most important item***

Teacher 1's class is a big group of high energy students which can be felt by the cheerful atmosphere of people talking, laughing, and running around before class and during breaks. This energy is a great advantage for the teacher should he want to be more adventuresome and creative in trying out a wider range of classroom activities that promote communicative skills. For Teacher 1, the most promising spaces for students to practice these skills are in the listening and speaking classes. His listening sessions are often connected with a follow-up speaking activity where the students have an opportunity to reproduce or reconstruct what they have learned from the tape and work it into their own speech. The teacher tends to omit pre-listening activities yet invest in an elaborate post-listening task that demonstrates the different communication techniques that help increase student verbal involvement such as repeating, clarification request, praising, scaffolding, and eliciting (Walsh, 2006)<sup>23</sup>.

The excerpt below is a passage from Teacher 1's listening lesson where students first listened to different people talking about their most important item and completed the questions in the textbook. They then worked in groups and discussed the same topic before the teacher called on some random students to ask them what their most important item was and why. Within a short time, the teacher was successful in creating a communication platform that engaged many students. His communication strategy involves different scaffolding techniques

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Walsh (2006, p.66) considers these to be interactional features, not necessarily teacher communicative/pedagogical techniques to elicit more verbal speech. But most other L2 research labels them so.

such as eliciting, comprehension checking, clarifying, and so on. Many of these techniques came in the form of questions, whether simple or elaborate, genuine or display. In fact, the teacher sometimes varied his questions purposefully depending on how the learner reacted. For example, when he saw that the student was nervous or struggling a bit (e.g., Student 1 & Student 5), he only tried to get two basic questions answered (*What is your most important item?* and *Why is it important to you?*) and not push the student too hard. But when he noticed that the student had more to say, he offered an opportunity to extend the conversation by keeping asking more questions (e.g., Student 2 & Student 6).

**Excerpt 6.1 Your most important item**

T: yeah what is this?	T: oh very good. Xuan?
S1: er this is my most important--my note book	S5: my item er my most important is er watches
T: Your notebook, uh huh	T: watch?
S1: I er write down many new words er and grammar rules	S5: My girl friend gave it to me on my birthday
T: Uh huh=	T: Uh huh
S1: =and I sometimes ((giggle)) make er um make a lot of draws	S5: I um wear it every day
T: Uh huh (2.0) that's all? ok thank you, your English notebook, uh. Ba Ninh	T: uh huh, thank you, very good, your watch. Hong? (4.0)
S2: The thing most important for you--er for me is my mobile=	S6: yes er the i think the most important item for me is my phone, my mobile phone
T: your mobile phone uh huh	T: mobile phone, uh huh
S2: I usually bring with me and er and call=	S6: without it i can't (2.0) er i can't text with anyone
T: = Yes of course hahah, anything else?	T: uh huh
S2: and er and it's very useful	S6: I think, er, um I always keep it in my pocket
T: Useful, why?	T: pocket?
S2: Because i can play game=	S6: No, this ((shows a little pouch))
T: = play games	T: oh in a purse, the purse that you use to keep money?
S2: and and use it for dictionary	S6: Yes
T: dictionary (3.0)	T: Your purse, uh huh
S2: And i can see [movies and things	S6: yeah that's all ((Ss laughter))
T: [ movies	T: That's all? why is your purse important? (1.0)
S2: Facebook	T: why is the purse important?
T: Facebook, that's all?	S6: because i er I bring it--I have cards, my student card
S2: [that's all	T: student card, money? (3.0)
T: [ok thank you, Thuy? (3.0)	S6: ATM card
S3: I think...i think...the most important thing to me is er my my blanket	T: ATM card ok thank you Hong, uh Quynh Nga
T: your blanket?	S7: The ring is important to me
S3: Um my mother made it for me when I was 4 years old=	T: The ring? [uh
T: =ah hah	S7: [yeah because it's my mother's=
	T: =mother's ring

S3: I er I like...I use it when i am cold	S7: She gave it to me on my 18th birthday
T: cold, uh	T: 18 birthday ah hah (2.0)
S3: and usually, usually, it keeps, it	S7: um that's all
T: =it keeps you warm uh huh	T: That's all? uh huh, thank you. Thao (5.0)
S3: it keeps me warm, and i like it	S8: The most important item is er cell phone of course because er with cell phone i can text with many people and er I can er I can er look at the internet er and many things
T: Uh huh thank you, very good Um (1.0) Chau, Chau (2.0)?	T: uh huh
S4: My bicycle.	S8: many things interesting ((laughter)) too many things
T: Your bicyle, uh	T: Too many things huh ok thank you
S4: Yeah I like my bicycle I had it for a long time [er I I use it to go to school	
T: [uh	
S4: and to go out with my friends. It's very fast and oh it's not--it's good for environment	

It is noticeable from the transaction above that the teacher not only uses questions to prompt student responses, but he also echoes part of the students' answers and sometimes followed with an elicitation, be it just a rising tone (e.g., *Facebook, that's all?*) to show interest or his usual *anything else?* question to encourage his students to continue their story. Nearly in every adjacent pair in the conversation above, the teacher partially repeats the student's answer, signaling that their story is being heard and "broadcast" again to the whole class. His back-channel cues (e.g., *uh, uh huh*) also play a role in giving his students more incentive to keep talking because they indicate an engaged listenership (Lambertz, 2011). If there was a minor change that could have been made in the listening lesson, I suggest the teacher put down the textbook and use more eye contact with his students. Holding the textbook in hand while walking around the class is a habit of many teachers, even when they don't need to use it at all. Talking with the students while occasionally looking unconsciously at the textbook can be distracting for both speaker and listener.

A couple of factors facilitated such a fast-paced and smooth interaction with the students in this listening activity. First, the initial input from the "listen for detail" practice might have played a role in preparing the students both linguistically and cognitively for the post-listening

task. For example, as they listened for details from the tape, they learned about how people justify the choice of their item by describing it as having special emotional or practical meaning to them. Most students explained why their own item is important, mimicking the kind of reasoning they heard from the tape but personalized it to the extent their English allowed.

The second factor that eased the interaction with the teacher was probably the predictability of the questions when a student is called upon. He or she knew exactly what information should be prepared to respond to those questions. They also knew that the teacher would be able to call on many students since the conversation with each was kept very short, within 4-5 turns. By the time the last students were picked, they had already been very well-prepared considering the many answers that had been given by their classmates. A total of 16 students were offered the opportunity to interact one-on-one with the teacher and practice what they had learned. This kind of fast-paced mini-dialogue interaction not only checks on students' ability to transfer what they have learned from the listening lesson but also increases participation in class significantly.

#### ***6.4.2 Speaking: Teen language***

While echoing and confirmation requests appeared to be a significant feature in Teacher 1's speech during the listening lesson, a different communicative pattern emerged in his speaking class with questions being the primary technique to elicit student talk. Instead of echoing and prompting, the teacher steered and pushed forward the conversation by asking many questions. Teacher-fronted time was filled with conversation and barely any lecturing. Within 198 turns, 104 questions were asked and 89 got a response, making the class remarkably interactive as can be seen in Excerpt 6.2. below:

### ***Excerpt 6.2: Teen language***

- Line (1) T: Really? I don't know it. Ok thank you, and can you answer if this is a new language or not? (4.0) It's a yes/no question so you can just say yes or no.  
Ss: ((no response))
- (5) T: Is it a new language?  
Ss: No, no  
T: Who says "no" raise your hand? ((3/4 of class raise their hands)) who says "no" raise your hand? Nearly all of you say no? (2.0) Why? Can you tell me the reason why?  
S: It's not popular?
- (10) T: It's not very popular? Who use it?  
Ss: Teenagers  
T: Teenagers, teenagers, what about older people?  
S: No, they don't know  
T: They don't know about it? They don't understand it?
- (15) Ss: Yes, yes  
T: Why? (2.0) Why? (5.0) Do you know?  
S: They don't use that  
T: They don't use that so they don't know? Do your parents text message with you?
- (20) Ss: Yes  
T: Do you use these words with your parents?  
Ss: No

The reason why only 89/104 questions got answered is that some of them are repeated without pausing, some are rephrased to make it easier to understand, and some are display questions that do not expect an answer. However, there are some questions could fall in between both authentic and display categories. For example, when the teacher asked "Who use it?" (*it* refers to teen language) we can assume that he knows the answer, but at the same time the answer can be different from what he expected. It is noteworthy that the teacher used questions to interact with both individual students and the whole class, maximizing student participation while providing scaffolding to help them to complete the task together. By alternating different question types for different purposes such as clarifying, probing, and eliciting, the teacher was again able to connect with a number of students despite the fact that whole-class interaction is usually challenging for a large class like this.

Since the density of questions is significant in the speaking class, it naturally generates a certain amount of response from the students, shaping a series of mini-dialogues that vary greatly in complexity. Some questions generated more truncated or gesture responses while some prompted longer answers. Responses to *yes/no* and display questions were typically limited between one and three words while *why* and other genuine questions elicited more complete answers. However, the use of *yes/no* question type is still very effective in quickly gathering student attention and allowing less proficient and/or more shy students to venture their answer. *Yes/no* questions also tend to generate choral responses, while *Wh-* questions invite answers from individual students, as can be clearly seen in the excerpt above<sup>24</sup>.

As the teacher's questions are geared more to the closed-ended type, they result in a single short response and only activate lower-order thinking (Ur, 2012, p.229). Although it is typical to use display questions as a quick comprehension check especially in a large class, it is evidenced in the excerpt that open-ended questions engaged the students more and therefore resulted in a more elaborate answer. Among the 89 responses identified in the speaking lessons, 31 received a full answer (not necessarily grammatically or phonologically correct answers), while 58 responses were simply *yes*, *no*, *ok*, or no verbal answer at all<sup>25</sup>. Some questions only required the students to raise their hand for an answer. The different constructions of question did entail different levels of student participation in both quantity and quality.

The 31 "real" questions that prompted full answers present themselves as an effective instructional tool that teachers can use to scaffold interaction. Seen through sociocultural theory, teacher questions serve as a symbolic linguistic tool that "mediates, assists, and scaffolds mental

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<sup>24</sup> Ss refers to a whole-class or group response, S refers to an unidentified individual student

<sup>25</sup> When Ss shake or nod their head, I still count it as a "response"

activities” (McCormick & Donato, 2000, p.184). One of the most significant tenets of this paradigm is that the more students are cognitively challenged, the more likely they will learn. This challenge can be embedded in a specific task or in the interaction with a more competent peer or the teacher. That said, a teacher with more challenging questions will set up conditions for student L2 capabilities to be stretched and extended. If the student struggles when faced with challenging questions, a scaffolding model can be offered by the teacher to assist the student in finding the answer.

#### **6.4.3. Writing: Brainstorming**

Unlike the speaking lesson where genuine questions occurred more often, the teacher changed his strategy in the writing class, and his speech contained more display questions and lecturing. In the lesson, the students tackled the concept of “brainstorming” in writing, and practiced it along with some activities in the textbook. Although the teacher attempted to define the term collaboratively with the students by breaking the word down into two parts “brain” and “storm,” he realized that the students were confused as they tried to translate the words literally, and the teacher ended up explaining the term himself. He made it even clearer for the students by referring to the textbook, drawing a bubble diagram on the board, and writing down the key words being discussed. During this exchange with the students, the teacher’s speech was punctuated with more long pauses than in other skill lessons, which means the fast-paced style that I would usually see in his speaking and listening classes was no longer present. Excerpt 6.3 is an example of teacher speech where I can find multiple instances of teacher mini-lectures.

### Excerpt 6.3 Brainstorming

- T: Unit 1 (8.0) free writing.....today we'll tell you a very important part in writing (1.0), we called it brainstorming ((T writes 'brainstorming' on the board)). Do you know the word brain?
- Ss: Yes
- T: Do you know the word 'storm'?
- Ss: Yes
- T: Can you guess what is brainstorm? (3.0) Vietnamese? Ten thousand. (T reminds Ss of the class 'rule', which is a 10,000VND fine if anyone uses Vietnamese in the class) (3.0) What is brainstorming? ((laughter)). What is brainstorming? (3.0). Ten thousand. ((laughter)) What's brainstorming? .....<sup>26</sup>
- T: Lots of rain? (T draws a cloud shape on the board with raindrops on top) that is your brain. That means we have a lot of rain falling onto your brain, or if we call this "ideas" ((T points to the "rain", and writes "ideas" next to it)). That means many ideas come to your brain. That means you think about many ideas, something like that. Ok? That means brainstorming. (2.0) yes, when you've got the topic, the first thing you must do is brainstorming. We have many ways...to do that, but we have the most (.) popular ((1 word inaudible)) three ways to do that. First thing is making a list .....
- T: Yes (laughter) any ideas? Ok, that's a way of brainstorming, and when you have any topic, the first thing you do is brainstorming, that means you write down any ideas you know about the topic, ok? Today we just only do it now open your book (.) open your book (2.0) page number 6 ok? (2.0) brainstorming (2.0) the first thing we have is the question "what is brainstorming?" and as I explained to you (.) it's ok no problem? The second thing we have is making a list, \*there\* is an example on the blackboard, ok? And number 7 is free writing, let's read the example, uh huh, example of a student's free-writing. ((2 words inaudible)) the moment || Free writing, page number 7 (2min)
- T: Finished? Everybody? (1.0) Finished?
- S: Yes
- T: Yes, OK you can see making a list on the blackboard means to getting your idea. You have a lot of ideas here, ya, and in free writing you see in the book (.) what (.) can free writing help you? (5.0)
- S: It makes our points more clear
- T: Make-your...?
- S: Points
- T: points ...
- S: more clear
- T: More clear, clearer, ok. Uh huh, Anything- Any other ideas? (9.0) no more ideas? (2.0) no ideas? (4.0) look at the example again. Is there any mistakes here? (.) is there any mistake here? (skip 12 lines)
- T: Science, ok, very good, now come back (.) to page number 6, making lists (4.0) making list, ok (1.0) it has the same topic as mapping, that is "what should I...study?" ok, now let's look at the (.) list. Do you know what is the most important? (1.0) Do you know what is the most important in the list? (.) No? Every idea is the- the same? OK, do you know what is the sub-point of the bigger point? (1.0) No? You can't do it? OK. So::, you see, we have three things, making a list, free writing, and mapping. What is the most important? (8.0) What will you do first in three things here?

<sup>26</sup> Some lines are skipped so I can fast forward to the speech patterns I want to show

It is striking how the teacher slowed down in the writing lesson with longer wait times and more confirmation checks, repetition, recasts, and clarification. In the repetition instances, the teacher also enunciated more, making sure he re-delivered what he heard in a clear manner to the whole class. A review of other writing lessons shows the same pattern: teacher speech becomes more explanatory than interactive, writing terminologies are clearly defined, and the overall high energy subdues. It is also interesting that metalanguage terminologies were introduced in the writing class more than in any other classes<sup>27</sup>. This did not seem to be a point of interest in other lessons such as reading, listening, and speaking although sometimes the students came across words such as *skimming*, *scanning*, and *annotating*.

Another noticeable phenomenon in Teacher 1's writing lesson is the predominance of display questions. Although there has been a body of research that criticizes display questions as not being able to stimulate higher order thinking and being too artificial for real life communication purposes, they are hard to avoid in the course of a lesson. The teacher's traditional role is to transmit knowledge, and therefore this type of question is the most powerful tool to check, or test, comprehension. In the excerpt above, display questions are not always redundant since many of them contain cued assistance that less-proficient learners find helpful. For example, when the students had trouble navigating the chaotic bubble diagram in the textbook, the teacher asked *Do you know what is the most important? What thing will you do first in the three things here?* to help the students identify the key points from their brainstorming so that they could narrow down their topic. Not only did he add extra wait time between the questions, but he also managed to rephrase them multiple times to make them clearer (see last teacher turn in Excerpt 6.3). Other display questions such as *What is the topic in the map? How*

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<sup>27</sup> There is more discussion on this in Teacher 2's writing class, which has the same phenomenon

*many big points? How many sub-points?* may appear redundant at first but they helped draw the students' attention to the content being taught before defining the three activities in brainstorming (mapping, making a list, free writing). These questions were also directed more to the shy and novice learners to encourage them to speak since the answer to such questions can be drawn easily from the textbook.

The final comment I would make about Teacher 1's writing class is the lack of actual in-class writing. It was rare when the teacher asked his students to take out a piece of paper and write something in class since he placed much focus on tackling writing concepts and demonstrating different writing techniques. Even if the whole English program emphasizes communication and verbal interaction, it is crucial that students receive more practice in timed writing so that they can do well in their exit and standardized tests. Writing knowledge and writing skills should come hand in hand. Ready-made writing exercises in the textbook (e.g., with multiple choice questions) and writing only at sentence level cannot replace the role of real writing, especially when there is ample time for practicing in class. I am aware that students had take-home writing assignments, but in fact a lot of student writing in the AC is associated with exams where no dictionary or internet is allowed. Therefore, I can see the benefits of doing more timed writing in class. This will not only prepare students for their short-term writing requirements, but also provide an opportunity for students to work independently. Besides, these in-class writings can also be a relatively accurate reflection of the students' actual proficiency in this skill. In short, it is not sufficient to help students explore a topic, comprehend the writing terms (e.g., *brainstorming*, *transition*, *subject*, and so on), and practice these terms in isolation of writing a full essay. Teach writing at NHU in the context of the Advanced Curriculum needs to require students to go all the way from writing the first draft to the final draft with multiple

revisions based on teacher and/or peer feedback. If students do not create a piece of writing themselves on a regular basis, they will not be able to apply what they learn in their own writing, nor will they be able to improve their writing skill in general.

#### **6.3.4 Reading: *Types of friends***

Reading is handled in a rather unconventional way in Teacher 1's class, especially at the pre-reading step. It involves reading aloud passages and correcting pronunciation in addition to the more conventional content learning and vocabulary practice. The students did quiet reading in class too, but it does not matter what kind of reading is happening, the lesson typically starts with pronunciation and vocabulary practice and then reading comprehension with the latter sometimes followed by group work and/or teacher-fronted discussion. This sparks a skill mismatch between what is being taught in class (pronunciation/vocabulary with interaction around generally simple concepts) and what the real world will possibly demand from these readers (complex text materials in their final tests or later on their content classes). For example, with the reading lesson described below, the students started reading five short passages about different types of friends (e.g., childhood friend, work friend, bus friend, and so on), then the teacher picked five random students to first read aloud the passage and then identify the type of friendship that the characters in these passages have. As the students read the text, the teacher occasionally corrected their pronunciation. After all the small paragraphs in the textbook had been read and answered, the teacher led a whole-class conversation before putting the students in pair work to talk about their own friends.

#### ***Excerpt 6.4: Types of friend***

- T: Do you have a lot of friends?  
Ss: Yes  
T: You have a best friend?

Ss: Yes  
 T: You have a work friend, or study friend?  
 S1: Yes  
 T: You have a bus friend?  
 Ss: No  
 T: that's somebody who goes with you to the bus  
 S1: Yes, a bus friend  
 Ss: No::  
 T: Do you have a boyfriend or girlfriend? ((Ss giggling))  
 T: Why not? (soft laugh) (2.0) ok Now let's work in pair (25.0) Let's work in pair to make a conversation (10.0) about your friend yeah any kind of friend you have.

One paradox emerging from the data is the presence of less challenging topics in the reading class and more challenging topics in the speaking class. It is a paradox because the real struggle with English for Vietnamese L2 learners does not lie in reading, but speaking. A difficult topic for speaking will just worsen this struggle. But students would be capable of a good deal more in the reading class than is asked of them. The students are often given plenty of time to scrutinize the text before they answer the accompanying questions. Their performance required for this skill is not spontaneous like it is for speaking. Considering the goals of the AC and students' current level, it is of urgent importance that more complex texts be introduced in the reading classes, or else the students will lag behind academically should they pursue their study in English. It is very predictable that all the content subjects taught by US professors will demand working with much more advanced texts than the level they are at now.

Another possible issue that might eventually present itself in Teacher 1's reading class is that when a task is effortless, it hinders learning progress and language development. For example, in Excerpt 6.4 a large part of the interaction involves display questions with minimum cognitive and/or linguistic requirement in the students' responses. There have been sufficient research theories such as Krashen's (1985) *i+1* and Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD, Chaiklin, 2003; Kinginger, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978 among others) that have provided

evidence of how learners can gain from working slightly beyond their comfort zone. In the case of NHU students, these models ( $i+1$ , ZPD) should be applied to stretch student reading literacy and comprehension skills. In addition to following these models, we can also consider some methodological changes in teaching reading so that it becomes more flexible, reflective, and critical. This means student readers should be exposed to a wider range of texts with various activities from close detail reading, to critical reading, to scanning. Reflective and critical readers engage with the text with a critical mind and a willingness to question what is often taken for granted within a text.

By no means are the criticisms and suggestions in this section meant to be corrective. It simply occurred to me that Teacher 1 and students are generally on the right track with speaking, listening, and writing. Reading is the only skill that goes a little off track and therefore raises some concerns for me, even though I also recognized some very agreeable practices that the teacher was using in the class. For example, the transition from text-focused to reader-focused activities was very helpful to enliven the class and allow for an immediate application of the text in real-life communication (e.g., the follow-up activity was for the students to talk about their own friends). The teacher's effort to cover both the lexical and semantic aspects of the text also helps improve comprehension and strengthen the learners' language repertoire.

In short, Teacher 1's classes employed a wide range of communication strategies across the four skills. If the speaking and listening lessons were full of interesting activities, high participation, more sophisticated teacher-student interaction, the writing and reading lessons witnessed an increase in teacher talk time and recurrence of simple reading topics. The teacher also brought in more outside teaching materials for the speaking and listening classes while relying more on the textbook for reading and writing activities. This might have come from the

press to improve the students' two weaker skills (speaking and listening) to satisfy the requirement of the AC program, but it might also have been the teacher's preference to invest more in these two skills.

### **6.5 Teacher 2: Elucidation and comprehension check**

The most striking feature in Teacher 2's talk is his concern about his students' ability to recognize the vocabulary they encounter. Throughout all the four lessons selected, the most often asked question is always *Do you know/understand X?* and *What does X mean?* with X being a word that he assumes his students might not know. This somehow suggests his priority and belief that the best way for students to make sense of speech, be it written or spoken, is to have a rich vocabulary repertoire. To help the students build such a repertoire, Teacher 2 used elucidation and comprehension checks. The analysis of Teacher 2's speech when teaching the four skills below will show a consistency in his methodology.

#### **6.5.1 Speaking class: Health problems**

Teacher 2's speaking class was a lively coproduction of talk with remarkable rapport between the teacher and his students. The structure of most speaking activities is quite predictable with the first half (sometimes one third) of the class time led by the teacher and the second half devoted to group work activities. In the class selected, the teacher introduced the health problems topic, starting with a teacher-led brainstorming activity where all the words related to health were gathered collectively with each student contributing one word that they knew. After having a long list of words such as *stomachache*, *sore throat*, *heart diseases* and so on, the teacher continued to generate another list of symptoms and finished with more words on the board such as *sweat*, *cough*, *sneeze*, *tiredness*. Now that all the necessary words for the topic were on the board, the students started working in groups to talk about the most severe illness

they had experienced. The teacher then recapped the activity by calling individual students to share what they discussed with their group mates. While Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 conducted their speaking lesson in a relatively similar structure (pre-speaking activity, group work, report to the whole class), a close analysis of the exchange below does show some differences in their interactional patterns:

**Excerpt 6.5 Health problems**

- Line (1) T: Ok thank you right thank you so much, time's over right. Now I would like some of you to talk about the disease that you have had. Van, can you? (1.) Can you tell us about one of the illnesses you had?
- S<sub>1</sub>: I had some fever er...
- (5) T: fever, right. I had a fever
- S<sub>1</sub>: Yeah I had a fever and I feel... I feel... I feel so tired (2.0) and I er I and my temperature is very hot
- T: Yeah
- S<sub>1</sub>: It was er thirty nine er
- (10) T: Thirty nine or twenty nine?
- S<sub>1</sub>: Thirty nine er...and it's hot and I had to go to see the doctor er I had to—um when I go to the doctor er he advise me has some ...er... take some medicine and er...er... take the medicine=
- T: Thank you yeah
- S<sub>1</sub>: I see doctor 10 days
- (15) T: 10 days! Oh too long (.hh)!
- S<sub>1</sub>: yeah I feel better and my...my temperature reduce and I can go to school
- T: Yeah, during that 10 days, um did anyone take care of you?
- S<sub>1</sub>: My mother=
- T: =your mother, yeah, ok so mother is always the best person yeah... and what about you Ms. Ngoc? (2.0) Can you tell us about the illness that you had?
- (20) S<sub>2</sub>: I—I had a flu
- T: You had a flu? Flu, ok flu, you had a flu, when?
- S<sub>2</sub>: Er...
- T: Last week, last month, or some days ago?=  
 (25) S<sub>2</sub>: =Some days ago
- T: Some days ago (1.0) what happened?
- S<sub>2</sub>: (2.0) I er... I headache
- T: You feel... you feel, or you had a [headache
- S<sub>2</sub>: [headache (3.0) I flu and:: sneeze
- (30) T: Sneeze, it's sneeze, yeah you sneeze all the time right, did you take er any medicine?
- S<sub>2</sub>: (2.0) Yes
- T: OK
- S<sub>2</sub>: I went to see doctor... and he said I take a rest and better=  
 T: =But I—but I saw you going to class so you don't care? You ignored your doctor's advice
- (35) S<sub>2</sub>: Yeah ((in a very soft voice and uncertain))
- T: Do you know *ignore*? You don't care, you don't listen to you doctor, is that?
- S<sub>2</sub>: No, I take a rest (2.0) some day.
- T: Yeah, for some DAYS, ok, you took a rest—I took a rest for some days, and I felt better and I went to class again, right. Ok thank you so much.

In this episode, two students were called on to share their health problem story with the whole class. Since the task naturally frames the student speech in the form of a narration, their turns seem to be longer and more complex. This also causes a decline in the teacher's talk as the students take the floor, teacher talking time will have to drop. As a result, there were fewer questions from the teacher and more student-initiated turns. For example, Student 1 volunteered to expand her story (Line 12) even when the teacher already said "thank you" and was about to move on to the next person. By volunteering to talk, Student 1 "won" a couple more turns to make her story more complete, and the teacher finalized it with a nice sentiment in his comment *yes mother is always the best person*.

Unlike Teacher 1, Teacher 2 did not have to elicit as much to get the students to talk. The stories seem to just pour out naturally, yet with different levels of details and fluency. The teacher's role now is simply an active and supportive listener who did not interrupt and only engaged in the conversation with simple back-channeling signals. He also asked mostly genuine questions, occasionally reacted to the details in a friendly and warm manner. There were a few instances showing that the teacher cares about his students—or at least about their stories. For example, the teacher asked thoughtful questions to learn more about the student's story such as *What happened? Did you take medicine? I saw you going to class... you ignored your doctor's advice?* These hints of a positive and healthy interpersonal relationship between the teacher and students might have been a contributing factor to the students' relaxed participation. This interpersonal relationship has also been addressed in SLA research as an "affective factor" (Dornyei, 2014; Garder & Macintyre, 1993; Schumann, 1975) that may have an impact on learning and development in addition to other "cognitive factors." Being able to establish such intimacy in the classroom, the teacher has succeeded in creating a foundation for communication

and rapport, which may eventually seep into student motivation and attitude toward learning the target language.

Not all the transactions between Teacher 2 and his students turned out smoothly without the help of the teacher. Scaffolded assistance was also employed when a problem arises in the interaction. As Student 2 hesitated, the teacher filled in his pause first with an easy question by providing three options for the student to choose from: [you had a flu] *Last week, last month, or some days ago?* Then he smoothed the conversation by shifting to more genuine questions, giving it a natural and relaxed ending. This suggests that when teachers purposefully modify their questioning behaviors, they can extend an opportunity for students to remain in the conversation and potentially elaborate on it. If the teacher gives up mid-point when the student is struggling, not only the chance for the student to verbally communicate her thought is eliminated, but the chance for learning is also reduced. What I see as a positive sign in the excerpt above is the way the teacher turns an initially pseudo-communication into a more real one. This recommends recognizing and implementing this kind of progressive classroom practice more often since we are implementing a communicative curriculum that aims at narrowing the gap between the somewhat faux communication in the classroom and the actual communication in the outside world.

### ***6.5.2 The listening class: Air transportation***

The listening class presents a different interactional pattern in Teacher 2's speech partly due to the unfamiliar topic (see Chapter 5), air transportation. Although the teacher talk time was kept moderate and the teacher was still practicing the same scaffolding model to assist the students, their responses were shorter and less complex. Twenty of 39 responses were simply *yes/no* or fewer than three-word answers. There were also six instances of incomplete responses,

some overlapping with the teacher's self-answers. It is not common for Teacher 2 to answer his own questions, but he resorted to doing so when eliciting and prompting did not seem to work.

There are several other new patterns emerging in Teacher 2's listening class, some of which are due to the unfamiliar topic as mentioned above, and some are due to the time spent on vocabulary explanation, which is not always productive. The excerpt below shows an example of a lengthy chunk in the teacher's talk, with a particularly high density of questions that checked on students' recognition of new words (see highlighted text).

### ***Excerpt 6.6 Air travelling***

T: Air travelling, right? (1.0) Unit 7, yes (2.0) now look at number 1 right, match the picture with the name. For example number 1, No Smoking sign (.) you see, yeah, sometimes you see a road sign, no smoking yeah. Number 2, do you know *custom forms*, do you know *custom*? (1.0) custom, before you boarding, before you go on the airplane, right, you have to do some custom er procedure steps, or... for example you say custom check, right? So you know custom? Yes, so now custom form, *custom form* means er—it is documents, or the form, do you know *form*? Where you have to fill—to write some information about. For example your destination || you know *destination*? Yes, the place you arrive, for example you go to Ho Chi Minh City, so Ho Chi Minh city is your destination, right. Then your sex, your age, ok, your occupation, do you know *occupation*? What does it mean? || Occupation means job, right. What else? (1.0) Your passport number, do you know *passport*? || passport number, so most of the information about you, right so that the custom officer can check, right, can see who you are, right, so now number 2, which picture? A, or B, C, D, E, G, F? which one? Can you see? Quickly. Huh? Lan? (Jan 22, 2015)

It is worth noting that none of the many questions in the episode prompted an answer, despite the fact that they were clearly phrased, patiently repeated, and strategically scaffolded. Some were even followed with extensive wait time (as marked by ||) and vivid examples. Although the listening vocabulary was not too hard considering the picture provided in the textbook, the teacher still decided to walk the students through every new word. Nine of 17 questions in the excerpt above were raised to simply “test” student vocabulary. It is true that some concepts are relatively alien to the majority of students such as *custom form* and *overhead compartment*, but there are also more common terms that I believe most students already knew

such as *passport* and *No-smoking sign*. Sometimes, the lack of an answer comes from the simple truth that the students do not know the answer (e.g., when the teacher asked about *custom form*, with pause). Other times, it seems that the students knew the answer but refused to provide one because the answer is too easy or obvious (e.g., when the teacher asked about *passport*, with pause), or when the speaker fails to show his or her expectation of an answer (e.g., when the teacher answered his own questions about *destination*, no pause).

There can be many reasons for the lack of verbal responses for teacher questions, but it is quite disconcerting to see many of them within a two-minute talk. Sometimes, we can be so wrapped up in our teaching that we do not notice the students' attention loss, which tends to happen more in the second half of the lesson. Our effort to teach anything that falls into those attention breaks will then become an uneconomical usage of class time and energy. As in the excerpt above, when students lack interest or focus, they choose to answer or not answer a question as they please, apparently independent of teacher question types or length of pause offered. It might not be a fair criticism for the teacher and his methodology when such a low participation happens because the students themselves can, purposefully or not, bring classroom interaction to a crashing halt!

While the teacher's concern that not teaching vocabulary can affect student comprehension is a rational one, one would not want the teaching of vocabulary to interfere with or dominate the teaching of other skills, in this case, listening. Besides, if building vocabulary is set as first priority in the class, we should also consider the various ways of teaching it rather than just providing a definition. Research on vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary teaching has proliferated for decades with numerous applicable guidelines (Carter & McCarthy, 2014; Hunt & Beglar, 2002; Nassaji, 2003), but very little is in line with the approach above. This may be a

signal that we should take a more progressive step toward teaching vocabulary while making use of technology and other resources. Students pick up words both incidentally and intentionally, therefore the teacher should not be burdened with the responsibility to teach them every new word they come across. The students can expand their vocabulary through listening, but the ultimate goal of a listening class should be for listening skills to be built and improved. In fact, in real life, many non-native speakers can share that experience of listening to a native speaker and understanding what is said without having to know every single word they hear.

The next observation in the listening class is the random attempts of the teacher to teach intonation and basic phonetic features of English pronunciation, though not explicitly. I came to the realization that at NHU we have never taught pronunciation in a systematic way. The students are often not sure what dimension of language they are having to work on when their teacher tells them to say /z/ after a plural noun instead of /s/. And one problem with their listening skill is that some students cannot recognize the pronunciation of a word even when it is said slowly and clearly. In the textbook, there is a small phonetic component built into several speaking units, but teachers tend to go over it very quickly. This may be due to the predetermined mindset that non-native speakers like us can do only very little in the battle with pronunciation, and we rightly put that issue on the back burner. It is time to deliberately incorporate a portion of pronunciation teaching into the curriculum, and Vietnamese ESL/EFL teachers should no longer belittle their authenticity or credibility to teach pronunciation, because if not them, who will? In the case of listening, recognizing a word's sound precedes recognizing its meaning, therefore familiarizing students with the English phonetic system, or at least the basics of it, will contribute greatly to their ability to comprehend the message being communicated and respond to it appropriately. Needless to say, the students' speaking skill will

also benefit since knowing the correct pronunciation of a word is the prerequisite for saying it correctly.

### 6.5.3 Reading: *Watching TV*

Teacher 2's reading class explored the advantages and disadvantages of watching TV, a topic that most students are familiar with. This familiarity might have been the cause of the animated whole-class pre-reading discussion where everybody could easily come up with something to contribute. The starting question posed by the teacher was *What do people feel when they watch TV?* and that alone got nine students involved in answering. This class also witnessed a drop in genuine questions and an increase in eliciting effort such as lines 1, 5, and 8 in this excerpt:

#### **Excerpt 6.7 *Watching TV***

- Line (1) T: Sometimes, sometimes you feel bored, what else, you feel...?  
S1: Interested,  
T: Interested, or excited. Do you feel excited? You know excited?  
S1: Yes
- (5) T: Yes (.) what else? Only that? Sometimes bored, sometimes excited. (2.0) What about:: ok Hieu (.), How do you feel?  
S2: I feel (.) interesting, er interested, and only that.  
T: and what? Only that? Really (hh), OK, you ((another student)) how do you feel when you watch TV?
- (10) S<sub>2</sub>: I feel... excellent  
T: Sorry?  
S<sub>2</sub>: I feel excellent  
T: Feel what?  
S<sub>2</sub>: Excellent
- (15) T: Sorry? (2.0)  
S<sub>2</sub>: Ex—  
S<sub>3</sub>: Excellent  
T: Ah excellent you think that, right, that some TV programs are excellent, and you feel right, excited right. And you?
- (20) S<sub>3</sub>: I feel bored  
T: Bored, for what program do you feel bored? Or every program?  
S<sub>3</sub>: Every=

It is quite perplexing why genuine questions were used so skillfully in the other classes and sparingly in this particular lesson, especially when the topic could easily invite a more genuine and natural conversation. Another riddle in this transaction is the hesitation and confusion in the learners' speech despite the easy topic. As students hesitated, they provoked a lot of clarification requests (e.g., *sorry?*), teacher recast, and echoing. It could have been the question itself that caused this hesitation in the student responses because *How do you feel when you watch TV?* is a little vague for a question. It might not have been the kind discussion question that one would expect to see coming with this particular topic. If the lead-in questions were more standard, such as *What is your favorite TV channel? Why?* that might have reshaped the interaction in a more vitalizing way, or at least, it could have smoothed the conversation and given it a less broken start.

Among the three phases of the reading class, the pre-reading time was the most efficient in terms of language production despite students' confusion about the question. This is also where more interesting interactional phenomena arose since the overall interaction decreased and was rushed at the end of the class. For example, in a quick episode, the teacher raised the question "How does TV affect your intelligence?" and the class went mute for a few seconds with some contemplative and wistful faces. This seems to be the less explored aspect of the topic and most students were not able to access their past experience on this subtopic (TV and intelligence) to quickly formulate an answer. The only two attempts to answer were unfortunately not followed up due to the little time left for the class. One student stated that TV "affects our creativity," and the other added "it can widen your knowledge." However, the teacher took the floor and provided his own answer, probably passing by a teaching moment where a more complex conversation could have taken place. When an "easy" topic is introduced

in class, the teacher will have to decide if he or she wants the students to just discuss what they already know about the topic or help them go deeper to the level of knowledge that they have never been exposed to before (for example, the TV and intelligence theme). A seemingly easy topic can always be entangled in some aspects to make it more challenging and more interesting to explore. But to do so requires more planning time and scaffolding.

With an extended pre-reading activity, the actual reading and post-reading parts had to be rushed before the bell rang. Fortunately, the outcome product expected of this reading section was only a set of true/false questions, so the students finished both parts very quickly. The class bears some similarities to Teacher 1's reading class in that the text was not challenging enough and neither were its associated tasks. The teacher's speech also changed from very interactive (pre-reading) to quite indifferent (post-reading) since he was stuck in a discourse pattern where his only job was to confirm his students' true or false answers. At this point, teacher-student interaction shrunk into an extremely plain IRF model like the example below and it was not surprising that the students got all their true/false answers correct.

T: Number 2?  
Ss: True  
T: True, okay. Number 3?

The students therefore might have benefited more from interacting with the teacher in the pre-reading discussion than in the during-reading activity since there was so little intellectual demand in both the text and the task. I found the instances where the teacher attempted to complicate the subject matter further, such as asking more challenging questions about the topic, to be a pedagogically valuable point of investigation because choosing the more difficult way to explore an easy topic can compensate for the lack of cognitive stimulation that is often found in the textbook's reading units.

#### 6.5.4 Writing: Coherence

Teacher's 2 writing class evoked more teacher talking than any other skill class he taught and in comparison with Teacher 1's classes. In this lesson on coherence (see Appendix 6), the teacher brought to class a stack of handouts that he had collected from a major language university in Hanoi, where students are at a much more advanced level than at NHU. The handout package was about 20 pages with dense paragraphs that demonstrated the ideas of coherence, thesis, transition, topic sentence and so on. If Teacher 1's problem involved the dependence on the textbook for writing practices and the lack of in-class writing, his writing class regressed into a model somewhat resembling the old grammar-translation classroom where teachers tended to dominate the discourse, as can be seen in the example below:

#### *Excerpt 6.8 Coherence*

T: Huh? Oh right, easy to understand, ok (3.0) now I would like you to read the first, yeah, the two first paragraphs in the book. *Another element of a good paragraph is (.) coherence. Co- means? It is a prefix that means together, or with, right? Co- means together (.) and the verb cohere means hold together. So it means—in writing, you have to write—to—to put, to link ideas together (.) to make a full paragraph. In order to have coherence in writing, the movement—do you know the movement? (1.0) from topic to topic, idea to idea, it means movement right? From one sentence to the next one, in a longer essay from a paragraph to another—to the next paragraph, must be logical and smooth, remember that, logical and smooth (2.0) there should be no sudden jump, do you know jump? Jump (.) for example when you write about—you describe your house (.) you cannot write something about the outside of the house and then you jump into the inside of the house, and then you jump out again right? It's not good. The sentences should follow smoothly into the next one. There are four ways to achieve this (.) remember 4 ways. The first way involves repeating ... key nouns or key words, ok? (.) and using pronouns that refer back—do you know refer? (1.0) Yes, refer means talk, tell, mention. The third way is transition signals as you know, right? Like firstly, secondly, moreover, besides, one thing, another thing is (.) to show how one idea is related to the next one. The first way to arrange your sentences in logical order. It is very important, logical order, for example when you describe your house you should follow logical order (.) of SPACE, from outside to the inside, right? (1.0) Two of the common logical orders which you will learn to use in yeah in the next two chapters (1.0), or we can say chronological order, or order of time, ok. Logical of division (.) and order of importance, ok? Remember (.) some kinds of order, right. The first one (.) you say (.) order of time, yeah order of division, and order of importance (2.0) Now the first (.)*

**thing we learn is repetition, you know repeat? And the noun is repetition, repetition of key nouns, the most natural way and therefore the easiest way to achieve coherence is to repeat key nouns frequently in your paragraph.** Now let's look at the model paragraph about gold that you learned in the first chapter (. and see how it uses this technique to achieve coherence. The key noun here in this paragraph is gold right? It is also the topic. Circle the word gold and count how many repetitions are there, right. I would like you to read quickly and circle the word gold and tell me how many times they repeat (4.0) Line 1, yes or no, how many gold's in the first line.

There are multiple episodes like this in Teacher 2's other writing classes, suggesting he does settle on a different method when it comes to writing. Whether this is just a strategic change or methodological choice, it would now be more practical to find out where such an urge to lecture comes from rather than criticizing the method. A close examination of the episode above reveals the different intents in the teacher's talk. First, some of his talk is for recounting the material (*italic text*). Second, a big portion is devoted to explaining new words such as *movement, coherence, jump, refer, repeat*, (**bold text**). Finally, the rest of his speech functions as guidance and explanation of the task requirement (underlined text). Apart from these three main functions of the teacher's talk, there are other utterances that show the teacher's attempt to interact with his students by checking on their comprehension and attention (e.g., *ok? Right?*) although these did not generate responses, and the teacher did not often pause for them. As categorized in the episode above, only half of the talk involves lecturing on the material, the other half was for vocabulary checking and other necessary instruction. It would not be fair to criticize all teacher talk. Not all lecturing is bad, and not all teacher talk is lecturing. In the complex fabric of classroom discourse, lecturing is a de facto aspect of teacher talk and in the Vietnamese context it is even backed by Confucian values with lecturing being placed at the heart of all education. The amount of lecturing recorded in Teacher 2's speech simply reflects the

fact that lecturing is a fundamental activity that will naturally happen in the course of a lesson no matter what teaching idealism or pedagogical methodology we are aspiring to.

To further justify the point that sometimes extended teacher talk is not entirely teacher-centered, we can examine the episode above more closely to identify the instances where the teacher tried to reach out to his students. The lengthy transcript above is actually more interactive than it looks since there are many instances of teacher asking questions (e.g., *do you know 'refer'?*) Unfortunately, his efforts were not met with any verbal response. What happened was once the students saw that their teacher had drifted into his “lecturing” mode, they turned on their passive “listening” mode, too. Once the students are set up for listening and not interacting, it takes longer for get them to become engaged or answer questions. The fact that the teacher did not offer long enough pauses and sometimes answered himself could also be a cause for the lack of student responses.

It was noted that questions that end with *right?* are omnipresent in Teacher 2’s speech, and this way of constructing a question is often believed to seek approval or agreement more than a real answer, even if they are followed with pauses. This suggests that by reconstructing questions the teacher might be able to break away from his “lecturing” discourse and engage more with the students. Recounting the materials is not a point of criticism in my view considering the teaching context, as long as it does not last too long. The teacher may consider “changing gears,” or alternating between different instructional schemes while talking so that the students will not be in the same passive mode for the entire class. Students can learn first by listening, and ideally active listening, so that their mind does not cease to react as they listen. Extended teacher talk is not always uncondusive to learning if the teacher occasionally offers opportunities for interaction, negotiation, and communication.

The decrease of teacher-student interaction happened in both writing classes taught by the two teachers, which suggests that it could have stemmed from the same place. Both teachers claimed to have employed CLT and are very aware of what kind of communication is conducive to learning and what will do the reverse. They were well trained and very dedicated to promoting more meaningful communication in class, as can be seen in the listening and speaking lessons. The problem is they both reverted to the teacher-centered teaching style in their writing class. And this poses the question of where this coincidence in methodology could possibly come from?

One hypothesis is that many teaching practices in Vietnam were associated with lecturing and taking notes, and a writing class is where this activity happens the most. Writing, even if that means copying the blackboard or the teacher's talk, is considered the most fundamental act of learning and of education in general. This conception and belief might have been carried on and still have an impact on today's teaching practice, where writing and lecturing still come together. In other words, a writing class is inherently set up for "lecturing" to happen. Because the final product (e.g., an essay) is often seen as the most legitimate evidence of learning, teachers may feel more pressure to lecture, assuming it allows less ambiguity in their teaching. Writing is the most high-stakes educational product. Errors while speaking can get ignored and sympathized with; errors in writing retain their force, hence the disposition to lecture more when teaching writing.

Another hypothesis as to why there was more lecturing here may have to do with the amount of metalanguage introduced in the writing class. The students have to understand such concepts as *topic sentences*, *controlling idea*, *brainstorming*, *coherence*, *transition*, *unity* prior to diving into any writing activities. Although knowing these writing notions can be useful for

students to see how different elements work together to produce good writing, it does not help students to achieve the ultimate goal of a writing class—that is to learn how to write. Besides, it is noticeable that many writing exercises/practices in class involve identifying topic sentences, coherence, and transitional words, but not producing a real paragraph or an essay that the students compose themselves. Writing can be preceded by many interesting and fun activities, but the only “activity” that can really improve it is to just sit down and write.

While the two hypotheses above can help justify why there is such a tendency of teachers talking more in the writing class, it is important to adhere to the curriculum objectives. The ultimate goal is not for students to be able to label topic sentences or transitions in a paragraph, but to be able to write one. Therefore, what emerges as a problem in Teacher 2’s writing class is not the amount of teacher talk, but the lack of practical writing assignments for the students. Further pedagogical recommendations will be offered in Chapter 7: Conclusions and Suggestions.

In conclusion, Teacher 2’s interactional patterns varied greatly across the four classes with the highest participation occurring in the speaking lesson, measured by the total of 114 turns and high rate of student responses to teacher’s questions. This is also the class where more genuine questions were asked, more student-initiated turns were volunteered, and teacher talk time was minimized. A stark contrast was seen in the writing lesson where teacher talk escalated due to the teacher’s attempts to recount the class materials and clarify the task. This was done at the expense of losing his usual one-on-one communication with the students and therefore resulted in a decline in student participation. The reading class observed much interaction at the pre-reading phase but this tapered off as the students reached the post-reading activity due to time pressure and the lack of interest in the effortless reading questions. The writing class was a

trade-off between teacher talk and student participation as he regressed to an instructional approach that constituted more teacher talk and less dialogic interaction with his students even though he tried to connect with them sometimes. The writing class also offered some insights into the teacher's perception of his role as imparting knowledge about writing. The main concern arising from Teacher 2's class is the lack of authentic writing practices that could have been done in place of the textbook's artificial writing activities. Overall, Teacher 2 employed a wide variety of instructional and interactional approaches that were designed to promote communicative language learning. The actualization of these approaches, however, faced challenges from class size, economic and institutional constraints (e.g., NHU cannot afford to break down the class into smaller groups) and therefore demands much time and effort on the part of the teachers to overcome.

## **6.6 Chapter summary**

This chapter examines interactional patterns in the two teachers' speech during teacher-fronted time to better understand what scaffolding strategies were used and how they correlated with student language production. The findings reveal a remarkably wide range of strategies that the teachers utilized to facilitate L2 learning. Specifically, Teacher 1 demonstrated a stronger resistance to the traditional teacher-centered method, as can be seen in his efforts to engage students in a multitude of group work activities and create opportunities for meaningful communication in the class. Elicitation was employed as his primary method of scaffolding L2 acquisition and this was done more successfully and consistently in speaking and listening classes. In contrast Teacher 2 scaffolded mainly through repetition and comprehension checks and overall spent more time on lecturing than Teacher 1 especially in his writing sessions. Nevertheless, both teachers demonstrated a very natural transition, or adaptation to the new

teaching context under the AC curriculum by instructing nearly entirely in the target language. This is a very interesting observation for me because existing literature in teacher's L1 use tends to support the view that teacher's use of L1 is irresistible in linguistically homogenous classes especially where the teacher shares L1 with his or her students. While I do not want to end on a too personal or biased note, I cannot help but express my respect for the two teachers who, despite all the institutional and cultural constraints, had admirably strived and conquered the challenges posed by the AC program to give their students such a meaningful and productive learning environment. What the students gained academically from these English classes as well as what opportunity the AC project opened up for them, will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Study

### 7.1 The English-only policy and the communicative approach

The gap between a “communicative” rhetoric in Vietnam and the reality was pointed out in Nunan’s (2003) survey of seven countries in Asia with much cynicism. Thirteen years later, it is arguable that the aforementioned gap has been narrowed with the launching of serious reforms in language policy and L2 education nationwide. As a compelling example, the Advanced Curriculum (AC), has adopted an English-only policy in all English and content classes to maximize exposure to the English language in academic contexts. This policy is tied to an English-based curriculum developed with a US university, making learning English more high-stakes than ever before. This partnership might have been the key factor for the MOET<sup>28</sup> to reap significant successes within its very first phase of implementation, even at a non-English major school like NHU.

Although the Advanced Curriculum did not make it explicit that English teachers have to employ a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach when teaching, its expectations and guidelines with respect to verbal English interaction placed the whole English program straight into the frame of CLT. Unlike other language policies that were hastily issued to demand proof of English proficiency as the very first requirement for higher education or job opportunities such as the “English-B” certificate, the Advanced Curriculum was launched with remarkably systematic preparatory work, starting with teacher training in an English-speaking country. This was then followed by MOET’s monitoring and end-of-term student evaluation. The supplementary ESP course is required just before students start taking content classes with US

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<sup>28</sup>MOET: Ministry of Education and Training

professors to meet the specific needs of the learners in establishing preliminary subject-content knowledge through the target language. This ESP course allows students to transition to a new stage where English will be the primary tool for them to learn other subjects. Some institutions participating in the AC program even go a step further and hire native-English-speaker teachers to co-teach, making English classes more interesting and authentic.

While the AC program at NHU has never been recognized as the most attractive or competitive one in Vietnam's university system, in fact its enrollment has soared over the years. The first cohort in 2009 recruited 33 students, and that number had tripled by 2015. Meanwhile, some other major universities such as the Information Technology University and Natural Sciences University in Ho Chi Minh City had to observe a downward trend in enrollment. This model of educational reform seems to have worked out very well at NHU since it is now expanding its partnership to build even more AC programs with Germany and Oregon State University. It is safe to say the teaching of English at NHU has been undergoing some qualitative changes with the proliferation of multiple AC programs.

The emergence of different reforms in language teaching prompts a need for regular monitoring and evaluation since this helps decide if the new policy works or not, no matter where the policy is administered. In fact, there have been very few attempts to assess the implementation of the AC; even descriptive, informative research that simply documents the project outcomes is rare. The chance for English classes at NHU to be researched is even smaller given its location and modest recognition in ranking. Now that the town where NHU is located has been merged into Hanoi, and the university's international cooperation is escalating, the lack of research in EFL teaching should be redressed. This study is a humble endeavor to establish the first database for such research. Not only does it allow current teachers at NHU to reflect on their

teaching, but it also sets the first foundational stone for future researchers to conduct their studies in EFL class interaction in Vietnam. Moreover, future international research that aims at evaluating a language policy or investigating L2 verbal language production will benefit from cumulative data and findings from studies originating in non-major universities like NHU and not just those in big cities.

## **7.2 Recap of Chapter 4: The learners**

As I wrote this final chapter for this research study, I came across an email string from a former colleague at NHU and learned that one student from the very first cohort of the AC program was just granted a prestigious foreign scholarship for a master's program in Germany, making it a total of 8 students who have continued their studies abroad after graduating from the AC program. In addition to that, two other AC students were selected to participate in a forestry project contest in Moscow, conducted in English, and won the first prize. Such achievements bring more reputation to the program and hope for a real transformation in the English teaching and learning situation at NHU, a school that used to place their graduates mostly in the forestry and agriculture professions after graduation with little resources or orientation for those who wanted to go oversea for higher studies. Witnessing this trend of students making good use of English for studying abroad opportunities, we have more incentives to keep the AC program running here at NHU, despite the pessimism that other institutions are experiencing about their own programs.

The accomplishment of the students above, however, does not represent a total success. US professors' general evaluation of student English proficiency still identifies 30% of the class as below expectation, and they consistently suggest downsizing the class size. In a big class of 40, or even 33 students, shy and/or less proficient students can easily hide in the background and

let the other more talkative ones drive the classroom discourse. An analysis of complexity-fluency-accuracy (CAF) in the talk of this 30% of shy students would definitely have yielded a different result for this study.

For the rest of the students, CAF levels in their speech are dependent on several factors such as their familiarity with the topic and preparedness. Activities prone to regurgitated speech resulted in a higher number of t-units while spontaneous interaction with little or no time for preparation often co-occurred with less complex talk. Student fluency was measured using some conventional criteria such as rate of speech, pause, self-repair, fillers, and repetition. The findings suggest that speech dysfluency is rooted in different causes among which self-repairing and repetition were the two most common. For example, Thu's fluency was interfered with by her self-repair as soon as she spotted a mistake in her speech. Meanwhile Hien's speech was disrupted with pauses and repetitions as a way to give herself more time to recall a certain word or put together a complete sentence. Overall, the inability to mobilize vocabulary and the tendency to correct themselves when an error is noticed were the two main culprits that undermined their fluency. Accuracy was an interesting factor since student speech can be error-free for an entire episode if they are only attempting to use short utterances. The trade-off hypothesis (Skehan, 2009) explains this phenomenon, confirming that better accuracy takes place at the expense of lower complexity. Another finding in the accuracy aspect is that there were fewer errors in teacher-student interaction than in peer interaction since each student is engaged in a shorter conversation with their teacher than with their peers. Typically, the teacher will cut the interaction short (e.g., after a couple turns) so that he can move to the next student. The more speech produced, the more likely it will contain an error except for the kind of regurgitated speech mentioned earlier.

The operation of CAF in group work and the amount of talk was also found to be influenced by affective factors. Dan and Thu in Teacher1's class produced the most speech in the focal group but their talking dropped when they were split and grouped with other students. Students who are not close to each other outside of the class tend to use L1 more if they sit in the same group. However, in general, the intimate learning environment in both classes was very striking. The students spent so much time together that they held very little formality in their interaction. Jokes, small talk, friendly sarcasm, or even blunt disagreement were seen in many episodes without causing a communication bump. This environment is beneficial for both students and teacher because the less intimidation students experience, the more they will be open to communication.

In addition to CAF, I also examined the use of L1 in student group work. Although it was made clear at the beginning that teachers and students keep close to the English-only policy as enforced by MOET, it was quite predictable that L1 would occur, and most likely in student group work. Even in the focal groups, in some activities the students would use L1 regardless of the topic or the 10,000VND fine as proposed by Teacher 1. In this case, it is not convincing to say they use L1 because they are not being monitored: my camera was pointing at them, they were wearing a voice recorder, and the teacher was circulating around the room. It seems that there exists some "rebellious" moments when students simply refuse to do what they are told to so that they can be in their comfort zone. The focal group that once conducted 90% of their conversation in L1 was led by Mai<sup>29</sup>, one of the students that has the best pronunciation in the class. If she starts off using Vietnamese, it is very likely that her team will just follow her,

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<sup>29</sup> At other times Mai was an excellent leader as she is very good at keeping the group on track. She has a tone of voice that conveys power and authority which made her stand out even if the teacher appointed someone else to be the team leader.

ignoring the English-only rule. Another reason to explain the incessant use of L1 in this group might be the eager to participate as the task was interesting and stimulating. The “The Survivor” task seems to have invoked more ideas than the students could express in English and to share these ideas with the group they had to overpass the rule. Overuse of L1 in group work can be prevented with the teacher circulating more between groups and firmly prompting students to use L2. If necessary, the teacher could stay with the group for a couple minutes to make sure that the discussion will be conducted in English.

Student performance in group discussion also shed light on how intensive English programs like the AC can help EFL learners in Vietnam break away from a long history of being stereotyped in L2 research. They have always been characterized as reserved, passive, and prone to rote learning since our educational system and cultural values were built for mechanical memorizing rather than inquiry. These characterizations have had such a fixated place in L2 teaching literature that they forge a strong stereotype that even the learners assume to be correct and do not bother challenging. As I spent time with the 73 students at NHU, I could easily claim that not all of them will fit in the above stereotype. Specifically, one third of them totally do not deserve that characterization. The findings in Chapter 4 reaffirm that the students are getting accustomed to the new context of learning. The frequency of group work they have in class, the awareness of taking classes with US professors, and the dream of immersing and competing in a wider world as a global student provide them with the incentive to break away from said stereotype. In other words, they are under a circumstance where speaking English has been “normalized” to a large extent. Having to speak English in class may still be a challenge, a fear, an awkward moment for some, but students now expect it. To implant this mentality in the mind

of the learners is already a success of the AC program considering Vietnamese learners' well-known resistance to speak.

### **7.3 Recap of Chapter 5: The tasks**

Classroom tasks provide different opportunities to engage learners cognitively and linguistically. In this study, 10 tasks were selected to examine their possible correlation with student language production and the kinds of interactional pattern they entail. Three speech patterns emerged during student group work and certain task types were identified as conducive to language production. For example, tasks that involve a debate on a familiar topic such as the “The Survivor” activity in Teacher 1’s speaking class have the potential to generate more natural speech. Meanwhile, tasks that are driven by written text (e.g., retelling a story, rearranging sentences in a paragraph) often constitute regurgitated and/or self-directed speech. Regurgitated speech happens when a big portion of the talking basically recites the text being used. CAF in student talk therefore enjoys an unusual all-around improvement. This is an interesting phenomenon to further investigate since it is like a hybrid of rote learning and collaborative performance. Also, regurgitated practice may provide students stock phrases that ultimately will aid their fluency. Another characteristic in student discourse is the presence of self-directed speech, which eventually changes the nature of the task from being dialogic to being monologic when interaction subsides and even slips into silence. The nature of the task also changes since it is no longer a collaborative task, but is performed individually.

Tasks with unfamiliar topics could also end with diminished participation where students gradually withdraw into their individual working mode so they can figure out what to do with the task. Since students do not have the vocabulary, or sometimes the basic knowledge to tackle the topic, they refrain from participating. However, as revealed in the data, the fading of interaction

that comes with unfamiliar topics does not mean these tasks hindered learning. Silence, no matter what causes it, functions in multiple ways. Schultz (2009, p.25) posits that student silence should be understood as a “product of a larger sociocultural patterns.” She suggests five interpretations of silence: as a form of resistance, a means to assert power, a response to anxiety, and a space to build student imagination or to solidify knowledge. This perfectly explains why silence should be more accepted especially when handling a challenging task or encountering an unfamiliar topic. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, students had to occasionally withdraw from conversation with their peers in order to think, either quietly (Thu) or verbally in the form of private speech (Dan). It was difficult for them to fully engage because they probably felt the urge to educate themselves first, then participating in the conversation only when they are ready. Unfamiliar topics can interfere with the production of speech, but they are a crucial part of learning since students cannot and should not work with old topics all the time. Introducing new topics to students expands their horizons, which will be beneficial for them later on when they participate in the globalized academic world. The only downfall with an unfamiliar topic is that it takes time for students to familiarize themselves with the topic before they can talk about it. The teacher can help with this familiarization by building in more pre-task time for students to explore the topic, anticipating the vocabulary needed to do the task or the knowledge/experience to prepare the students accordingly.

While it was exciting to see the different types of tasks being used in class, I somehow feel grateful that the teachers did not entirely abandon the traditional form-focused tasks that they themselves are still teaching in other classes. The stand-alone, rule-bound grammar drills have now been converted into metalinguistic tasks where students take advantage of their grammar metalanguage to collaborate on form-focused tasks. If dealing with grammar drills was

teachers' strong point, it should still have some space to grow and not get buried under the sweeping CLT wave or any other reform. While definitive evidence is pending, I still support the hypothesis that this grammar knowledge and consciousness will somehow permeate students' speaking and writing over time.

The break-away from textbook-oriented activities means the teacher has to put in more preparation time for their classes, searching for relevant materials, and designing tasks that meet the lesson's objectives. The common practice shared by the two teachers is the use of supplementary materials. Teacher 1 thinks the textbook activities could be more interesting, and he brought in more interesting materials. Teacher 2 thinks tasks in the textbook are not challenging enough, so he brought in more advanced tasks for students to work on. As the tasks are diversified, more interactional patterns emerge and classroom interaction becomes more animated, buoyant, and intricate. The more task types the students are exposed to, the more opportunities they have to explore their learner self, understand their preferences, and bestir their hidden capabilities that have never been tapped before.

#### **7.4 Recap of Chapter 6: The teachers and pedagogical suggestions**

If I may be biased once in this report and say something personal, I would express my pride in witnessing NHU English teachers' accomplishments and professional endeavors. To put things in proper perspective, what they and their students are doing in class is a gigantic leap compared to the model I knew 13 years ago when I started my first teaching job in Vietnam. We would teach about four to five classes of 60 students or more. We used L1 to explain grammar points, one after another, followed with grammar drills or tests. The only time teacher talk dropped was when the students did their grammar exercises in class, quietly and individually. The group work luxury was nothing more than lip service paid at biannual teacher meetings and

conferences. Now the group work idea is backed with deeds, as convincingly shown in the data (Chapter 4), and teacher talk patterns have gone beyond the teacher-centered model. The following suggestions, therefore, are not necessarily meant to call for improvement of something that has not been done well, but an elaboration on previously recognized improvements. These suggestions include assigning groups more purposefully, complicating/diversifying reading texts and activities, increasing formal writing assignments, and introducing a basic pronunciation component in the English curriculum.

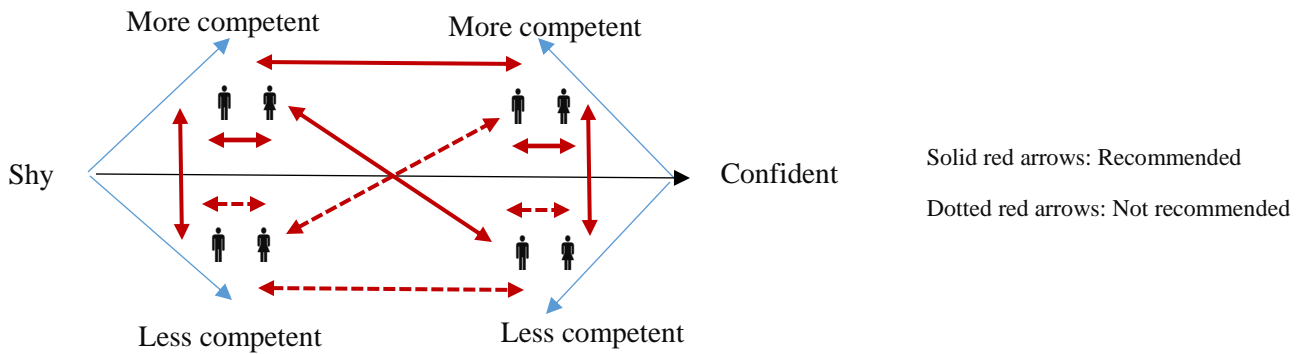
#### ***7.4.1 More purposeful assignment of groups:***

Teacher 1's speaking class was the most productive in terms of verbal language production thanks to the various group work activities that he carefully prepared. Yet the grouping of students was handled quite arbitrarily, partly due to the physical setting of the classroom and partly because of the class size. Students tended to work with whoever was sitting next to them, and oftentimes they worked with the same partner again and again over the semester. While this familiarity can lead to relaxed practice, it can also work against optimal learning. And even when students changed their seats and worked with someone new, sometimes they were placed in groups with peers that hindered them from optimal engagement and performance. For example, a very shy student was assigned to a group with two noisy partners, and her role was totally overshadowed. A group of very close friends in real life could steal a few minutes to catch themselves up with their personal updates before working on the task. All these were captured in the video-recorded data, suggesting that purposefully assigning students to groups can enhance their participation and responsibility for the task. Shy yet proficient students are often identifiable after a few weekly tests. They should be assigned with an active role so that their groupmates are slightly dependent on them for their expertise. On the

contrary, more talkative students should be on the same team; as they compete to talk, they are more likely to reach a solution for the problem they are working on.

Needless to say, accommodating a large, heterogeneous class with groupings is not likely to work with a fixed formula, but once the teacher has known the students well enough and set up clear goals for the task he or she is bringing to the class, it might be useful to plan student grouping ahead of time. The following figure suggests the different ways to group students based on their proficiency and confidence.

*Figure 7.1 Recommended student grouping model*



This grouping assignment model is devised based on my observation of the students' interactional tendency in group work. It is also in line with the ZPD's tenet that learners benefit more working with a more competent partner. However, each class is different in terms of goals and activities so rotating groups frequently would allow students to engage themselves in different group dynamics. It is not reasonable, for example, to ask a strong student to be always teaching a weaker one. Also, the model above is strongly recommended for activities that involve debating and collaborating and may not be necessary for the kind of group work that is less collaborative or interactive in nature. For example, there is no need to put students in group work if the task involves reading a longer text since once they spend time reading quietly they

are very likely to end up finishing the task themselves rather than collaboratively. In this case, the actual group work may be assigned as a post-task activity when students can check and discuss each other's answers.

#### ***7.4.2 Upgrading reading texts and reading activities***

This suggestion may not look feasible for administrators who tend to believe that the current English program is already too much for the students. Yet the truth is historically our students have demonstrated that reading is their best strength among the four skills. This strength needs to be fostered and reinforced through a wide range of challenging reading texts so that it will keep empowering their English abilities.

As presented in Chapters 5 and 6, the texts used for both reading classes, whether discussed in groups or led by the teacher, were not challenging enough and the accompanying activities are not oriented to stimulating critical thinking, but simply assessing basic comprehension. Students should be encouraged to interact with the text in a more responsive way, beyond what is presented to them. Grabe and Stoller (2013) outline the different cognitive activities that take place in a fluent reader, including not only the general comprehension of the text but also how the reader interacts with the text (p.12). This interaction requires the activation of both readers' linguistic and prior knowledge base. The ability to think-outside-the-text distinguishes a more proficient reader from a novice reader. If the latter is more skill-oriented and only looks at textual clues to get the task done, the former makes inferences and asks questions. Since the teaching of reading in many English curricula in Vietnam are already very skill-oriented, an approach straight from the high-school level, it is time for college English teachers to help students build more complex reading abilities and strategies.

More specifically, a reading text should be approached with a wider range of tasks that allow students to explore the topic with a critical eye. For example, the basic semantic and lexical comprehension of the text can be left for students to do at home so that in class the teacher and students can delve deeper into the text and its intention, then relate it to a wider context. With a technology-enhanced classroom such as the ones in the AC program, reading activities can be planned with endless possibilities. Some of these may include 1) annotating a text together on a shared platform such as One Cloud or Google drive; 2) using the internet to find out more about the historical or social context related to the topic, or to even check the text's credibility; 3) challenging, questioning the author; or 4) connecting the text to a writing activity such as a reader response or critique, writing memo, or summary. Even if the teacher prefers a traditional class without too much technology, most of the suggested activities above can be done face-to-face in small groups of three-to-four students.

### ***7.4.3 Increasing formal writing practices***

As indicated in previous chapters, one disconcerting issue emerging from the data is the insufficient amount of practice in writing classes. While it is very noteworthy that writing classes now have employed more collaborative work as a pre-writing step, this was not followed up or transferred into a final writing product such as an essay. Instead, many writing activities stalled at the sentence level while at this proficiency level, students should be working on writing complete paragraphs or full essays.

In both classes, the two teachers successfully employed a variety of pre-writing activities that acquaint students with the topic, exchange ideas, and understand the mechanics of writing. Paradoxically, what the students learned from participating in these activities was not applied in their actual writing, simply because they were not asked to write in class very much. In-class

writing would have allowed them to forge connections between class materials and discussion, and most importantly enhance their timed writing skills. Insufficient practice comes with a cost of lost opportunities to receive feedback. Since the writing homework was still more concerned with constructing and transforming sentences, the kind of feedback that students were most likely to receive was a tick for a correct sentence. Not receiving feedback means slowing down development, as feedback is more closely tied to achievement than any other teaching behavior in the learning cycle. Research has provided ample evidence about how teacher and peer feedback can improve one's writing (Storch (2013) on collaborative writing; Lee (2014), Hyland (1998) on the role of teacher feedback; Woo et al, (2013), Yu & Lee (2015) on peer feedback). These researchers, no matter what theoretical framework they are led by, accentuate that teacher feedback is very impactful not only in improving student subsequent performance in writing but also on their language development. For these reasons, longer writing should be assigned on a weekly basis or more frequently so that all the pieces of the curriculum (e.g., from grammar drills at the sentence level, reading, and group discussion) can be put together in a standard and structured essay.

#### ***7.4.4 Experimenting with pronunciation teaching***

The teaching of pronunciation at NHU has often been held back with three excuses. First, we non-native EFL teachers often assume that we are not qualified to teach that aspect of the target language because we ourselves cannot pronounce, or speak, like a native speaker. It is too difficult to acquire and to teach so we do not feel the motivation or practicality to deal with it. Second, we take pronunciation lightly because NHU is a non-English major school—it specializes in forestry and natural resources and the English subject has often been seen as something students just want to “get over with” as a requirement. Third, before the arrival of the

study-abroad fever, most students seemed content with just getting a degree and finding a job without dreaming about performing on an international stage. The English Department's role was not always fully or appropriately recognized as professional development opportunities would go to the other departments that taught the content subjects such as forestry or environmental science. Only when international relations expanded and different programs/projects were developed with foreign universities did NHU start to make full use of the English Department's expertise, and we earned some recognition.

The aforementioned excuses have generally been accepted and thus kept pronunciation teaching in a pending status for a long time. However, with the CLT turn in L2 teaching comes the expectation of better verbal skills where good pronunciation is an integral part. The needs for better pronunciation from EFL/ESL learners have been well identified so we cannot hold onto the excuses above and sweep this issue under the rug any more. Neither should we delay it with the unrealistic hope that a native-English-speaking teacher will finally be hired and do the job for us. In retrospect, I remember receiving pronunciation lessons with my Vietnamese EFL teachers at the College of Foreign Languages, Hanoi. We used a textbook called "Ship or Sheep" that taught about the differences between English sounds in minimal pairs. Not everybody ended up obtaining a nativelike accent, but we all became aware of our own pronunciation problems and responded to them and improved them with time. Needless to say this was a prestigious language-focused school in a national university, and even there they did not need a staff of native English speakers to handle pronunciation classes. As such, it is both feasible and necessary for an intensive English program to find an avenue to officially bring pronunciation instruction into the curriculum. It can start with the teaching of phonemes, vowel sounds, word stress, and then sentence stress (suprasegmentals or prosody). Pronunciation textbooks and CDs

are available so we should not count on the random presentation of the English sounds in current English textbooks since these have been proven to be superficial and ineffective.

In sum, these suggestions are context-specific and should be read and adapted with much flexibility. Putting aside the inevitable use of L1 in some groups and the communication gaps in certain task designs, this report can conclude that the ELT landscape at NHU has changed for the better thanks to the Advanced Curriculum project. This model should be more widely piloted in other degree programs such as forestry and silviculture if the budget allows. The table below is a recapitulation of the AC’s English course accomplishments and pedagogical recommendations I make based on my three-month engagement with the participants.

***Table 7.1 Accomplishments and pedagogical recommendations***

<b>Course accomplishments</b>	L2 was recognized as both the goal and the vehicle to achieve the goal; students demonstrated tremendous effort to use L2.
	Collaborative L2 tasks engaged students and enhanced verbal participation.
	Varied scaffolding techniques were employed during teacher-fronted time.
	L2 production was satisfactory in both quantity and quality for the students’ current English level (CAF in student speech was only low in complexity).
	A CLT and multimodal approach was implemented.
<b>Pedagogical recommendations</b>	Purposefully assign groups.
	Upgrade reading texts and reading activities; cut down on recounting texts and explaining new vocabulary.
	Increase in-class and formal writing practices; provide more written feedback.
	Experiment with pronunciation teaching.

### **7.5. A final reflection**

In retrospect, I would not have believed that my three months of observing and recording could be condensed into a 200-page dissertation. The amount of data and the multitude of classroom happenings that I observed were staggering at first as if they would have just thrown me straight into a chaos of choices where I could easily lose track of my original research objectives. Yet with time patterns started to surface, ideas started to form, and goals started to

reset—and I was able to get back on track. My findings provided sound qualitative evidence that the English classes under the AC project were overall making steady progress toward achieving their chief goal of making English the language of instruction and learning as can be seen in the amount of L2 production within group-work, across certain task types, and during teacher-fronted time. In conclusion, the study bears with it the limitations of qualitative research where the in-depth description of events and phenomenon is reaped at the price of restricted generalizability. Besides, my analysis and discussion might have been still more or less imbued with -my personal biases and idiosyncrasies considering my seven-year association with NHU and the excitement to see the new changes that are happening in the place I used to call home. However, these changes are real and should be encouraged—and I hope this research report has successfully conveyed that.

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## **Appendix 1: Teacher Interview Questions**

### **A. Background and preparations:**

- 1) How long have you been teaching English and what type of English courses do you have experience with?
- 2) When and how were you assigned to teach the Advanced Curriculum classes?
- 3) What resources do you consult to make up your lesson plans?
- 4) It is common that AC English teachers are sent to an English-speaking country for some intensive training to better teach the class and transition to the new teaching method, can you please tell me about this training course? (which country did you go to? Which school did you attend? For how long? What did you learn and overall how do you feel about the effectiveness of the course in preparing you to teach the AC class?)
- 5) Does the class size and layout affect your teaching?
- 6) What are some of the challenges and opportunity that you anticipate when teaching the AC classes?

### **B. Class in progress**

- 1) Is there any difference in the students' engagement in textbook activities and your activities?
- 2) What is your opinion on students' use of cell phone in class to look up for new words and/or to use the internet to accomplish a task?
- 3) How did the 10.000VND rule work? (for Teacher 1 only)
- 4) What methods/tips do you use in class to make sure/encourage your students use English most of the time?
- 5) How important is it for you to keep the student using English in class?

### **C. L2 production and comprehension**

- 1) Can you quantify (in percentage) the amount of English used in class by the students during teacher-fronted time?
- 2) Can you quantify (in percentage) the amount of English used in class by the students during pair work and group work?
- 3) What are some of the measurements you have taken to check on student comprehension?

### **D. L1 and Code-switching**

- 1) How often do you speak Vietnamese?
- 2) Since students are allowed to use Vietnamese during break time, and my observation is that you interact with them quite a bit during breaks, would you mind telling me what you often talk about? (mostly academic, a low-key chat, or do they take the opportunity to catch up with what they missed during the lesson?)

- 3) What method/tips do you use in class to make sure your students use English most of the time?
- 4) How important it is for you to keep the student using English in class?
- 5) By your own experience, when do you think it is acceptable/necessary for the Ss to switch to L1?
- 6) What would you do when you found out your Students were using mostly L1 in their group?
- 7) Under what circumstances do you allow yourself to switch to L1?
  - a. When I myself find it hard to say it in English
  - b. I find it pointless to explain the term in English
  - c. The concept is too abstract or the task is too challenging for the students
  - d. When we run out of time
- 8) What are some of the challenges that you have faced when teaching the AC classes?

## Appendix 2: CA transcription conventions

Symbol	Explanation
(.)	Micro pause, less than 1 second
(2.0)	Time paused in seconds, round up
	Very long pause ( $\geq 10$ s) often happens when Ss read instructions or T stops talking to write something on the board
::	Prolonged sound
...	Unfinished sentence with some hesitation, uncertainty about what to say next
--	Unfinished sentence, being interrupted or speaker jumps to a new idea
[	Beginning of overlapping utterance
(( ))	Transcriber's commentary
<b>CAP</b>	Stressed sound or increased volume
*	Guessed word
(.hhh)	Laughing word
<b>S</b>	Unidentified student
<i>italic</i>	Translation of Vietnamese talk

### Appendix 3: Class handout for Task 5.5.

(Setting a dining table in Western style)

See page 58

## 2.2 Setting a Table

1. Put the plate in the center of the placemat.
2. Fold the napkin.
3. Put the napkin to the left of the plate.
4. Place the knife to the right of the plate.
5. Put the teaspoon to the right of the knife.
6. Put the fork on the left-hand side of the plate, on top of the napkin.
7. Set the glass near the tip of the knife.

## Appendix 4: Class Handout for Task 5.10

(Topic Sentences)

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### PRACTICE

#### Practice 1

*Above each paragraph below, there are some possible topic sentences. Choose one from the group to begin each paragraph. Make sure that it contains a controlling idea. Write it in the space at the beginning of each paragraph:*

- (a) Ned Kelly was our most famous bushranger.  
(b) Bushrangers may be classified into three groups.  
(c) It would be difficult for a bushranger to make a living nowadays.

\_\_\_\_\_.

Firstly, there were the "bolters". These were usually convicts who hated the harsh treatment in the convict settlement and ran into the bush to escape it. The next group was "colonials". These come out as free settlers. When they arrived, they decided to take up bush ranging as a profession. They did this because they like the life-style. They thought it was a free, exciting and adventurous way to live. The discovery of gold produced a third group of bushrangers. This group was sometimes made up of unsuccessful gold-diggers. They hoped to get rich by robbing coaches which took the gold down to the city. They robbed other people as well. But very often, they robbed only rich people and they often helped the poor-settlers, so these settlers liked them and tried to help them. As a result, it was difficult for the police to catch them. Ned Kelly and his gang, Ben Hall, Captain Moonlight are famous bushrangers.

- (a) Camping is the cheapest way to have a holiday for these reasons.  
(b) Camping is not as comfortable as staying in a motel.  
(c) There are several reasons why camping is very popular with a lot of people.

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For one thing, it is a fairly cheap holiday. It is much cheaper to hire a caravan or a tent than it is to stay in a hotel. In addition, it is very pleasant to sleep out