The influence of personal, situational and sociocultural factors on Vietnamese EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices

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Recommended Citation

THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL, SITUATIONAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS ON VIETNAMESE EFL NOVICE TEACHERS’ COGNITIONS AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, English has become a compulsory subject in primary, secondary, high school, and tertiary education in Vietnam. Despite its inclusion across multiple tiers of the Vietnamese education system, many Vietnamese learners of English have not acquired adequate language skills to become competent communicators of English (Nunan, 2003; Tien, 2013; Van, 2009). This may be attributed to teachers’ cognitions and practices, as what teachers believe and do in their classrooms ultimately impacts students’ learning (Helen, 2003). An increasing number of studies of teacher cognition in Vietnam have been conducted (Canh, 2011; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013, 2014); however, these studies are targeted at more experienced teachers, giving little attention to novice teachers. There is a need to examine what novice teachers believe and practice in their classrooms because, as recent university graduates, they represent teachers who have received the most contemporary education in how to effectively teach EFL learners.

Guided by Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model and Shulman’s (1986, 1987) teachers’ knowledge categories as theoretical frameworks, this study investigates the relationship between the cognitions and practices of five novice EFL high school teachers in Vietnam and the influence of personal, situational and sociocultural factors on their cognitions and practices. Following a qualitative research approach, this study employed multiple methods of data collection including curriculum texts, interviews with teacher educators and school vice-principals, and classroom observations, as well as biographical and stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers.

The findings reveal that personal, situational, and sociocultural factors have significant influence on the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices. Results indicate that the teachers struggled to find appropriate ways of teaching to meet the expectations of different stakeholders, namely language policy makers, teacher educators, colleagues and students. On one hand, the teachers tried to follow a communicative language teaching approach (CLT) (e.g. using games and the L2) as mandated in the curriculum, textbooks and teacher education. On the other hand, they experienced considerable difficulty in implementing many other important features of CLT into the classroom, due to classroom constraints such as pressures from their students, colleagues and examinations. In response to this dilemma, through their various choices in terms of
game utilisation, activity selection, grammar instruction, and the use of the L1 and L2, the participating teachers tried to find a pedagogical compromise between teaching expectations, and what they perceived to be realistic for their students. Modifying lessons allowed the teachers to include some elements of CLT for their students but also left room for other components of form-focused teaching to help their students prepare for examinations. Nevertheless, due to the more immediate and pressing constraints in their teaching contexts, these compromises and modifications tended to gravitate more towards form-focused rather than communicative practice.

The results of this study offer several significant contributions to the understanding of novice teachers’ cognitions and practices in the context of Vietnam, which could be applied to similar contexts. Methodologically, with the inclusion of teachers’ biographies, this empirical study makes an important contribution to the literature on language teacher cognition research. Drawing on these findings, implications for theory, language policy, teacher education programs, schools and teachers are discussed.
Acknowledgments

This strenuous and interesting journey has been a good opportunity for me to enrich not only my academic knowledge and research skills but also to gain an understanding more about life and myself. The completion of this PhD thesis would not be possible without the support and contributions of many people. With my sincerest gratitude, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their important contributions to my learning development.

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Certification

I, Nguyen Tien Ngo, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Nguyen Tien Ngo

March 2018
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALM</td>
<td>Audio Lingual Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Communicative Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEFR</td>
<td>Common European Framework of Reference for Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOET</td>
<td>Provincial Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Direct Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELT</td>
<td>English Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>GTM</td>
<td>Grammar Translation Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>First Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Second/Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOET</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS</td>
<td>Non-Native Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Novice Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCK</td>
<td>Pedagogical Content Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Presentation – Practice – Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMCK</td>
<td>Subject Matter Content Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBLT</td>
<td>Task-based Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TETE</td>
<td>Teaching English Through English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>Teacher Educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPR</td>
<td>Total Physical Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZPD</td>
<td>Zone of Proximal Development</td>
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Research problem

The Mekong Delta, despite its prominent status as the rice bowl of Vietnam and recent increases in agricultural and aquaculture production (Garschagen, Diez, Nhan, & Kraas, 2012), faces notable challenges. In addition to limited development of new enterprises and Foreign Direct Investment (Garschagen et al., 2012), the region lags behind other parts of the country in socio-economic aspects such as education and the qualifications of the workforce (Garschagen et al., 2012). In order to push the socio-economic growth of the region, on February 12th, 2014, the Vietnamese Prime Minister approved the comprehensive “Plan for the Mekong Delta towards 2020 with the Orientation to 2030” (Decision_245/QD-TTg, 2014). Attracting foreign investment and improving quality of education and training are two of the key measures proposed to achieve the goals of this document. In this context, foreign languages, especially English, are indispensable. However, the Mekong Delta, as with the rest of Vietnam, is struggling with developing a workforce that possesses satisfactory English competence.

For many years, English has been one of the compulsory subjects in the graduation examinations at secondary and high school level. Recently, English has been introduced into the primary education curriculum. At the tertiary level, English is one of the foreign languages that undergraduates and graduates alike are required to study. Despite these improvements made to English language education, several studies indicate that Vietnamese learners of English have not acquired the necessary language skills to be good communicators (Nunan, 2003; Tien, 2013; Van, 2009). There are a number of possible reasons to explain this situation, such as curriculum design, inadequate resources, and quality of teachers and textbooks (Hoang, 2009). Among the many problems that obstruct the expected outcomes of English teaching and learning, the inadequate translation of learning from teacher education programs to classroom practice is worth considering. For example, teacher training programs have been designed with a focus on equipping teachers with communicative teaching methodology; however, the theories and practices learnt during teacher training seem to be rarely found in English classes (Nunan, 2003; Van, 2009). The question is, why?
One promising area in which an answer may be found is through the exploration of teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning. As Shinde and Karekatti (2012) argue, teachers’ beliefs have an influential impact on the outcomes for learners. They posit that “teachers’ beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitude, teaching methods and teaching policies, and finally, their learners’ development” (p. 69). Helen (2003) also states that teachers’ beliefs will direct their selection of teaching approaches, techniques and activities. It seems, then, that the beliefs of teachers who are teaching English in Vietnamese schools are likely to be important factors that influence how they teach and consequently the learning development for their students.

Studies of teachers’ beliefs often come under the broader concept of cognition. Borg (2003, p. 81) defines the concept of teacher cognition as “what teachers think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom”. Language teacher cognition, as defined by Borg, includes teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about language teaching and learning, which are closely intertwined (Baker & Murphy, 2011; Verloop, Van Driel & Meijer, 2001). Therefore, in this study, language teacher cognition refers to both teacher beliefs and knowledge, and they are used interchangeably. In this study, the term “cognition” is used in phrases such as language teacher cognition and teacher cognition as an inclusive term to embrace the complexity of teachers’ mental lives (Borg, 2015). The term “cognitions” is also used but not with an attempt to differentiate from the term “cognition”. It is often used in phrases such as teachers’ cognitions, the cognitions of the teachers, and the novice teachers’ cognitions, to indicate that, as individual teachers, they may have different cognitions about language teaching and learning (Borg, 2003; 2015). The cognitions of teachers play a central role in shaping their classroom events (Borg, 2015; Macalister, 2012). Borg (2003) argues that language teachers’ cognitions in teaching and learning are shaped by various factors including school-based learning, professional coursework, and school and classroom contexts. In addition, teachers’ cognitions and practices may be shaped by not only these factors but also the sociocultural context in relation to language teaching and learning. In the context of Vietnam, to improve the language proficiencies of Vietnamese language learners, there is a need to investigate not only what language teachers think about and how they teach English in the classroom, but the situational and sociocultural factors influencing their cognitions and classroom practices.

The majority of studies of language teachers cognitions have been conducted with pre-service teachers (Burri, 2015; Debreli, 2012; Farrell, 1999; Gan, 2013; Johnson, 1994; Numrich,
1996; Özmen, 2012; Peacock, 2001; Silva, 2005; Sinprajakpol, 2005; Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015) and in-service experienced teachers (e.g. Baker, 2014; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Kun, 2008; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011; Liviero, 2017; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). In contrast to this considerable interest in language teacher cognition research, there is limited research into the cognitions and practices of novice language teachers; that is, those who are in their first five years of teaching (Ingersol & Smith, 2003). As Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, and Watters (2001) point out, the first years of teaching are critical to novice teachers’ professional development, since they influence their future commitment to effective teaching. Many of the initial studies on novice teacher cognition were focused on ESL contexts (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Jessica, 2015; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Urmston & Pennington, 2008; Velez-Rendon, 2006), while there have been only a few documented studies on Non-Native Speaking (NNS) EFL (English as a Foreign Language) novice teachers (Erkmen, 2014; Zhang, 2017).

In the context of Vietnam, there has been very little discussion about the cognitions and practices of novice language teachers. Most studies in language teacher cognition in the Vietnamese context have only been carried out with in-service experienced teachers in relation to the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007) and/or Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Canh, 2011; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013). The limited research on novice language teachers in the EFL context and in the context of Vietnam leaves a gap that the present study seeks to fill. Such research will provide more insights into the limited literature on novice language teachers’ cognitions in EFL contexts. In addition, research into novice language teachers’ cognitions also provides practical suggestions for the teacher education program to better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching realities. Knowledge about teachers’ cognitions and practices can also suggest useful implications to language policy makers in implementing teaching innovations. Specifically, this study informs language curriculum designers and provides a greater understanding of the influence of contextual factors on teachers’ implementation of curricula, which can be helpful for them to consider when implementing a specific curriculum to improve the language competence of Vietnamese learners (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study, then, was to investigate the cognitions and practices in relation to English teaching and learning of five EFL high school novice teachers, and the personal,
situational and sociocultural factors that shaped their cognitions and practices. In particular, the present study aimed to address the following research questions:

Main research question:

*How do the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the novice teachers live and teach influence their cognitions and teaching of English in Vietnamese classrooms?*

Sub-research questions:

1. *What theories and practices in relation to English teaching and learning are used in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam?*

2. *What beliefs and knowledge (cognitions) about teaching and learning English are held by the novice teachers in the study and how are these evident in their teaching?*

3. *How are the theories and practices espoused in their teacher education evident in their classroom teaching?*

To address these research questions, Borg’s (2015) model of language teacher cognition and Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model of teachers’ knowledge categories were drawn on as useful guides. While Borg’s (2015) model was utilised to inform this research about how the novice teachers’ cognitions were established from various contextual factors, Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model was employed to identify the specific types of knowledge possessed by the teachers and to provide the conceptual language to talk about these knowledge categories. A qualitative research design with multiple methods of data collection was employed to facilitate the investigation of the teachers’ contexts, their cognitions, and the relationship between these and their classroom practices. These methods of data collection include curriculum texts, interviews with the teacher educators and school vice-principals, and classroom observations, as well as biographical and stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers in the study.

1.3 **Significance of the study**

This study adds to the overall literature on language teacher cognition, and specifically to the limited research on novice teacher cognition in the EFL context and in particular in the
context of Vietnam. Currently, most language teacher cognition studies focus on pre-service teachers and in-service experienced teachers, while little attention has been given to EFL novice teachers. There appears to be very little research on this particular group of teachers in the teaching context of Vietnam. This study, thus, was conducted as a first attempt to provide detailed description of the cognitions and practices that Vietnamese novice teachers have in relation to language teaching and learning.

Secondly, this empirical research also enables an extension of our understanding of Borg’s (2006) “Language Teacher Cognition” model, through an examination of the specific context in which the participating teachers lived and taught. Drawing on this model as an important guide, the study utilised the notion of teachers’ biographies to look into how the teachers’ school-based learning and professional coursework, and factors inside and outside of the classroom, shaped their cognitions and practices. The teachers’ biographical interviews also allowed me to examine how specific personal, situational and socio-cultural contexts might influence both Vietnamese language policies and the translation of these into teachers’ practice. In this way, this study adds further understanding of Borg’s (2015) model in a specific EFL context of Asia. Insights into how the teachers’ beliefs and practices were influenced by the socio-cultural and situated context suggest that considerable attention needs to be given to the context in which teachers live and teach, in order to understand and support them.

Thirdly, the results of this study provide important knowledge to inform the work of language policy makers in their efforts to improve the English language competence of Vietnamese learners.

In addition, language teacher education programs; as Macalister (2016) posits, can be viewed as “change” programs through re-shaping teachers’ cognitions, which subsequently influence their classroom practice. In this sense, the present study may help to inform the teacher education program by proposing suggestions to improve teaching practice for both pre-service and in-service teachers. This research has implications for the design of a teacher education curriculum to better support pre-service teachers in addressing contextual factors for effective teaching.
1.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two reviews the current literature which has informed this study. This chapter is organised around the following topics: challenges for novice teachers in education in general; challenges for ESL/EFL novice teachers specifically; the relationship between language teachers’ cognitions and their teaching practice; the challenges of teaching CLT/TBLT in Asian contexts; and specifically, studies of language teacher cognition in Asia in relation to the implementation of CTL/TBLT. This chapter ends with the identification of research gaps in Asian and Vietnamese teaching contexts which the study will address.

Chapter Three presents the description of the theoretical models drawn on as important guides for the present study: Borg’s (2015) model of language teacher cognition and Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model of teachers’ knowledge categories. This chapter concludes with a description of the key concepts used in CLT/TBLT which were employed as useful terminologies to feature the teachers’ Subject Matter Content Knowledge (SMCK) and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK).

Chapter Four describes the school context for study and describes the research methodology and procedures which it employed for data collection and analysis. This chapter also discusses the strategies utilised to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter Five begins the discussion of the contextual influences on the participating novice teachers’ cognitions and practices. The focus of this chapter is on the socio-cultural context, as indicated through analysis of the Vietnamese language curriculum and textbook, as well as the methodology teaching syllabuses and the data from the teacher educators’ interviews. This chapter highlights the teaching theories promoted in the Vietnamese teaching context and how these were translated into specific forms of pedagogy in the curriculum and teaching resources.

Chapter Six continues to build a picture of the personal, situational and sociocultural factors impacting the teachers’ cognitions, through an analysis of the teachers’ interviews, which is presented in the form of the teachers’ biographies. This chapter begins with an overview of socioeconomic context of the Mekong Delta where the participating teachers lived and taught and provides specific discussion of the influences on the cognitions of the five novice teachers. It also presents the participants’ family backgrounds, prior learning experiences,
professional coursework, and additional contextual factors both inside and outside of their classrooms.

Chapter Seven presents various contextual factors as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and how they influenced the teachers’ SMCK and PCK. This section is completed by utilising recorded classroom data to illustrate how the teachers’ cognitions were reflected in their teaching as well as in their explanations for what they did. Specifically, this chapter discusses how the teachers made decisions in relation to the activities presented in the textbooks, their employment of L1 and L2, and their grammar instruction. This chapter concludes that contextual factors, especially the teachers’ assumed knowledge of learners, had an important impact on their cognitions and practices.

Chapter Eight concludes the study by summarising the key findings of the study and pointing to the implications of these findings for extending theory, and for improving language policy, teacher education programs and teacher professional development. The contributions of the study, as well as suggestions for future research in the field of language teacher cognition, complete this chapter.
Chapter 2
Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This study investigated EFL Vietnamese novice teachers’ cognitions about language teaching and learning, and the relationship between their cognitions and classroom practices. The following literature review of studies on teachers’ cognitions and practices provides an overview of what is already known about teachers’ beliefs and how these are formed. This comprehensive understanding helps to identify the gaps in the research literature that the present study will fill. As a starting point, Section 2.2 reports on research that investigates the challenges that novice teachers face in the first years of teaching more generally, and then specifically in relation to novice teachers in the fields of second and foreign language teaching. Section 2.3 reviews studies that investigate factors that impact teachers’ cognitions (beliefs and knowledge) about language teaching and learning. The literature in Section 2.3 includes studies conducted with pre-service teachers, and then narrows the focus to the smaller body of literature on in-service and novice teachers. Section 2.4 discusses the challenges of teaching Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching (CLT/TBLT) in Asian contexts. This section also focuses on research conducted on language teacher cognition in Asia in relation to the implementation of CLT/TBLT. Finally, Section 2.5 identifies the research gap in Asian and Vietnamese settings that this study will address.

2.2 Novice teachers and their challenges

The term “novice teacher” is commonly used to refer to teachers who have completed their initial teacher education and recently commenced teaching in an educational institution (Farrell, 2009). Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, and Watters (2001) argue that these first years of experience with school and classroom practice are very important for novice teachers’ professional development because they influence their future commitment to effective teaching. During this important stage, novice teachers “test their beliefs and ideas, expand their teaching strategies, acquire practical knowledge, and formulate their professional identity” (Kang & Cheng, 2014, p. 170). However, their experiences are often challenging as they navigate their new role as professionals (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). Novice teachers often encounter a ‘reality shock’ in the first year of teaching when they realise that the
principles they learnt in teacher education programs may not be conducive to real classroom contexts (Farrell, 2006). In addition, they have to work under pressure to fulfill the ongoing and ever-changing requirements of their classes and schools (Ginns et al., 2001). Attrition rates of educators are alarmingly high worldwide, especially amongst novice teachers within their first five years of teaching (Hong, 2010). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) reports that, in the United States, 14% of new teachers leave by the end of their first year, 33% leave within three years, and 50% leave within five years. The primary factors explaining teachers’ attrition were insufficient support and poor working conditions. According to this report, novice teachers were more often assigned to teach low performing students in relation to their peers, thus placing the novice teachers in a position where they have more responsibilities and challenges in working with learners who may require more support. However, most of the beginning teachers were not provided with any professional support, feedback, or demonstration on how to help these challenging students to succeed (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Hong, 2010).

A review of studies of novice teachers, conducted by across the United States, Europe, Australia, and Canada (Veenman, 1984), identified a number of problems faced by novice teachers, which included classroom discipline, student motivation, dealing with individual students' differences, grading students' work, relationships with parents, organization of classwork, and insufficient teaching materials and supplies (p. 143). Decades later, Fantilli and McDougall (2009) identified similar challenges for novice teachers teaching at primary and junior levels in Canada, as well as multiple responsibilities in an unfamiliar school culture, meeting the differing needs of students with minimal in-school support, feelings of failure, anxiety and stress, and the lack of a qualified mentor. A recent study (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014) compared the effects of collegial support on the ability of Norwegian school novice and experienced teachers to cope with their work. This study found that the novice teachers, despite receiving equal support from school leaders, had difficulty articulating their needs and communicating with their colleagues. In contrast, the experienced teachers, having specialized knowledge and being familiar with the conditions of the workplace, found it easier to communicate at staff meetings and made better use of support than the novice teachers. The authors questioned whether the problem might be a result of inadequate teacher education, and suggested that the key stakeholders - teacher educators, novice teachers and schools - should work collaboratively to bridge the transitional gap between teacher education and the workplace.
High teacher attrition rate amongst novice language teachers in ESL contexts is also widely acknowledged and considered a major concern in the professional community (Farrell, 2012; Swanson, 2012; Valeo & Faez, 2014). However, literature focusing specifically on EFL contexts is more limited (Carmel & Badash, 2018). In the EFL context, the focus seems to be more on teacher burnout (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2016; Javadi & Khatib, 2014; Kalantari & Kolahi, 2017). The high risk of teacher attrition in ESL contexts has been explained in terms of poor working conditions, job security, lack of subject matter content knowledge, and underdeveloped classroom management skills. These factors are not surprising given that numerous ESL teachers are more likely to be employed in casual or part-time positions (see Valeo & Faez, 2014). In the EFL context, teacher burnout is defined as a result of a teachers’ daily interactions and negotiations with students, parents, administrators, and other teachers (Wood & McCarthy, 2002), and regarded as an one of the important factors having a negative impact on language teachers’ practice (Javadi & Khatib, 2014).

As the above literature demonstrates, the first years of teaching play a crucial role in a teacher’s capacity to survive and be successful. In the field of second and foreign language teaching, studies that investigated the experiences of teachers in their initial years of teaching have been “much less documented in the literature” than those of general education disciplines (Richards & Pennington, 1998, p. 173). To some extent, novice teachers of English language education in general share the same challenges as those of general education disciplines. These are lack of mentor support (Farrell, 2003), dealing with the transitional gap between pre-service teacher preparation and in-service teacher development (Farrell, 2012), unpreparedness to meet various needs of low-literacy students and students with learning disabilities (Baecher, 2012), classroom management (Farrell, 2012; Shin, 2012), students’ behavioural problems (Farrell, 2003; Mann & Tang, 2012), and dealing with parents (Mann & Tang, 2012). In addition to these difficulties, the literature points to other problems faced by novice teachers of English as a second or foreign language, such as the reality shock of over-demanding workloads (Farrell, 2003) and dealing with students’ low English proficiency (Farrell, 2003; Shin, 2012). The literature presents the common issue that novice teachers of second and foreign language teaching, as well as those in other disciplines, are not well prepared for their beginning years of teaching.

Farrell’s (2003, 2006) two consecutive studies of a secondary school English teacher in Singapore provide some insights into the experiences and challenges facing a Singaporean
ESL teacher in the first years of his teaching. In his first study (2003), Farrell used field notes, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and the novice teacher’s journal entries, to demonstrate how the novice teacher was shocked by a reality that he had not experienced before. For example, his teaching load increased drastically in comparison with his practicum, from 16 to 35 periods/week. The teacher was assigned many tasks outside of his teaching, such as counselling students and organizing extracurricular activities. He was expected to write and mark papers for levels that he was not trained for, and deal with low English proficiency students and students with discipline problems. In addition, the novice teacher received little support to deal with such dilemmas. Although the teacher was assured that mentoring would be provided in the first year, he met his mentor once at the onset of his work but no other communication took place afterwards. The novice teacher was also isolated in a different room from the common office with other staff, which limited opportunities for sharing ideas with other colleagues. The teacher was not granted permission to observe colleagues’ classes. The only support received was from the principal, who appeared receptive to the teacher’s new ideas and offered positive support.

In the second study, Farrell (2006) utilised the same methods for data collection to examine the transition of the novice teacher from the teacher education into classroom reality and how the teacher overcame the challenges. Farrell points to three conflicts experienced by the novice teacher. The first was the disconnect between the method that the teacher wanted to teach and what he was expected to teach. The learner-centered approach, which was taught at university and which the novice teacher wanted to employ, was opposite to the traditional expectations of the school, where a teacher-centered approach dominated. The second conflict was between content that the teacher identified as best meeting students’ needs and the content based on the established syllabus and materials designed to prepare students for the tests and examinations as required by the department. The third difficulty was in the formation of professional relationships with colleagues and administrators who always seemed busy and formed their groups according to their years of experience. Mismatches between the novice teacher’s teaching intentions and his school, as well as the lack of collegial support, led to a difficult first year of teaching.

As Farrell (2006) concluded from these studies, in terms of the inevitable challenges that novice teachers encounter when leaving their pre-service teacher education for real classroom practice, there is a lack of adequate and successful preparation from teacher education programs to assist teachers with this transition. The need for support was also highlighted by
the novice teacher in the study: “New teachers need a lot of affirmation and support to pull through the first year. Obtaining feedback without worrying about any negative implications would also go a long way in helping teachers to grow” (Farrell, 2006, p. 219). As suggested by Maynard and Furlong (cited in Farrell, 2008, p. 3), when faced with context complexity, novice teachers will gradually establish their teaching routines, but at the same time, tend to resist new teaching approaches in order not to “upset these newly developed and perceived successful routines”. This raises an important issue, since novice teachers’ adopted teaching practices in a new environment may persist even when they become experienced teachers, and subsequently have an impact on students’ learning.

As indicated above, positive support in the challenging first years is essential to novice teachers (Villani, 2002), as it helps them to manage their assigned workload, meet the requirements of their administrative tasks (Pogodzinski, 2013), and develop their teaching skills and overcome weaknesses that might lead them to leave the job (DeAngelis, Wall, & Chen, 2013). In a study conducted by Brannan and Bleistein (2012), the researchers demonstrate how social support made a significant contribution to the work performance of novice teachers. Their study involved surveying 47 novice teachers in hybrid Master of Teaching English as a Second Language (MA TESOL) programs, most of whom were originally from the United States (91%) and the rest from overseas. They identified three categories of social support that were important to the novice teachers: support from mentors, co-workers and family. Regarding mentor support, the novice teachers reported that they received significant support from their mentors in the form of teaching ideas, lesson plans, classroom management tips and resources. They also felt valued as they were heard and encouraged by their mentors who were ready to listen to them and offer advice or share experiences. The majority of the novice teachers also reported that collegial relationships provided them with opportunities to share ideas about teaching, classroom management, school policies, peer observation and resources. From their families, the majority of novice teachers received support such as childcare, purchasing supplies or organizing and stapling papers. In particular, the novice teachers’ stories and experiences were listened to and shared with their family members.

In this sense, the teacher education programs and the schools where teachers are placed play a pivotal role in providing teachers with sufficient support to help them survive in the new teaching environment (Farrell, 2006). As Freeman and Johnson (1998) suggest, understanding how novice teachers undergo this transition is an important component in
establishing an effective knowledge-base for English language teacher education. They emphasize that, in order to provide effective language teaching, teacher educators must have an understanding of schools and schooling, and the sociocultural environments in which the learning how to teach takes place. Despite this, aside from Farrell’s two detailed studies of one teacher, there is limited empirical research exploring how novice ESL/EFL teachers manage their first years of teaching. Most studies in language novice teachers’ transition process have been primarily carried out in ESL contexts or EFL contexts outside of Asia (Akcan, 2016; Albaba, 2017; Farrell, 2006, 2012, 2016; Senom, Zakaria, & Shah, 2013; Veenman, 1984) and there has been little attention to EFL Asian contexts (Kumazawa, 2013; Shin, 2012). In the Vietnamese context, apart from one study on how pre-service EFL teachers experienced their practicum by Hudson, Nguyen and Hudson (2008), no other relevant research was found in my search that investigated how Vietnamese EFL novice teachers experience their first years of teaching after graduation. This supports the need for a study in an EFL context such as Vietnam, such as that described in this thesis, to provide further insights into understanding novice language teachers’ transition process.

The literature above has shown that novice teachers find their first years of teaching challenging and that positive support at this stage is essential. Nevertheless, the research to date has tended to focus on exploring the challenges and mentoring of language novice teachers in ESL environments (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Mann & Tang, 2012), EFL contexts outside of Asia (Karatas & Karaman, 2013), or on general pedagogy in Asia (Salleh & Tan, 2013; See, 2014; Tadashi, 2012; Vikaraman, Mansor, & Hamzah, 2017), while very limited attention has been paid to EFL contexts of Asia. Among the limited studies on the EFL Asian contexts, a recent study conducted by Nguyen and Baldauf (2015) explored the experiences of peer mentoring among novice teachers working at a university in Vietnam, through interviews and reflective journals. Findings of the study reveal the positive impact of a peer-mentoring model as a form of professional support that enabled teachers to engage in a critical and reflective review of their own practice. Although this study provides more insight into the limited literature of EFL novice teachers’ transition process and proposes an effective model of peer-mentoring for the university context, further research is required on other teaching contexts, for example, at upper secondary schools. In addition, a review of literature suggests that the novice teachers abandoned the teaching methods learnt in their teacher education programs and tended to switch to traditional methods at their schools. This situation relates to the question raised by Flowerdew (1999): “How can we ensure that the
ideals and practices we encourage our students to develop in the supervised practicum are carried over into their careers as teachers?” (p. 141). Research exploring how novice teachers utilise and practice the knowledge and teaching principles provided during their pre-service teacher training in their teaching appears to be limited, especially in the EFL context.

2.3 Language teachers’ cognitions and relations to practice

According to Bourn (2015), teachers constitute a fundamental part of effective teaching and learning, and are seen as key players of change within the classroom, within the wider school, and within society as a whole. In this sense, what characterizes teachers, for example their values, beliefs and cognitions, are also important to the successful implementation of any innovations in teaching and learning. As indicated above in Farrell’s studies, besides the challenges that novice teachers face, their cognitions (belief and knowledge) about language teaching and learning are likely to have a significant impact on their classroom practices. Teacher cognition as defined by Borg (2003) refers to the “unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching” in relation to “what teachers know, believe, and think” (p. 81). What teachers believe about teaching imposes a significant effect on their pedagogical decisions, instructional practices, and professional development (Zhang & Liu, 2014).

Despite the pivotal role of teacher cognition, research on language teacher cognition did not gain wide recognition until teaching methods were further developed in the 1980s (Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015). Burns et al. (2015) attribute the limited research prior to this era to the preference for Direct and Audiolingual Methods (Brown, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000) in 1970s, which required the use of the target language in a highly structured drilling and automatic manner. According to Burns et al. (2015), this substantial emphasis on controlled practice in these teaching methods demanded little cognitive work on the part of teachers. In contrast, they suggest that the ‘innovative methods’ (e.g. Communicative Language Teaching, Community Language Learning, Natural Approach, the Silent Way, and Suggestopedia) have embedded themselves within a way of thinking (Burns et al., 2015). Therefore, it can be said that using these methods has required teachers’ substantial thinking about their selections of teaching practice (Freeman, 2016). Innovative methods have enabled novice language teachers, as well as pre-service and in-service experienced teachers, to think about and be reflective on how they teach in the classroom. Research into the field of language teacher cognition, especially in relation to the increasing popularity of CLT/TBLT (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Littlewood, 2007, 2014), is important if we are to gain further
understanding about teachers’ beliefs in relation to their decisions about their pedagogical practices, which in turn have an impact on their learners’ learning.

In his (2015) book, “Teacher Cognition and Language Education: Research and Practice”, Borg identifies a number of studies of teacher cognition that have been conducted in contexts in which English is taught as a first language, second language and foreign language. Borg claims that research on language teacher cognition has gained wider interest with studies in this area carried out across many countries: the USA, the UK, Hong Kong, Canada, Singapore, Germany, Turkey, Malta, Hungary, Australia, New Zealand, Colombia, Oman, Brazil, Greece, the Netherlands, Puerto Rico, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Since Borg’s review, interest in this area has continued to expand (Baker, 2014; Burri, Baker, & Chen, 2017; Burri, Chen, & Baker, 2017; Deng & Lin, 2016; Dongho, 2017; Erkmen, 2014; Fajardo, 2013; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Golombek, 2015; Moodie & Feryok, 2015). As Borg (2003) argues, teachers’ cognitions about language teaching and learning are influenced by various factors including: their previous learning experiences; professional coursework; and school and classroom contexts. The following section is organised around studies of ESL/EFL teachers that point to the ways these factors influence their cognitions.

2.3.1 Pre-service teachers’ cognitions

The largest body of literature examining the impact of teacher education on teachers’ cognitions has been conducted with pre-service teachers. This literature provides useful insights into novice teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about language teaching and learning, as cognitions formed during teacher education are likely to influence their future practice as novice teachers.

A number of studies have shown how prior learning experiences have had an effect on pre-service teachers’ beliefs and practices in the classroom. Johnson (1994), for example, on the basis of written reflections collected during the teaching practicum, concluded that the pre-service teachers’ schooling experiences as second language learners had an impact on their choices of theories, methods and materials. In addition, their school-based learning experiences appeared to influence “the extent to which they accepted or rejected the content of their teacher preparation courses” (Johnson, 1994, pp. 445-446).

Several studies (Debreli, 2012; Farrell, 1999; Numrich, 1996; Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015) have demonstrated specifically how negative experiences led pre-service teachers to reject more
traditional approaches in favour of more communicative activities such as games, singing and pair-work activities (Debreli, 2012). For the teachers in Numrich’s (1996) study, negative experiences of humiliation and discomfort at being corrected as L2 learners led to their choice to teach more communicatively and not to interrupt their students’ flow of expression nor correct their errors.

On the other hand, other studies (Farrell, 1999; Kunt & Özdemir, 2010; Numrich, 1996; Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015) have pointed to the persistence of beliefs in a traditional approach - formed from previous experiences as second language learners. For example, in a longitudinal study, Peacock (2001) examined the beliefs of trainee teachers in Hong Kong and found that their beliefs about language learning changed very little after three years of studying TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) methodology. A majority of trainees still believed that learning vocabulary and grammar rules should be the focus in learning a second language. Peacock explains the lack of impact of teacher education on the trainees’ beliefs in terms of their own second language learning experiences. This conclusion is supported by Chappell, Bodis and Jackson (2015) who suggest that, despite the efforts of teacher education and training to shape teacher behaviour, this is not a simple task, as “teachers have their individual ideas, beliefs, knowledge and preferences, all of which have a significant influence on their professional actions” (p. 7).

By contrast, studies by Özmen (2012) and Burri (2015) demonstrate the impact of teacher education programs on the changes in pre-service language teachers’ cognitions. Özmen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study on the changes in beliefs of 49 pre-service Turkish teachers during a four-year training program which was based on a constructivist approach to teaching. His interviews demonstrate a strong connection between teacher education and changes in pre-service teachers’ beliefs. When interviewed in their first two years of the training, they believed that vocabulary and grammar should be the focus of language teaching and learning. These beliefs were attributed to their prior second language learning experiences at primary and secondary school level. However, in the third year of the program, when the pre-service teachers were involved in more micro-teaching practices with a student-oriented syllabus, they experienced a significant change in beliefs about language teaching and learning towards a more academic perspective. At the same time, they seemed confused about the applicability of the innovative principles in practice. By the end of their training and practicum, most of the participants described language learning as a process through which individuals tried to develop their communicative competence facilitated by the
teacher as mentor and counsellor, a position that was congruent with the approach taken in their teacher education courses.

In Burri’s (2015) study of the impact of a postgraduate pronunciation course on ESL/EFL student teachers’ cognition about pronunciation pedagogy, he observed a significant influence of teacher education on teachers’ cognition development, especially for those who had no prior experiences in teaching pronunciation. These teachers began to realise the value of pronunciation in teaching, and attained a new perspective on English varieties and an understanding that one does not need to be native-like for language communication. Burri (2015) highlights some particular features within the course that made significant contributions to the student teachers’ cognition development. For example, the group work/discussions and accent comparison as generated by the lecturer provided the participants with frequent opportunities for rich exposure to various Englishes and accents as well as for collaborative construction of knowledge, which subsequently prompted the participants’ awareness of English varieties and accents.

In addition to the influence of the teacher education program, the context of the classroom has also been claimed to have an impact on teachers’ cognitions and practices. In the case of pre-service teachers, this is the context of their practicum teaching experience (Gan, 2013; Johnson, 1996; Silva, 2005; Sinprajakpol, 2005). As Wang and Odell (2002) argue, during the practicum period, pre-service teachers have to cope with a “conceptual struggle about teaching and learning” (p. 515). In other words, their personal beliefs about good teaching and learning may be challenged by the realities of the classroom context. For example, Gan (2013) demonstrates how pre-service teachers struggled to apply innovative pedagogical practice such as TBLT in their classrooms due to the time required for task preparation, students’ low proficiency of English, discipline problems, and cooperating teachers’ discouragement. For the Thai teacher in Sinprajakpol’s (2005) study, it was the prescribed curriculum that she reported as inhibiting her practicing her beliefs. She decided to use Thai instead of English to speed up her lesson to meet the required curriculum plan.

While the studies described above are of pre-service teachers, they point to the way cognitions and teaching practices of teachers (experienced and novice teachers) are developed by their previous learning experiences, professional coursework, and school and classroom contexts.
2.3.2 Experienced teachers’ cognitions

Literature on the cognitions and actual practices of experienced teachers has increased in recent years (e.g. Baker, 2014; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Kun, 2008; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011; Liviero, 2017; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). While studies on pre-service language teachers suggest a variety of contextual factors, including school-based learning, teacher education, and classroom factors, as main contributors to pre-service teachers’ cognitions, research on in-service teachers tends to point more to factors of the context in which teachers live and teach as the major influences on their cognitions and practices. In other words, whether or not the teachers’ beliefs and their practices are aligned depends substantially on the sociocultural and contextual environments within which the teaching and learning take place. Not surprisingly then, given the often challenging nature of classrooms and institutional requirements, studies have often shown an inconsistent relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their practices (Fajardo, 2013; Fang, 1996; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Kun, 2008; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011; Liviero, 2017; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Teachers in these studies explained the mismatch between their beliefs and practices in terms of time constraints, the need to maintain good rapport with students, students’ limited language ability and motivation, students’ expectations around examinations, and the demands of classroom management.

For example, Phipps and Borg’s (2009) study of three teachers’ beliefs and practices in Turkey reveals a number of tensions between their reported beliefs and observed practices in teaching grammar. Despite reporting that they preferred not to use mechanical activities such as gap-fill exercises, two of the teachers in this study tended to use them regularly. They explained that these types of exercises met their students’ expectations and were useful classroom management strategies in calming their students down. In another example, Farrell and Kun (2008), in a study of three elementary school English teachers in Singapore, found a considerable discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices. The teachers in their study stated that teachers should be responsible for correcting students’ use of Singlish (Singapore Colloquial English); however, in the lessons observed by the researchers, feedback to students was rarely present. The authors suggest that such a gap could be due to teachers’ concern about how their feedback might impact students’ confidence and the flow of the lessons.
In another study by Li and Walsh (2011), which compared the beliefs of a novice teacher and an experienced teacher, the relationship between the experienced teacher's stated beliefs and classroom interaction was found to be more complex and less “linear” than was the case for the novice teacher. In other words, the experienced teacher’s teaching did not always correspond with his stated beliefs. For example, he stated that language needed to be used for communication rather than as a subject for academic study. In his teaching, he seemed to promote oral communication, which aligned with his stated beliefs that communication began first. However, his prompts to students tended to lead them to the answers he expected. While the sources of the teacher’s beliefs were not investigated in the study, the authors suggest that the local contextual factors, such as large class sizes, shy students with little opportunity to practise, and examination pressure, might have influenced the teacher’s classroom practices.

In the tertiary context, incongruences between teachers’ beliefs and their practices were also derived from the similar factors. For example, in a study that employed open-ended questionnaire and classroom observations to investigate university language teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching in Turkey, Hos and Kekec (2014) found that there were often mismatches between the teachers’ reported beliefs and their actual practices in teaching grammar. The teachers stated that they were in favour of CLT in their grammar lessons and believed that grammar should be instructed in a meaningful and contextual manner in integration with other language skills and the use of communicative activities. Nevertheless, the actual teaching revealed that Grammar Teaching Method (GTM) was the main method used by the teachers in the grammar lessons. The teachers employed mechanical drills and exercises supported with translations into students’ native language, without translating the grammar into contextualised situations. Hos and Kekec (2014) conclude that the factors affecting teachers’ grammar teaching and contributing to these disparities were due to the context, students’ profiles, course objectives, curriculum and available materials.

In contrast to the findings in the studies so far cited, there is also evidence that teachers’ beliefs and their practices can be convergent. In a study of ESL teachers’ pronunciation pedagogy, Baker (2011a) identified a convergence between teachers’ stated beliefs and their teaching activities. In particular, four out of five teachers in Baker’s study stated that their graduate education had an influential role in their current teaching practice. Classroom observations showed this convergence, as the teachers applied techniques they learnt previously in their graduate education, such as stretching a rubber band for teaching word
stress or deciding to use the textbook used in their training because of its relevance in terms of guidelines and activities. Classroom observations of the fifth teacher in this group also found congruence between her beliefs and her teaching; however, these appeared to originate more from her prior learning experiences and collaboration with colleagues.

In other studies, teachers’ beliefs were found to be sometimes congruent and at other times incongruent with their practices (Alghanmi & Shukri, 2016; Zhang & Liu, 2014). This was explained in the research as primarily occurring because of influences of various contextual factors. For example, Alghanmi and Shukri (2016) utilised surveys, open-ended questions and classroom observations to explore the relationship between the beliefs and practices in the grammar instruction of EFL university lecturers in Saudi Arabia. Their results reveal both similarities and variations between the teachers’ beliefs and actual teaching. As reported in the surveys, the teachers believed in the importance of grammar as a fundamental element of language learning and that sufficient time should be given to grammar teaching with a focus on mastering grammar rules to support students’ accuracy in communication. They highlighted the value of learning grammar communicatively through language exposure in natural and communicative environments to develop students’ language fluency. For some of the teachers, these beliefs were reflected in their practice, in the way they spent considerable time engaging in deductive grammar instruction and presenting grammar in isolation, rather than time spent on learning English in natural and authentic learning contexts. Due to the teachers’ emphasis on grammar accuracy, their beliefs about the importance of communicative language teaching were not echoed in their practices. This phenomenon was explained by the teachers in the study in terms of their own grammar learning experience, their teaching experience, and their students’ language proficiency level.

The literature reviewed above indicates that the factors suggested by Borg (2015) impact the way experienced teachers believe and practice in classrooms. The literature reviewed in the following section also demonstrates that, while contextual factors are important, little is known about how these might influence novice teachers, especially those who are at a crucial stage of forming their beliefs and knowledge about teaching English (Farrell, 2008). In particular, with Freeman and Johnson (1998), it will be argued in the present thesis that it is crucial for teacher educators, in establishing an effective knowledge-base for language teacher education, to understand how the socio-cultural context of schools and teachers’ school based learning are likely to influence novice teachers’ practice.
2.3.3 Novice teachers’ cognitions

It has been acknowledged that what novice teachers learn about teaching in the first year has a very important impact on their future careers (Ginns et al., 2001; Kang & Cheng, 2014) and that teachers’ beliefs play a major role in their teaching (Gan, 2013; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Silva, 2005). However, research investigating novice language teachers’ cognitions and their relationship to their practices appears to be limited. The studies that were found for the present review mainly focused on ESL contexts (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Jessica, 2015; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Richards & Pennington, 1998; Urmston & Pennington, 2008). By contrast, there were only a few documented studies on Non-Native Speaking (NNS) EFL novice teachers (Erkmen, 2014; Zhang, 2017).

Although studies on EFL novice teachers show that changes in teachers’ cognitions and practices are mainly due to contextual factors, various contexts appear to impact novice teachers’ cognitions and practices differently. Two studies, one by Erkmen (2014) and the other by Zhang (2017), provide a good example of this. While Erkmen’s (2014) study found that the development of novice lecturers’ cognitions and practices primarily began with their teaching experience, self-reflection and teaching context, Zhang’s (2017) study concludes that, for the lecturer in his study, prior learning experiences and self-agency moulded his beliefs and practices.

The study conducted by Erkmen (2014) on novice EFL lecturers in a private university in Northern Cyprus found that the lecturers’ previous experiences as learners themselves, and their students’ expectations, impacted their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning. The lecturers in this study said that they had intended to apply what they believed in, which were a “constructivist conception” or “student-oriented practices” which promoted communicative language teaching and the use of the target language in their classrooms. However, they found it not to be always possible to put their beliefs into practice, due to their students’ expectations and the syllabus requirements. For example, the lecturers expected that their students could learn grammar and vocabulary by themselves in an innovative way. However, the students’ preference was for a deductive grammar teaching method, which they expected would help them pass the exams. Reflections and conversations on their practice with the researcher after the first classroom observations enabled the lecturers to become more aware of the incongruence between their beliefs and practices and thus to try to lessen the gap between the two and thus meet their students’ needs. For example, acknowledging the
students’ preference for explicit grammar teaching, the lecturers applied different teaching techniques (e.g. drawing, pictures, word cards) to stimulate students’ interest before giving them exercises.

A more recent study conducted by Zhang (2017) explored the beliefs and practices of an EFL Chinese novice lecturer about the importance of linguistic form and textual meaning in teaching writing. With data collected from interviews and observations, this study found that the teacher’s school-based learning with his own English teachers in high school and college, his self-agency during the teaching practices, and his interactions and teaching experiences with his students, shaped his beliefs and values. In particular, the novice lecturer placed an important emphasis on teaching linguistic forms, which was influenced by his previous schooling, which focussed on teaching structure, grammar and testing skills. However, his self-reflections through his teaching experiences and identification of students’ writing challenges enabled him to see teaching fluency or textual meaning with the use of cohesive pieces as an important part of his writing instruction. Nevertheless, despite the novice lecturer’s efforts to mediate his students’ knowledge of linguistic forms and textual meaning to construct the textual flow of an essay, the key classroom constraints, which were his students’ proficiency and shyness, made it difficult for him to implement his beliefs, and thus he had to adjust his teaching strategies from time to time.

While these two studies target novice educators’ cognitions and practices, they provide limited understanding of language teaching and learning in the specific contexts of Asia. The former was conducted in Turkey, an EFL non-Asian setting (Erkmen, 2014), whereas the latter focussed on lecturers’ writing instructions at university level (Zhang, 2017); thus pointing to the need to have further research on novice language teachers in Asian settings.

The literature in this section has provided a discussion of ESL/EFL language teacher cognition, from pre-service teachers to in-service, experienced teachers and novice teachers. It has also identified both congruencies and mismatches between teachers’ beliefs and their practices, mostly in relation to CLT. The teachers in these studies expressed their preference for CLT; however, due to various contextual factors, their attempts to follow this teaching approach were limited. While these challenges are reported in non-Asian contexts, they are also present in the literature in Asian contexts. The following section (Section 2.4) provides a detailed discussion about the challenges in implementing CLT/TBLT in the context of Asia; which is followed by a more in-depth examination into EFL teachers’ cognitions and
practices of CLT/TBLT. This section will also explore studies conducted with novice teachers in Asian, and specifically Vietnamese contexts to highlight important gaps in the literature that the present study aims to fill.

2.4 Challenges of teaching CLT in an Asian context

In light of the important role of English as an international language, governments in Asia have made a strong commitment to enable students to become successful English language users (Littlewood, 2007; Mustapha & Yahaya, 2013; Savignon & Chaochang, 2003; Shi, Baker, & Chen; Thinh, 2006; Zhu & Shu, 2017). As part of their efforts, changes have been made to important elements of the teaching process such as the role of the teacher, curriculum design, and teaching methods, to align with a communicative approach to language teaching and learning (Jihyeon, 2009; Karakas, 2013). As a result of these efforts, the traditional ways of teaching, namely a teacher-centred approach with over-emphasis on grammar, vocabulary and translation, has become less popular, since students’ competence in grammar and vocabulary alone is considered inadequate if young people are to use language communicatively, especially outside the classroom (Chang & Goswami, 2011; Savignon & Chaochang, 2003; Sreehari, 2012). To replace these long-established teaching methods in Asian contexts, innovative approaches to teaching English have been sought. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are currently the two most preferred teaching innovations adopted by many Asian countries (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Butler, 2011). Due to their emphasis on communicative and authentic language teaching and learning, these innovative teaching alternatives have become cornerstones to language education policies and language curricular of a number of Asian countries (Mustapha & Yahaya, 2013; Nishino, 2008; Sarab, Monfared, & Safarzadeh, 2016; Yook, 2010).

Despite the popularity of and growing interest in pursuing CLT and TBLT in Asia, a number of challenges persist in implementing them in EFL classrooms. One noticeable difficulty, identified by numerous researchers (Bax, 2003; Butler, 2011; Ellis, 1996; Hu, 2002; Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013), is the conflict between CLT principles and local values, especially cultural norms, in Asian regions. In other words, cultural differences between the West and East are regarded as barriers for implementing communicative ways of teaching and learning English in EFL classrooms (Hiep, 2007; Shao & Gao, 2016). According to Koosha and Yakhabi (2013), the CLT approach is not always appropriate nor compatible with the local socio-
cultural context in which it is used. They argue that, in the EFL setting, the home culture and
the EFL classroom/textbook cultures are not often compatible. They also suggest that the
values and teaching methods targeting the acquisition of language for practical knowledge are
perceived as foreign and receive little appreciation in class. One of the reasons for this
perception is that, traditionally, the teacher in many EFL contexts is not seen as a facilitator
of learning but rather as the possessor and transmitter of knowledge, and the student is
regarded as the recipient of knowledge from the teacher (Holiday, 1994; Hu, 2002). This
cultural value, as discussed in Hu (2002), is closely aligned with Confucian tradition in China
(for example) (Beaumont & Chang, 2011; Zhengdong, 2009), whereby students are expected
to respect and not to challenge their teachers while teachers need to possess extensive
knowledge to transfer to their students. This common cultural view leads to substantial
emphasis on knowledge mastery and teacher-centred teaching, which directly contrasts with
the student-centred learning inherent to CLT. Thus, while CLT considers learner-
centeredness, cooperative learning, teacher facilitation and oral-focussed activities as
important features of communicative learning (Brown, 2007), this appears to be in conflict
with the cultural attributes of Asian learners, who tend to be obedient, lacking in critical
thinking, and refraining from classroom interaction, as discussed above.

As well as the conflict of cultural differences between the West and the East, Butler (2011),
in her review of studies conducted on Asian contexts, nominates two further challenges to
teaching CLT in Asian contexts. These comprise classroom-level constraints (e.g. human
resources and material, class size, limited number of instructional hours, classroom
management issues) and societal-institutional level constraints (e.g. testing system and
limited opportunity to use English outside of the classroom). Empirical research specifically
examining constraints related to institutional and classroom contexts identifies similar
difficulties across other countries in Asia (e.g. Chang & Goswami, 2011 in Taiwan; Hu 2002
in China; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008 in Japan; Ansarey, 2012 and Roy, 2016 in Bangladesh;
Sarab, Monfared & Safarzadeh, 2016 in Iran; Shin, 2012 in Korea). For example, Shin (2012)
summarises a number of challenges faced by teachers in Korea in Teaching English Through
English (TETE) as a form of communicative language teaching promoted by the government.
These challenges include students’ inability to understand English instruction, lack of student
participation, setbacks to progress through coursework, difficulty in preparing for school
exams, difficulty in classroom control, and disparities in student proficiency levels. Also in
the context of Korea, Li (1998), in one of the most cited studies in the EFL/CLT literature,
organises these challenges into four main constraints, depending on the causal influence/agent:

i) by the teacher (e.g. deficiency in spoken English, deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence, lack of training in CLT, misconceptions about CLT, little time for developing materials for communicative classes);

ii) by the students (e.g. low English proficiency, lack of motivation for developing communicative competence, resistance to class participation);

iii) by the educational system (e.g. large classes, grammar-based examinations, insufficient funding, lack of support); and

iv) by CLT itself (e.g. inadequate account of EFL teaching, lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments).

(adapted from Li, 1998, p. 687)

Other studies have identified similar contextual constraints that hinder the implementation of CLT in other parts of Asia, thus suggesting the considerable difficulty in applying CLT in Asian classrooms. In an empirical study in Taiwan, Chang and Goswami (2011) explored the factors that hindered the implementation of CLT by college English teachers. They identified factors similar to those listed above, such as inadequate teacher training, teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills, students resistance to class participation, students’ low English proficiency, test-oriented teaching, large classes, limited teaching hours, and lack of English environment and efficient assessment instruments. These are similar challenges to those identified for EFL teachers in Iran (Sarab et al., 2016) and Bangladesh (Ansarey, 2012). The teachers in Iran added shortage of supplementary teaching materials for communicative activities; while their counterparts in Bangladesh mentioned the lack of training in CLT and support to incorporate CLT into their teaching, and CLT’s inadequate account of EFL teaching context as the major constraints to the implementation of CLT in the classrooms.

In Vietnam, since the promotion of CLT/TBLT by the government as the preferred way of teaching English communicatively and effectively (MOET, 2006; Van, Hoa, Minh, Phuong, & Tuan, 2013a), there have been a growing number of studies exploring the extent to which CLT/TBLT has been implemented in the classroom, as well as the challenges experienced by the teachers in implementing these teaching methods. Most of the constraints in adopting CLT in language classrooms in Vietnam are similar to those identified for other Asian
contexts. These include: traditional examinations (Ellis, 1996; Hiep, 2007; Khoi Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013); large class sizes (Canh, 2001; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007); cultural constraints characterised by beliefs about teacher and student roles (Hiep, 2007; Khoi Mai & Iwashita, 2012); students’ low motivation and unequal ability in, and teachers’ limited expertise in creating, communicative activities (Hiep, 2007); and limited teaching resources (Canh, 2001). Despite an increasing interest in illuminating the contextual constraints faced by Vietnamese EFL teachers from a language teacher cognition perspective, very limited attention has been given to exploring how novice teachers experience and resolve the challenges in their first years of teaching in their new teaching contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining how contextual factors might influence the cognitions and practices of Vietnamese EFL novice teachers.

Regarding the implementation of CLT in the Asian EFL context, the literature suggests that teachers often have positive attitudes about incorporating this approach in their classrooms. For example, EFL teachers in a Bangladeshi study by Ansarey (2012) reported developing their interest in learning English when they were students, and choosing to study foreign languages because they believed that mastery of two languages would secure high paying jobs. They believed that the focus on grammar should be shifted towards a focus on meaning and that the goal of learning English should be about using the target language for communication, and thus that communication should be given substantial attention in teaching and learning English. However, despite their positive attitudes to a more communicative teaching approach, most of the studies on EFL Asian contexts have shown disparities rather than congruencies between what teachers believe and what they actually do in the classroom (Gerami & Noordin, 2013; Mellati, Fatemi, & Motallebzadeh, 2013; Nishino, 2008, 2009; Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010).

In exploring Thai EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding the appropriateness of communicative methodology, Tayjasanant and Barnard (2010) found that the teachers supported “student-centered learning” which enabled their students to learn the language through communicative activities. However, the observational data revealed that the teachers’ talk dominated their students’ discourse. The researchers in this study also note that student-centered learning was limited due to a majority of ‘close-ended’ questions from the teachers which presented little opportunity for students to use English. The teachers’ explanations for what they did were consonant with other research studies (Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Lamb,
1995), as in the following teacher’s observation: “it is not that once this theory [communicative approach] was introduced, everyone could immediately use it” (Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010, p. 303).

The EFL teaching context in Vietnam has also seen an increasing amount of qualitative empirical research that examines teachers’ cognitions and practices regarding the implementation of CLT/TBLT. In many cases, whether there are congruencies or disparities between teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices, research findings reveal limited utilisation of CLT/TBLT in the classroom (Canh, 2011; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013). For example, Canh and Barnard’s (2009) study of three upper-secondary school teachers in an underdeveloped rural area, regarding their understanding and implementation of the intended syllabus innovation in the classroom, provides a detailed illustration of the wide gap between what was intended by the CLT curriculum designers and textbooks writers and what was actually implemented by classroom teachers. They found that, despite an emphasis on a communicative approach in the curriculum, teachers’ classroom practice remained textbook-based, test-oriented and teacher-fronted. Although the teachers followed the textbooks, they focused on how to finish the textbooks by explaining the grammar rules in Vietnamese and eliciting students’ responses from explicit information given in the textbooks. There was limited attention given to activity reconstruction to provide students with opportunities to use the target language for individual thought development or the negotiation of intended meaning among students. The teachers in the study reported a number of important constraints, including time pressure to deliver too many tasks in a 45-minute lesson, and their students’ lack of English proficiency to participate successfully in communicative tasks. In addition, the limited time allocation for English instruction (e.g. three 45-minute periods per week) and the lack of opportunities to use English outside of the classroom impeded students’ internalisation of the language, and thus they became demotivated to learn English. The teachers also reported on the conflict between the communicative intent of the curriculum, and the multiple-choice tests as the only testing method for standardised high-stake exams, which led to a washback effect of examinations. Canh and Barnard (2009) conclude that only lip-service appeared to be paid to communication, while in reality teachers focused mainly on teaching grammar for the tests.

To compare with secondary and/or high school teachers, university lecturers appeared to face similar challenges in apply CLT into their teaching, even though they might be committed to
this approach. For example, the tertiary EFL teachers in Hiep’s (2007) study indicated that, even when teachers displayed very positive beliefs about embracing CLT in their teaching, they all experienced difficulty in implementing CLT practices in their classrooms. For example, all three teachers in this study emphasized the usefulness of CLT in preparing students’ language proficiency for their future life, and thus highlighted the need to create meaningful communication rather than having a focus on accurate forms of language, to facilitate the learning process. However, classroom observations as well as their own evaluation revealed that they struggled to organize pair work and group work for communicative activities such as role plays, writing reports or stories, and simulations. The teachers’ explained their difficulties in applying CLT principles in their classrooms by reference to students’ lack of motivation to use English in a non-English environment, students’ emphasis on passing written-based exams, and their lack of willingness to engage in collaborative work and tolerance to different ideas. Another important factor influencing these teachers’ unsuccessful practice with CLT, according to the author, was their lack of a repertoire of CLT techniques to teach students in specific contexts. What can be noted from this study is that, despite the teachers’ interest in CLT and higher training in language teaching - two teachers completing a master’s degree, and one accomplishing a Postgraduate Diploma in TESOL in Australia - the contextual factors and lack of training for teaching in specific contexts constrained their employment of CLT in the classroom.

Across the literature, and consistent with Borg’s emphasis on the influence of contextual factors on language teachers’ cognitions and practices, the above contextual factors were not only identified as major constraints on the implementation of CLT but also of TBLT, in the context of Vietnam. Since both CLT and TBLT embed a communicative approach and prioritize cooperative, authentic and meaningful communication (Brown, 2007), it is not surprising, then, to find that studies investigating teachers’ cognitions and classroom teaching of CLT also reveal similar difficulties to those in studies exploring what teachers think and do about TBLT (Canh, 2011; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013). For example, in a study with eight teachers working in a gifted upper secondary school in the North of Vietnam, Canh (2011) explored the beliefs and practices about form-focused instruction in relation to the implementation of a task-based curriculum. The findings reveal the teachers’ strong inclination towards traditional grammar teaching with an emphasis on students’ memorisation of grammatical rules and terminologies. The study also identifies the teachers’ preference for a PPP model, rather than following task sequencing as promoted in the prescribed
curriculum. In this study, Canh (2011) points out a number of contextual factors impacting the teachers’ beliefs and teaching, including students’ low language proficiency, large class sizes, pressures of examinations, and teachers, professional development issues.

Two other studies, implemented by Viet (2013) and Tran (2015), appear to be consonant with Canh’s (2011) study, in terms of teachers’ priority of form-focussed teaching, and multiple contextual restraints affecting their thinking and classroom teaching. Specifically, Viet (2013) conducted a case study with a multi-method data collection approach to investigate eleven English teachers in two urban upper secondary schools. Findings from Viet’s study show that the teachers’ beliefs were found to be closely inclined toward a structure-based approach where language items were taught before the performance of tasks. The teachers often utilised form-focused activities, and organized classroom activities in a non-communicative manner. A wide domain of factors impeding the teachers’ application of TBLT in their teaching context were explored, including the teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and other contextual pressures such as written-based examinations and students’ language proficiency and motivation. Viet (2013) concludes that the teachers’ resistance and failure in implementing TBLT were due to their rooted beliefs shaped by their prior learning experiences and current teaching experiences and interactions within the contexts where they worked.

In another case study of six teachers in an upper secondary school in the Central region of Vietnam, Tran (2015) explored the teachers’ cognitions and implementation of the task-based curriculum in the dimensions of curricular content, teaching pedagogy and learner assessment, using various data sources including interviews, lesson plans, classroom observations, and documents. Results of the study evince a consistency between teachers’ cognitions, their classroom practices, and assessment, highlighting a structural approach that gives more priority to form rather than meaning. Regardless of a topic-based content designed in the curriculum, the teachers perceived delivering discrete linguistic items and enabling students memorisation of linguistic items to be more important objectives than students’ communicative language skills. Tran (2015) claims that the teachers’ classroom instructions aligned with their beliefs, in which they followed the PPP teaching model to deliver vocabulary-based, closed-ended and form-focussed activities. A conclusion that Tran (2015) draws from his study is that teachers’ cognitions and practices diverged from the
TBLT approach promoted in the intended curriculum due to the domination of the examinations and the teachers’ preference for examination preparation.

Developments in language teacher cognition in Asia have heightened the need for understanding EFL teachers’ cognitions and their classroom practices. However, despite a small but growing literature on pre-service and experience teachers’ beliefs and practices, so far there has been little discussion about the cognitions and classroom practices of novice teachers in the EFL context of Asia. Most studies in novice teacher language cognition have been carried out on ESL contexts (e.g. Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Gatbonton, 2008; Numrich, 1996; Urmston & Pennington, 2008; Warford & Reeves, 2003), with a few on non-Asian EFL contexts (e.g. Akean, 2016; Erkmen, 2014; Kaca & Yigitoglu, 2017; Zhukova, 2017) and Asian EFL contexts (e.g. Kang & Cheng, 2014; Kumazawa, 2013; Li & Walsh, 2011; Moodie & Feryok, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Among the small number of studies on EFL novice teachers in Asia, only a few were conducted with a specific focus on examining novice teachers’ cognitions and practices in relation to CLT, and these appear to be limited to the context of EFL teaching in China (e.g. Kang & Cheng, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011). For example, in their study comparing the pedagogical beliefs about teaching and learning, in relation to the teaching of vocabulary and oral communication, of an experienced teacher with those of a novice teacher, Li and Walsh (2011) found a complex relationship between the teachers’ beliefs and their practices which was closely related to the contextual factors. In the case of the novice teacher, her stated beliefs about the important role of learning vocabulary and her dominant role in the classroom correlated very closely with her actual teaching. The teacher’s classroom practice revealed that she spent considerable time explaining the pronunciation, spelling and literal meaning of the new words rather than introducing other aspects of the new vocabulary, for example, word collocations, to the students. In addition, her belief that “learning takes place when [she] dominates the interaction” (p. 45) was evident when there was minimal involvement of her students contrasting with her substantial talking in the classroom. The novice teacher explained her emphasis on controlled vocabulary instruction and dominance in the classroom in terms of her perception of her students “as weak and silent learners” (p. 45) who did not want to participate in classroom activities if they were not tested in the exams. In the case of the experienced teacher, his beliefs and practices were “more complex and less linear” (p. 52) than those of the novice teacher. Although his belief that “the most important thing is that language is used for communication” (p. 49) seemed to be enacted in his interactions with
students, what he meant by “oral communication” appeared to be restricted by the local contextual factors. The experienced teacher implemented a number of interactional activities to promote his students’ oral communication; however, the students’ responses were based on his prompts and guiding questions, and thus were provided “in a very controlled and managed way” (p. 52). These findings resonate with Li and Walsh's (2011) position that the local context, including large class sizes, shy students and examination pressure, can have an important impact on the teacher’s classroom practices.

The second of the two studies on EFL novice teachers in China was a longitudinal study by Kang and Cheng (2014) of changes in the relationship between classroom practices and cognitions development. They interviewed and observed the classroom practices of one novice middle school EFL teacher in China over a period of eight months. Their study found that changes in the teacher’s classroom practices over this time resulted from her teaching experience, her self-reflections on her teaching, and the teaching context. The teacher’s cognitions also changed via interaction between her school-based knowledge and beliefs and her classroom practices. For example, in the first semester, the teacher emphasized form-focused drills and exercises to consolidate language knowledge. Early in the second semester, however, once she had gained confidence in the students’ ability, she began to integrate meaning-focused language practices, such as dialogue and role play, to facilitate students’ language use. Towards the middle of the second semester, the teacher encouraged her students to do language production tasks such as designing a poster in groups. Changes in the teacher’s cognitions were also found in her reading class. In her previous lessons, the teacher used the reading materials as a means to teach vocabulary and grammar, in line with a translation approach, which appeared to be her dominant teaching method. This practice was subsequently replaced by more innovative methods in which the teacher supplied students with more activities for language consolidation and helped them to discover the language points in the text and interpret the meaning and usage by themselves. The teacher stated that these changes in her practice originated from the principle of “teacher-led student-centeredness”, which she had learnt in her pre-service education program and which was reinforced during her teaching experiences and in-service professional development.

Furthermore, the teacher also reflected on her own teaching through her communication with colleagues and the interview questions raised by the researchers. This suggests that teachers’ cognitions are not always static and can often involve critical professional reflections about their own teaching. It also suggests that there are possibilities for change in teachers’
cognitions towards communicative language teaching. However, whether teachers are able to transition towards more communicative teaching or not seems largely to depend on the support available in the contexts where the teacher is working. In the Kang and Cheng study, the teacher’s cognition development primarily derived from her own teaching reflections which were supported with other favourable contextual factors. Some other forms of support included her in-service professional development activities which emphasized student-centered teaching, support from the students’ parents, and the interviews with the researcher which enabled her to reflect on her current teaching.

In the context of Vietnam, however, far too little attention has been paid to novice teachers’ cognitions about and practices in language teaching and learning. The two studies which have been conducted on novice teachers were both conducted in the university context (Dinh, 2009; Lam Hoang & Filipi, 2016); however, they were not closely related to teachers’ beliefs and practices about CLT/TBLT. The first one was conducted by Dinh (2009), who examined the factors influencing EFL novice teachers’ adoption of technologies in classroom practice. The second one was implemented by Lam Hoang and Filipi (2016), who explored how novice teachers pursued students’ understanding and responses through the practice of language alternation.

2.5 In summary: Identifying the gap

This review of studies has shown that considerable attention has been given to the field of language teacher cognition. However, research gaps remain. Although the literature on language teachers’ cognitions has been growing, much of it has been conducted in the United States, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Borg, 2009). Borg (2009), Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) and Tajeddin and Aryaeian (2017) also draw attention to the point that there is a limited attention given to language learning in other EFL education contexts. Furthermore, it appears that studies on language teacher cognition in pre-service contexts are more prevalent than on in-service teaching contexts, thus little is known about factors that contribute to the cognitions and practice of practicing teachers, including novice teachers (Borg, 2009), particularly in the context of Vietnam. The review of literature presented above has demonstrated that, despite an increasing number of studies on teacher cognition in Vietnam (Canh, 2011; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013, 2014), studies are targeted at more experienced teachers, leaving scant attention to novice teachers. A wide gap in research on this particular group of teachers, as displayed in many parts of
Asia as well as the context of Vietnam, suggests a pressing need for implementing further examination of novice teachers’ cognitions and classroom practices, to provide further insights and understanding to the field of language teachers’ cognitions.

Apart from some recent research (e.g. Baker, 2011a, 2014; Erkmen, 2014; Kang & Cheng, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011; Urmston & Pennington, 2008), most studies have employed questionnaires and/or interviews, while few have used classroom observations and video-stimulated recall. These latter would seem to be important methodological strategies to provide insights, especially in relation to the congruence and discrepancies between stated beliefs and actual teaching practices. In order to have insights into teachers’ cognitions and practices, it was considered necessary for the present study to gather information from various sources of data (e.g. documents, interviews, classroom observations) to provide a more robust and reliable result. Lastly, it is argued that sociocultural factors beyond the classroom and individual beliefs are likely to impact on the teaching practice of language teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998); but that, however, these factors have rarely been included in the studies described above. Most studies capture teachers’ cognitions at the time of classroom observations and interviews, while few studies involve how their biographies, including their prior learning, their professional learning and contextual factors shape and influence their cognitions and practices. The present study also aims to address this gap, and those others described above, by investigating the relationship between novice language teachers’ cognitions and their practices in the context of high schools in Vietnam, while taking into account how sociocultural factors impact teachers’ beliefs and practices.

The next chapter will present the theoretical framework used to guide the investigation of cognitions and practices of the teachers in the study described in this thesis.
Chapter 3
Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to the two conceptual frameworks, Borg’s (2015, p. 333) model of teacher cognition, and Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model of teachers’ knowledge, that are employed to investigate teachers’ cognitions about and practices in language teaching and learning. It concludes with a description of the key concepts used in CLT/TBLT.

3.2 Borg’s model of language teacher cognition

As defined by Borg (2015, p. 40), teacher cognition can be “characterized as an often tacit, personal-held, practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic - that is, defined and refined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers’ lives”. In an earlier review of teacher cognition in language teaching, Borg further uses the term teacher cognition to refer to the “unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching - what teachers know, believe, and think” (Borg, 2003, p. 81). The two concepts, beliefs and knowledge, seem to be inseparable, although beliefs are often associated with evaluation and judgement while knowledge is linked to facts (Pajares, 1992). However, as Baker and Murphy (2011) argue, the distinction between “teachers’ knowledge and beliefs is at best hazy” (p. 32); or, as Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer (2001, p. 446) comment, “in the mind of the teacher, components of knowledge, beliefs, conceptions, and intuitions are inextricably intertwined”. Thus, for the scope of the present study, Borg’s notion of teacher cognition, defined as “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching-what teachers know, believe, and think” (Borg, 2003, p. 81), was drawn on to refer to both teacher beliefs and knowledge.

Teacher cognition plays a powerful role in shaping teachers’ classroom practices and hence learning outcomes (Helen, 2003; Shinde & Karekatti, 2012). Shinde and Karekatti (2012) argue that “teachers’ beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitudes, teaching methods and teaching policies, and finally, learners’ development” (p. 69). As indicated in the previous chapter, the cognitions of language teachers are the outcomes of ongoing and interwoven interactions among multiple factors including their prior learning experiences (Farrell, 1999; Watzke, 2007), teacher education programs (Cabaroğlu & Roberts, 2000;
Mattheoudakis, 2007; Watzke, 2007) and the contextual factors in which their teaching takes place (Erkmen, 2014; Fajardo, 2013; Gan, 2013). In other words, teachers’ cognitions about language teaching and learning are shaped by the personal (i.e. family background and school-based learning), situational (i.e. school and classroom context) and sociocultural (i.e. the economic and political context) factors. Borg’s (2015) model of the elements and processes transforming language teachers’ cognitions provides a useful framework for examining how language teachers’ cognitions are formed. This model was particularly useful to the investigation of the contextual factors influencing the cognitions of novice teachers, in the study reported in this thesis.

Figure 3.1 Elements and processes in language teacher cognition (Borg, 2015, p. 333)

As seen in Figure 3.1, teachers’ cognitions are constructed in relation to three primary factors: schooling, professional coursework, and classroom practice. For Borg, schooling experiences encompass the “personal history and specific experience of classroom which define preconceptions of education (i.e. teachers, teaching)” (Borg, 2015, p. 333). Borg’s
second factor impacting teachers’ cognitions is the professional coursework they take in their teacher education program. In this thesis, ‘personal’ factors are used to encompass both of these factors. This term has been chosen because it better reflects the complexity of their personal language histories, including early family experiences, school-based learning, and professional coursework. The use of this term also enables this study to capture the teachers’ wider personal experiences and how they influence their language beliefs and knowledge.

In the study described in this thesis, information about novice teachers’ early language experiences and school-based learning were collected through biographical interviews which asked the participants about their experiences in learning English in secondary and high schools. Their memories of their professional coursework were also collected through the biographical interviews. The interviews with teacher educators could also provide an opportunity to obtain insights into the professional coursework as well as to clarify and confirm the language teaching theories and practices discussed by the novice teachers.

Classroom practice, including the contextual factors that shape what can happen in the classroom, is the third factor in Borg’s model. These contextual factors, defined by Borg (2003) as the social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and classroom, include “parents, principals’ requirements, the school, society, curriculum mandates, classroom and school layout, school policies, colleagues, standardised tests and the availability of resources” (p. 94). In this thesis, these contextual factors are divided into situational and sociocultural factors. Within the scope of this study, “situational” factors are used to differentiate between the situational immediate classroom contexts (e.g. the school contexts, students) and the “sociocultural” factors which include the policies and the socioeconomic and cultural background of the Mekong Delta. The discernment of these two terms helps identify the extent to which they have an impact on the participating teachers’ cognitions and practices. In this study, the influence of situational factors on the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices was identified through an analysis of situated recall interviews in relation to the teachers’ immediate classroom decisions. Information on how sociocultural factors influenced their cognitions and teaching was collected through biographical interviews with the teachers.

To better present how this study adopted Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model to identify the influence of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors on the Vietnamese EFL teachers’ cognitions and practices, Figure 3.2 is provided to illustrate the role of these
factors. Among them, sociocultural contexts appear to play a central part in shaping teachers’ cognitions (Borg, 2003); thus, they are positioned outside and around the diagram as an overarching and important component in relation to other factors as well as teachers’ beliefs and knowledge.

Figure 3.2 The influence of personal, situational and socio-cultural factors on language teacher cognition (based on Borg’s, 2015 “language teacher cognition” model)
Although Borg’s model provided a comprehensive description of how teachers’ cognitions are established, and served as a useful tool for the study to help understand the formation and development of the teachers’ cognitions in language teaching and learning, this model does not specifically identify the categories of cognitions that teachers have about language teaching and learning. In other words, it discusses the sources of teacher’s cognitions but does not attend to the types of cognitions teachers have about teaching and learning. To bridge the gaps in Borg’s model, the present study drew on Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model of teachers’ knowledge-base categories, which provides more specific descriptions of the types of knowledge that teachers need to have about teaching and learning.

3.3 Shulman’s teachers’ knowledge base categories

The categories of teachers’ knowledge suggested in Shulman’s (1986, 1987) conceptual framework provide a conceptual language to identify the specific types of knowledge that teachers have about teaching and learning. Shulman presented seven categories of teachers’ knowledge, as follows:

- **subject matter content knowledge** (i.e. knowledge about concepts and principles in teaching language and how they are organized and structured);
- **general pedagogical knowledge** (i.e. general principles and strategies for classroom management and organization);
- **curriculum knowledge** (i.e. knowledge of the teaching programs, materials and resources that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers);
- **pedagogical content knowledge** (i.e. knowledge of how to teach the subject matter content knowledge using appropriate examples, explanations, illustrations, and demonstration);
- **knowledge of learners and their characteristics** (i.e. knowledge about learners’ interests, motivation, background and abilities);
- **knowledge of educational contexts** (i.e. knowledge about situated and sociocultural conditions where the teaching takes place);
- **knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds**.

(adapted from Shulman, 1986, 1987; Baker, 2011b; Baker and Murphy, 2011)
A number of studies have utilised Shulman’s framework to investigate L2 teachers’ cognition (Baker, 2014; Gatbonton, 2008; Gorsuch, 2004; Hulshof & Verloop, 2002). For example, this framework has been utilised to explore ESL teachers’ cognitions and practices in teaching pronunciation (Baker, 2014), novice and experienced ESL teachers’ pedagogical knowledge (Gatbonton, 2008), and language teachers’ use of analogies in pedagogical content knowledge to help students comprehend texts (Hulshof & Verloop, 2002). For the purpose of the present study, Shulman’s (1986, 1987) model of teachers’ knowledge afforded an analytical framework to examine the types of knowledge that the novice teachers had about language teaching and learning. These seven types of teachers’ knowledge can all have important contributions to effective teaching of teachers; however, for this study, four aspects of teachers’ knowledge were most applicable: *subject matter content knowledge; curriculum knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; and knowledge of learners.*

Shulman defines *subject matter content knowledge (SMCK)* as the knowledge necessary for teaching a specific subject domain. In the case of this study, it refers specifically to knowledge about language. In particular, it enabled the study to explore what knowledge about language (i.e. the facts, concepts and principles) the teachers chose to present to their students and their justifications for their choice. Rather than question the teachers about their SMCK, which could have been regarded as confronting, the teachers’ SMCK was identified through an analysis of classroom observation field notes and recordings and their responses in stimulated recall interviews (see Chapter 7).

The teachers’ *knowledge of curriculum*, for Shulman, is evident in their knowledge of the full range of programs designed for the teaching of particular subjects and topics at a given level, the variety of instructional materials available in relation to those programs, and the set of characteristics that serve as both the indications and contraindications for the use of particular curriculum or program materials in particular circumstances. (Shulman, 1986, p. 10)

For Shulman (1986), *curriculum knowledge* is regarded as an important component of teacher education programs. Teachers’ knowledge about curriculum can assist them in making appropriate pedagogical decisions for the variety of students in their classes. Importantly, Shulman asserts that teachers need not only have a comprehensive perspective of curriculum programs but also possess a range of alternative curriculum materials for particular circumstances. Regarding the present study, the concept of *curriculum knowledge* provided a lens to investigate the extent to which the participating teachers had knowledge about the
curriculum language programs, teaching resources, and other teaching alternatives and how such knowledge impacted their pedagogy.

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) refers to the ways teachers represent and formulate the SMCK to their students using various “forms of representations, analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations” so that the subject matter becomes comprehensible to diverse interests and abilities of learners (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Shulman contends that there is not always a single correct way of representing the subject matter; thus, he suggests teachers need to own “a veritable armamentarium of alternative forms of representation” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9), which can be research-based or practice-based. Furthermore, teachers’ PCK allows them to differentiate how they teach based on their knowledge of learners (discussed below). In the present study, the concept of PCK was used to understand the forms of representations the novice teachers utilised to make SMCK intelligible to their students.

Last but not least, although teachers’ knowledge of learners is not elaborated on in Shulman’s model, preliminary analysis of interview data pointed to its central role in shaping teachers’ pedagogy. Teachers’ knowledge of learners refers to their understanding that students have diverse abilities and interests and to the ways in which they respond to diversity (Calderhead & Shorrocks, 1997; Rahman, Scaife, Yahya, & Jalil, 2010). Shulman argues that an understanding of their students is crucial if teachers are to appropriately organize, represent and adapt particular topics, problems or issues for classroom instruction. In the present study, the concept of knowledge of learners was used to explore what knowledge the novice teachers had about their learners and how this knowledge affected their choices regarding aspects of SMCK and PCK to meet the needs and abilities of their learners. The combination of the models proposed by Shulman (1986, 1987) and Borg (2015) helped in analysing the participating novice teachers’ cognitions regarding the “what” (what cognitions they had) and “how” (how their cognitions were shaped).

3.4 Communicative language teaching and its principles

In the context of language teaching, SMCK and PCK relate specifically to the various ideas/theories about the nature of language and how best it might be learnt and taught. In the context of this research, the focus will be on SMCK, curriculum knowledge and PCK in relation to CLT and TBLT. As indicated in Chapter 1, CLT and TBLT are currently the preferred approaches not only in global contexts (Benson, 2016; Jarvis, 2015; Li, 1998;
Littlewood, 2013; Richards, 2006) but also in Vietnam, as indicated by their inclusion in national language policies (Decision_1400/QD-TTg, 2008; MOET, 2006) and discussion in a number of studies (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007; Viet, 2014). The national English curriculum of Vietnam is designed to follow a communicative approach to language teaching. Descriptions of CLT and TBLT and their associated principles and concepts are discussed in detail below. Thus, the following sections begin with a discussion of CLT and its principles and/or features, and end with a review of TBLT and important related teaching concepts that are relevant to the Vietnamese teaching context.

Prior to the establishment of CLT/TBLT, traditional teaching methods such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), Audio Lingual Method (ALM) and PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) were prevailing methods in language teaching (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Among these teaching methods, GTM and PPP were most often used in the Vietnamese language teaching context (Cam, 2015; Ho & The Binh, 2014; Yen, 2016). GTM, originally named as the Classical Method, was adopted as the primary way for teaching language with a focus on students’ reading acquisition of foreign language literature (Brown, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In order to acquire this language proficiency, this method gives special importance to teaching grammar rules, and memorisation of vocabulary for text translations and completion of written exercises; while students’ communicative language skills such as speaking, listening and pronunciation receive relatively little attention by comparison. Unlike GTM, the second traditional teaching method, PPP, focused on students’ accurate mastery of discrete language items (i.e. vocabulary, grammar rules) prior to using them in communicative and meaningful situations. As indicated by its name, PPP is sequenced into three stages, namely Presentation, Practice, and Production (Harmer, 2007). According to Harmer (2007), in the first two stages, the teacher begins the lesson by introducing the new language item (Presentation), which is followed by controlled practice activities (i.e. repetition and cue-response drills) (Practice), to enable students to produce the accurate language. In the final stage, students are provided with opportunities to produce the language in their own ways (Production).

Originally developed in the European context in 1960s, CLT has since emerged as a global trend in teaching over the last three decades (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). CLT was originally based on the functional theory of language, which places a focus on language as a means of communication. The notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), also known as
communicative ability (Brandl, 2008; Littlewood, 1981), involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to apply such knowledge into a variety of communicative situations. Communicative competence comprises four components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). These types of communicative competencies are thus regarded as the SMCK of a teacher following CLT. Specifically, linguistic competence links to the teacher’s knowledge of how to use the target language correctly, which includes the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence formation. Discourse competence relates to the teacher’s knowledge of the ability to use the new language in different spoken and written discourse situations, in which learners are able to understand and produce meaningful, cohesive and coherent language of various genres (e.g. a dialogue, a short narrative, a weather report, a sport event, or a movie.). Sociolinguistic competence connects to the teacher’s knowledge of how to use language appropriately in specific social situations; for example, using appropriate language forms at a job interview. Sociolinguistic competence is based upon such factors as the status of those speaking to each other, the purpose of the interaction, and the expectations of the players. Finally, strategic competence is related to the teacher’s knowledge of how to use strategies for effective communication and to repair problems caused by communication breakdowns in the case of grammatical, sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties. Strategic competence is associated with how effectively a person uses both verbal forms and non-verbal communication to compensate for lack of knowledge in the other three competencies, such as in the cases of requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status, or in finding the right cohesion devices. With this focus on communicative competence, and its view that learning is most effective when learners interact in meaningful communication (Johnson & Morrow, 1981), CLT has been considered as a better way of teaching language than previous teaching methods (e.g. GTM, DM, ALM, PPP).

CLT is primarily built on methodological principles which serve as a guideline for implementing this teaching practice. A number of CLT principles and/or features specifically selected in this study provide an analytical framework to interpret and analyse the extent to which the cognitions and observed practices of the novice teachers align to CLT. These principles and/or features were chosen based on thorough and regular analytical comparisons between CLT principles and the research data collected in the present study. The data involved the curriculum texts (e.g. language policies, language curriculum, English
textbooks, methodology syllabuses), interviews with the teacher educators and novice teachers, and observations of the novice teachers’ practices. Relevant principles and/or features of CLT for the study are presented below.

The first overriding principle underlying CLT is that meaningful communication is important and enabling learners to achieve this goal is paramount. In this sense, the primary goal of CLT is to enable learners to communicate in the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), knowledge of linguistic forms (linguistic competence) is necessary but insufficient unless learners are able to understand that different forms can be used to perform a function (discourse competence) and also that a single form can address different kinds of functions. Learners need to be able to select the appropriate form, with consideration of the social context and the roles of the interlocutors (sociolinguistic competence), to express their intended meaning.

Teaching grammar in the context of CLT is also informed by the first principle. Although there are different views on whether to teach grammar implicitly or explicitly, a number of scholars in this area argue that making grammar rules explicit provides more benefits to adult language learners. In discussion of teaching explicit grammar, Long (1991) formulated the two terms “focus on forms” and “focus on form”. A focus on forms approach refers to a traditional way of teaching grammar, where the content of the syllabus and of lessons is the linguistic items themselves (e.g. structures, notions, lexical items, etc.) (Long, 1991). This is also where “students spend much of their time working on isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined externally and imposed on them by a syllabus designer or textbook writer, in conflict with the learner’s internal syllabus”, while meaning-focus is not prioritised (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 64). By contrast, a focus on form approach aims to enable learners to use the forms instead of merely possessing knowledge about the forms. In other words, it focuses on achieving meaning or communication through teaching grammar within contexts and through communicative tasks (Brandl, 2008). In its guidelines for foreign language teaching and learning, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2008) requires that language assessment must include an overall examination of linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge and language skills. Substantive emphasis is given to developing students’ language skills, and various and innovative teaching methods are promoted to provide them with more opportunities to use the language. In this context, a “focus on form” would be the preferred choice to enable students to be more communicative language users. Therefore, as part of an examination of the teachers’ PCK, the present study
investigates whether and to what extent this feature of CLT is reflected in the teachers’ practices.

The second important principle of CLT is that pedagogical activities need to be communicative. As identified by Johnson and Morrow (1981), communicative activities have three features: information gap, choice, and feedback. An information gap exists when teachers and learners have communication exchanges for unknown information instead of facts that they already know. As Richards, J. Platt and H. Platt (1992) argue, classroom activities will be mechanical and artificial if students are not asked to look for missing or unknown information through interacting with others. This communicative exchange must also enable learners to make choices about what they want to say and how they want to say it. Finally, activities are deemed communicative when the listener has an opportunity to provide the speaker with feedback upon what was said, thus indicating to the speaker whether or not the communicative purpose of the activity has been achieved (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). As discussed earlier, since the National Language Policy (Decision_1400/QD-TTg, 2008) and MOET’s guidelines (2008) mandate equipping students with communicative language abilities, it is essential to explore whether and how this principle of CLT, as essential to promoting learner communication, is implemented in the teachers’ practices in the present study.

The third principle of CLT is that language materials need to be authentic and reflect real-life contexts (Brandl, 2008; Brown, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Richards (2001a, p. 252) refers to authentic materials as “the use in teaching of texts, photographs, video selections, and other teaching resources that were not specifically prepared for pedagogical purposes”. These materials provide students with opportunities for exposure to real language either receptively or productively, in unrehearsed contexts where it is actually used (Brandl, 2008; Brown, 2007). This helps to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communicative exchanges. The use of authentic materials also allows teachers to be creative in their teaching approach, as they can select materials and design tasks and activities that fit their teaching styles and the learning styles of their students. This seems to suggest that authentic materials appear to be a vital element to promote meaningful communication and communicative activities. This principle is a key component of the analytical framework, for the examination of and the extent to which, if at all, the teachers’ use authentic materials in their classrooms.
The use of target language is regarded as the fourth principle of CLT and acts as a means for classroom communication rather than just being the object of study as part of a subject on the English language. Using the target language is a useful way to create rich input in the classroom. As argued by Cummins and Swain (1986), learners need as much exposure as possible to the target language because, the greater the amount of input, the greater the gains in the new language. The exclusive use of the target language by teachers in the foreign language has also become a strong principle advocated by proponents of teaching methodologies, most notably in relation to communicative approaches to language teaching (Rolin-lanziti & Brownlie, 2002). Nevertheless, Brandl (2008) highlights that teachers need to provide input (information or concepts in the target language) in a way that is comprehensible to the students; otherwise, learning cannot occur.

Finally, one of the most important principles of CLT is that a learner-centred approach needs to be used to promote cooperative and collaborative learning, typically in the form of pair and small-group work (Brandl, 2008; Brown, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). If the tasks are designed with meaningful and communicative goals and require students to use the target language, interactions among students will benefit students’ skills development (Brandl, 2008). Through exchanges with the teacher and other peers, the students are not only receiving input but also acting as active conversational interlocutors. These forms of classroom interactions give students opportunities to interact and construct meaning with other students and with the teacher, and consequently to learn to resolve difficulties that may occur during this communication. Such interaction functions as a catalyst that promotes language acquisition (Brandl, 2008).

As it is built on different principles, CLT has been implemented in diverse ways, most notably in what is referred to as the “strong” and “weak” versions of CLT (Howatt, 1984; Littlewood, 1981). The strong version emphasises that “language is acquired through communication” (Howatt, 1984, p. 279) and pays less attention to form. In this respect, instead of acquiring explicit linguistic knowledge and learning how to use it in communication, learners are provided with opportunities to experience how language is used in communication to develop their language skills. Conversely, the weak version advocates a need for a focus on form. Learners of a weak version of CLT concentrate on developing their linguistic competence before focusing on how to use this knowledge to express their intended message. In other words, the strong version is described as “using English to learn it”, and the weak one is understood as “learning to use” English (Howatt, 1984, p. 279).
The distinction between the strong and weak forms of CLT demonstrates its flexibility to be implemented in different contexts. The former appears to be largely utilised in ESL classroom settings, while the latter appears to be mostly used in EFL contexts (Karakas, 2013; Li, 1998). Ellis (2003) argues that the application of the weak version of CLT has parallels with task-supported language teaching, in which the tasks are given as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been first introduced using a more traditional method. In this sense, task-supported language teaching exhibits similar features as the PPP method mentioned above. The PPP method begins with the teacher’s presentation of linguistic items through contextual examples, followed by student practice of these items through controlled exercises. Finally, in the production stage, students receive the opportunity to use the language items in more personalised ways.

3.5 Language assessment

One of the contextual factors influencing teachers’ cognitions and practices, as identified by Borg (2015), are the kinds of expectations associated with language assessment, both nationally and locally in the classroom. In the context of the present study, language assessment is related to the policy context, and may have an important impact on the cognitions and practices of the novice teachers. For testing, that is, assessments organized at certain times as scheduled in a curriculum, students need to prepare and muster all their competences to achieve the best performance, as their answers will be measured and evaluated (Brown, 2010).

Two common forms of assessment are informal and formal assessment. As Brown (2010) points out, informal assessment is primarily found in the classroom context where teachers’ feedback is useful in supporting students’ development of knowledge and skills. By contrast, formal assessment, also referred to as summative assessment, targets measuring or reviewing what students have learnt, and usually occurs at the end of a unit or a course of instruction (Brown, 2010). Summative assessment aims to measure how well students demonstrate their understanding of knowledge and skills instructed in the unit or course, without necessarily guiding students to future development. In the context of Vietnam, summative assessment can take the form of end of semester tests, high school graduation exams, and entrance exams to university. The formal assessment, in this situation, plays an important part in the context of language policy that may have an impact on the practices of the teachers. Therefore, the goal of the present study is not to examine the influence of informal assessment but rather the
impact of formal assessment practices on the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices in the context of Vietnam. In addition, if CLT is selected as a teaching approach in the classroom, ideally, communicative language testing then needs to be employed in order to measure the extent to which students’ language proficiency aligns with curricular goals. Specifically, a communicative language test should not only evaluate students’ linguistic but also their discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence in a communicative manner (Bachman, 1991).

In short, a review on CLT and its essential principles and/or features as well as language assessment provides an insightful perspective about this widely discussed and applied approach, and importantly serves as a useful supplementary medium for the present study to describe and analyse more specifically the teachers’ knowledge base. The following section will conclude this chapter with a discussion on TBLT, which brings to this study another interpretive lens for better understanding teachers’ knowledge.

### 3.6 Task-based language teaching

Empirically, CLT is based on broad and theoretical tenets about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching (Brown, 2007), resulting in a variety of interpretations, and thus enabling a number of realisations to reside within the CLT family (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 2004). These realisations include content-based instruction, learner-centred instruction, cooperative learning, and task-based language teaching (Brown, 2007). As such, TBLT is viewed as another interpretation which has grown out of CLT and closely attached to its origin. Regarded as an approach, TBLT aims to provide learners opportunities to use language in natural situations by completing tasks. Similar to CLT, TBLT is regarded as an innovative teaching approach globally, and thus has received much attention in its implementation in the language classroom. TBLT is relevant to the present study because, as suggested in the Vietnamese high school teachers’ manual (see Chapter 5), TBLT should be the primary approach utilised in the classroom. According to the teaching manual, learners need to be provided with opportunities to work in pairs and groups to implement communicative or language tasks willingly and actively with teachers’ support. In particular, communicative competence development must be the outcome of teaching through learning the language skills comprising Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (Van et al., 2013a). In addition, there has been increasing attention of empirical research on TBLT in Vietnamese classrooms (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Viet, 2014). Thus, as with CLT, TBLT is an expected
practice in Vietnamese language classrooms. As is discussed later in Chapters 6 and 7, initial
analysis of data from the present study reveals that the teachers appear to follow many of its
principles (e.g. lessons following a clear and organized sequence of stages) and use
scaffolding to structure their lessons. The following sections of this chapter will begin with
an examination of the concept of scaffolding, a crucial teaching element of TBLT which is
featured as a useful guideline that EFL teachers employ to assist learners, followed by a
number of other important teaching concepts related to TBLT. The importance of using
scaffolding acts as an overarching principle that can also be seen in other concepts discussed
below.

3.6.1 Scaffolding and related concepts

This section discusses the main concepts relevant to the present study, including scaffolding,
task dependency, task difficulty, learner motivation and teachers’ use of the target and source
language. Among the concepts for TBLT, Nunan (2004) highlights the essential role of
scaffolding. He describes scaffolding as the process in language learning where teachers
provide a supporting framework to assist students at the beginning of the learning process
when they notice that their students are not able to produce the target language without
additional language support. He advises that scaffolding should neither be removed too early
nor last too long; otherwise, the learning will “collapse” or the learners will not be able to
develop sufficient independence in their own language use.

In his discussion of teacher support and teacher challenges in helping learners to become
independent, Mariani (1997) proposes a framework consisting of two dimensions: challenge
and support. This framework is closely based on the concept of “Zone of Proximal
Development” (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), referring to the difference between what a learner
can do without help and what he or she can do with help from interacting with peers and
more knowledgeable experts. Within this framework, Mariani suggests that learners need to
be challenged with demanding tasks that are beyond their present capacity and at the same
time need to be provided with highly appropriate support. A successful match of this pattern
may result in learners’ satisfaction, self-esteem and engagement. By contrast, if students are
given a highly challenging task but with low support, they will find the task impossible and
become frustrated, lose confidence and/or interest. Alternatively, if the teacher assigns a low
challenge task and offers a high level of support, his or her learners will feel very supported
but will probably gain very little new knowledge and skills because the task is not
challenging to them. Finally, if a low challenge task is coupled with low support, students may perceive it to be uninteresting, boring and/or demotivating.

The framework proposed by Mariani (1997) suggests that there are different kinds of scaffolding that a teacher can offer learners depending on his/her particular class of learners. For example, Mariani (1997) suggests breaking down the task into different steps through which the teacher starts with simple exercises and gradually leads learners to more complicated ones. A number of scaffolding techniques, presented below, advocated by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and later mentioned by Ellis (2003), are worth considering in examining how an EFL teacher can effectively provide support to learners. The framework proposed by Mariani (1997) and techniques suggested by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and Ellis (2003) are helpful in examining whether and how the participating teachers utilise them in their classroom. The scaffolding techniques below developed from Wood et al. (1976) and Ellis (2003) were found to be useful in describing how the teachers in the present study provided support to their students:

- Recruiting interest in the task through the teacher’s efforts to gain learners’ interest and engagement in the task.
- Simplifying the task by reducing other components or features of the task to the level that learners could recognize that the task is a good match with what they have achieved.
- Demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed through the teacher demonstrating or modelling a task to the learners.

(Mariani, 1997, p. 4)
Closely related to the main notion of scaffolding are the concepts of *task dependency* and *task difficulty*. Although it stands as a concept on its own, *task dependency* is closely related to scaffolding and is likely to be considered a form of scaffolding. The concept of task dependency is based on the assumption that students learn by gaining knowledge and experience from a previous task which serves as a foundation for assisting them to move on to the next one. Students continue this sequence; and, by its end, they are guided to a “pedagogical task” (Nunan, 2004, p. 35) where they are able to carry out free communication with peers, for example in the forms of discussion and decision-making tasks. In this sense, task dependency is affiliated with scaffolding because teachers need to support their students to build upon the previous tasks before doing the main task.

Equally important to the scaffolding concept, and which can influence significantly how teachers make decisions in the classroom, is *task difficulty*. As Nunan (2004, p. 85) stresses, the issue of task difficulty “is of central importance to researchers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, material writers and classroom teachers and therefore not surprising that it has been the subject of considerable research”. It is vital to consider the degree of difficulty of language tasks because, as Skehan (1996, p. 53) posits, if tasks are too difficult, they “are likely to over emphasize fluency”, or alternatively, “if tasks are too easy, they will present no challenge, and are not likely to extend any other goals of restructuring, accuracy, or fluency in any effective way”. In this sense, Skehan’s (1996) view is related to what Mariani (1997) discusses in his framework in that, without sufficient support, students will find challenging tasks impossible to accomplish and become frustrated, whereas low challenging tasks lead to boredom and demotivation. Within the classroom context, task difficulty refers to teachers’ assessment of the degree of difficulty of a task in relation to its appropriateness to their students’ abilities. However, as Nunan (2004) points out, there is not yet an objective method for determining task difficulty; thus, sequencing and integrating tasks is based considerably on intuition. Although there is not a clear definition of what makes one task more difficult than another, Brindley (1987) suggests that there are three main intersecting sets of factors contributing to the difficulty of a task, which comprise learner factors, task factors, and text or input factors. These factors, as presented below, originally proposed by Brindley (1987) and later revised by Nunan (2004), can help to explain teachers’ judgements on whether the task imposes difficulty to their students:

- Easier  
  More difficult  
  
  Learner
- is confident about the task is not confident
- is motivated to carry out the task is not motivated
- has necessary prior learning experiences has no prior experiences
- can learn at pace required cannot learn at pace required
- has necessary language skills does not have language skills
- has relevant cultural knowledge does not have relevant cultural knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Easier</th>
<th>More difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low cognitive complexity</td>
<td>cognitively complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has few steps</td>
<td>has many steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plenty of context provided</td>
<td>no context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plenty of help available</td>
<td>no help available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not require grammatical accuracy</td>
<td>grammatical accuracy required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has as much time as necessary</td>
<td>has little time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text/Input</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is short, not dense (few facts)</td>
<td>is long and dense (many facts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clear presentation</td>
<td>presentation not clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plenty of contextual clues</td>
<td>few contextual clues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>familiar, everyday content</td>
<td>unfamiliar content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(originally developed by Brindley, 1987, and revised by Nunan, 2004)

Although task difficulty appears to be different from scaffolding, as it is related to the nature of learners, a closer examination at learner factors and task factors reveals an adjacent correlation to scaffolding. This is because teachers need to consider the difficulty of the task and how their students need to be supported to do the task. These factors have equally contributing influences on task difficulty; however, a task may increase in difficulty when learners do not have the necessary language skills and learning motivation, especially when they have to deal with a cognitively complex task. In order to ensure an appropriate level of task difficulty, teachers can adjust the difficulty of a task methodologically by incorporating a pre-task activity (Ellis, 2003). As an example, Ellis (2003, p. 221) suggests “pre-teaching the vocabulary needed to perform the task or carrying out a task similar to the main task with the assistance of teachers, and planning time, i.e. giving students the opportunities to plan before they undertake the task”.

Another key determinant closely related to the notion of scaffolding is learner motivation. Dornyei (2001, p. 5) contends that learners’ motivation involves their “enthusiasm, commitment and persistence”, which are “key elements of learning success or failure”. Dornyei (2001, p. 5) also posits that “learners with sufficient motivation can achieve a working knowledge of an L2, regardless of their language, aptitude or other cognitive characteristics.”
Although motivation is not necessarily tied to TBLT, it does have a close relationship to scaffolding, in the way that teachers need to design appropriate activities to fit their students’ interest and background knowledge so that teachers can maintain their students’ motivation in the lesson and help them move beyond their present abilities. Dornyei (2001) proposes a number of motivational strategies, which are grouped into four primary categories: (1) creating the basic motivational conditions; (2) generating initial motivation; (3) maintaining and protecting motivation; and (4) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. These include, for example, activities that lead to the successful completion of whole group tasks or involving small-group competition games, bringing in and encouraging humor, adjusting the difficulty level of tasks to the students’ abilities, and counterbalancing demanding tasks with manageable ones. Thus, a key principle of learners’ motivation is teachers’ inclusion of diverse activities to build up their learners’ enthusiasm, commitment and persistence. Within the scope of the present study, learners’ motivation will be examined for its evidence, especially through the teachers’ cognitions and practices.

Finally, but just as importantly, teachers’ use of the target and source language is also connected to the notion of scaffolding. As discussed earlier, the use of target language is highly encouraged in CLT as one of its important principles. Students need to have more language exposure to the target language in order to enhance their skills. In this circumstance, teachers need to plan and think ahead about strategies (e.g. how to model and explain new vocabulary, how to simplify the use of target language) that allow them to maximize the use of the target language (Brandl, 2008). In this way, teachers’ exclusive or partial use of the target language can provide appropriate levels of language that can suit learners of different abilities. At the same time, the use of L1 is sometimes both necessary and advantageous to students (Brown, 2007). For example, teachers may need to use L1 as a way to help students understand concepts that may not be possible to explain in L2. However, Brandl (2008) argues that teachers need to balance the use of L1 and L2 to ensure that students understand and at the same time have maximize exposure to L2. Thus, within the EFL context, despite the necessity of L1 in certain circumstances, using L2 is essential to establish a suitable language learning environment and provide students with both receptive and productive language opportunities. The teachers’ use of L1 and L2 was investigated in this study as a way of providing information about the relationship between their beliefs (cognitions) about using the target language, as indicated in their interviews, and their practices in their classroom.
In summary, a number of teaching concepts in TBLT have been presented as necessary support that teachers may consider applying in order to suit their classroom contexts. Despite being presented separately, these concepts are interrelated in providing students with necessary support, and thus relevant for the study to understand the teachers’ cognitions through their choice of these elements as parts of their classroom practices.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has discussed the theoretical models and concepts that were drawn on as important guides to investigate the cognitions and practices of the novice teachers in this study. Specifically, the establishment of language teachers’ cognitions and practices could be attributed to the model presented by Borg (2015), whilst the specific categories of their knowledge have been discussed in relation to the model suggested by Shulman (1986, 1987). This chapter has also defined the language concepts and terminologies in relation to CLT/TBLT that will be used in describing the teachers’ SMCK and PCK. The next chapter will present the research methodology, and methods of data collection and analysis, for the present study.
Chapter 4
Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The objective of the present study is to investigate Vietnamese EFL novice teachers’ cognitions about and practices in language teaching and learning. From a review of the literature and research gaps identified in the context of Asian language teaching, with a particular attention into the Vietnamese setting, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

*How do the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the novice teachers live and teach influence their cognitions and teaching of English in Vietnamese classrooms?*

In order to answer this question the following three sub questions need to be addressed:

1. *What theories and practices in relation to English teaching and learning are used in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam?*

2. *What beliefs and knowledge (cognitions) about teaching and learning English are held by the novice teachers in the study and how are these evident in their teaching?*

3. *How are the theories and practices espoused in their teacher education evident in their classroom teaching?*

As indicated in Chapter 3, Borg’s model of language teacher cognition has influenced the framing of this study. Therefore, a theory-driven qualitative study was selected as the most relevant approach to identify the teachers’ teaching contexts, their cognitions, and the relationship between these and their classroom practices. Following this approach, the teachers are not treated as individual cases (e.g. case studies), but instead the data collected are used to illustrate multiple themes as linked to Borg’s model of language teacher cognition. Biographical interviews were employed to capture the teachers’ early life experiences, prior language schooling, professional coursework, and their perceptions of the school and classroom contexts in which they worked. To determine the influence of the nation’s language policies on the teachers’ cognitions and practices, textual data were collected in the form of the curriculum materials they would be drawing on in their teaching.
Teachers’ classroom practices were observed and recorded, and stimulated recall interviews were employed, to identify how the teachers’ cognitions were reflected in their teaching and the rationales for their decision-making.

4.2 Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study because it provides the means to describe and analyse the complex phenomena (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) of the interplay between teachers’ cognitions and their classroom practices (Baker, 2014). Qualitative research also provides the means to understand the contexts or settings in which the Vietnamese EFL novice teachers worked, and to determine the interplay between their cognitions and teaching within this context.

As Creswell (2013) points out, a complex, detailed understanding of the problem can only be obtained by having direct communication with participants, going to their homes or places of work. In relation to the present study, qualitative research allowed me to talk directly with participants, visit their schools and observe their classroom teaching in order to gain an overall and detailed understanding of the teachers’ cognitions about and practices in language teaching and learning. As Pajares (1992) suggests, interpretations of teachers’ cognitions require assessments of what they “say, intend, and do” (p. 327). Thus, a combination of multiple sources of data collection, such as biographical and stimulated recall interviews and classroom observations, were used in the present study to determine what the teachers believed about language teaching and learning and how their beliefs were reflected in their teaching.

4.3 The schools

The novice teachers who were participants in the study worked in two schools located in a province of the Mekong Delta: one is situated in the city and the other one is located in a district area. Van Lang school (pseudonym) is located in the city, which is also home to the university that the novice teachers attended for their pre-service teacher education. Unlike other high schools in the province, Van Lang school was founded in 2008 through an alliance between the Provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET) and the university. While it is affiliated with the university in terms of financial and human resources, Van Lang is under the academic administration of the DOET; specifically, it has to comply with academic and professional regulations regarding teaching schedules, professional
development, assessment and testing issued by the DOET. Van Lang school has three levels of education, comprising primary school (Grades 1-5), secondary school (Grades 6-9) and high school (Grades 10-12), with an average class size of 40 students.

After Grade 9, all students take an examination for high school entrance to different schools in the province; and, typically, they are grouped into classes from top to bottom level according to their examination performance. Number 1 is often used to signify the best class, and the classes with subsequent number designations are considered progressively weaker academically. In this school, Tam and Mai, the two novice teachers in this study, taught students from Grades 7, 9, 10, and 11. The focus of study was on language teaching and learning at high school level; thus, I did not observe secondary school classes such as Grade 7 and 9. I also excluded Grade 12, the senior high school classes, from the observations because students in Grade 12 often have to prepare for the graduation exams and my classroom visits might have disrupted these important studies.

The parents in the city school, as indicated by the vice-principal, were supportive of their children’s learning. For example, according to the vice-principal, they maintained regular contact with the school regarding English learning opportunities, as they thought that English was an important tool in the global integration. The vice-principal reported that the parents were keen on the intensive English courses or the innovative ideas that the school proposed, and willing to have their children participate in the English learning activities or courses.

The second school, Nhan Van, is located in a district of the province, and it takes 50 minutes for a 30 km trip from the city to arrive at the school by motorbike, a common form of transport in the area. The district is agriculture-based with rice cultivation and farm produce, and known for many attractions, with considerable potential for tourism development, such as Sap mountain, Ba The mountain, and Oc Eo archaeological site.

At the time the study was conducted, the school had 13 classes of Grade 10, 12 classes of Grade 11, and 15 classes of Grade 12, with an average class size of 30 students. Although the school was in the center of the district, the biggest challenge, as discussed by the vice-principal, was that it did not have a multimedia/lab room for language teaching. My observations showed that the English department had many cassette players and the teachers would bring them to class whenever they had listening lessons. Only Grade 12 classes were provided with television sets as learning supporting tools, which were purchased from the
school’s savings and a small donation from students’ parents. No projectors or television sets were supplied to the other classes. The vice-principal expressed her concern that the students’ parents had financial difficulties, so the school received only scarce support from them. Despite these difficulties, the teachers at her school had frequent opportunities to attend professional development courses such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) courses or postgraduate studies, which aimed to help them enhance their teaching practice and gain more confidence in teaching.

Unlike the parents in the city, according to the vice-principal, the parents of the students in the district school were not very interested in their children’s learning. She explained that, while there were a few parents who worked as government employees who paid attention to their children’s learning performance, the majority were farmers or self-employed and devoted little attention to their children’s learning or even attempted to collaborate with the teachers and school. For example, the vice-principal said that the school opened a language center for students with an interest in learning English, but it was soon closed due to low enrolment.

4.4 Gaining access to schools

In the context of Vietnam, in order to gain access to schools and teacher participants, there are a number of mandatory procedures. For this study, I had to first seek for approval from the Provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET), the main gatekeeper into the high schools in the province, before being able to approach high school novice teachers - the main participants of the study. I presented an information letter about the study to the DOET and answered any further enquiries. The DOET sent a list of high school English teachers in the province including their schools and years of teaching experience. Prior to granting me approval to proceed with the study, the Department asked me to select the schools and teachers for the research. After viewing the list of teachers, I selected two high school teachers in the city school and three in the district school who met the major criterion for the study, that is, they were within their first five years of teaching. Each high school in the province has a school website providing teachers’ emails and contact phone numbers. I contacted these teachers via phone and later met with them to clarify the nature of the research before obtaining their written consent. When the teachers agreed to participate in the study, I contacted the school principals and requested their permission to conduct research in
their schools. After having the teachers’ consent forms and school principals’ permission, I obtained approval from DOET to carry out the research with the teachers at the two schools. Prior to conducting this study, I also obtained the Approval letter (Ethics number HE14/391) from the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Wollongong.

As the novice teachers all graduated from the university where I was teaching, I decided to invite the teacher educators at my university who were in charge of the English teaching methodology courses to participate in the research. The purpose of having interviews with the teacher educators helped me to obtain knowledge about the theories and practices embedded in the teacher education, to address the first research question. The information gained from the interviews also enabled me to establish connections between what the novice teachers talked about regarding their teacher education program and how they applied what they learnt in their classroom practice. Similar to the procedure for contacting high school teachers, I also contacted the teacher educators by phone and later met them in person to explain the research and obtain their written consent. All three teacher educators agreed to participate in the study.

4.5 Participants

The key participants for data collection were five novice teachers working at Van Lang school (Tam and Mai) and Nhan Van school (Anh, Minh and Long). In addition, teacher educators from the university where these novice teachers attended were interviewed for the teacher education context, and the executives of the high schools were also invited to participate in an interview, to provide more insights into the school context.

4.5.1 The novice teachers

The five beginning full time teachers - four female and one male – who consented to participate in the study all graduated with a bachelor degree in English Teaching. They all graduated from the same public university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The two female teachers, Tam and Mai (all names are pseudonyms), had four years of teaching experience and worked at Van Lang, while the others taught at Nhan Van. Of the three at Nhan Van, Minh was in her fourth year of teaching and Anh and Long were in their third year of teaching. When all of these teachers were studying at university, English was the primary language of instruction in their courses.
As part of the National Language Project 2020, the MOET introduced a framework (MOET, 2014) that requires language teachers from primary to high schools to meet certain language standards depending upon the levels that they are teaching. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is used to assess teachers’ language performance in Vietnam. The teacher participants in this study also took language training courses in order to meet the language criteria required by the MOET once they became teachers. All five teachers had completed the CEFR for high school language teaching. The five teachers had been certified as having achieved the standard of English Language proficiency required to teach English Language at high school level. Thus, in terms of language proficiency, it could be surmised that they were all competent in using the English language.

The study began with observations of Tam and Mai’s classroom in the second half of the first semester of 2014. I decided to initiate the study with the teachers in the district at the beginning of the second semester of 2015 to allow me sufficient time for travelling and visiting the three teachers’ classes.

A brief summary of the teachers’ characteristics regarding where they learnt and taught, years of teaching experience, and the classes offered for observations, is provided in Table 4.1. More detailed discussion of the teachers’ backgrounds is given in Chapter 6, where narratives of each of the novice teachers in relation to their family backgrounds, prior language learning, professional learning and the current teaching contexts, are discussed.

Table 4.1  A summary of the novice teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Number of observations for each class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tam</td>
<td>Van Lang</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11A1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10A3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10A4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Van Lang</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11A4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11A5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anh</td>
<td>Nhan Van</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10A6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10A8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>Nhan Van</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11A8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Nhan Van</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10A5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>29</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.2 The teacher educators

Three experienced language teacher educators were invited to participate in the study. Interviews with the teacher educators provided a deeper understanding of, as well as the opportunity to clarify and confirm, the EFL methodology teaching principles in the teacher education program. Huy (pseudonym), the most senior lecturer, had 17 years of teaching experience, in which he had spent his initial 8 years teaching as a high school teacher before becoming a university lecturer. Van (pseudonym) had been working as a university lecturer for 12 years and Binh (pseudonym) for 13 years. They each graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English Teaching Education from a large well-known university in the Mekong Delta and all had a master’s degree in English Teaching Education. Huy and Binh did their postgraduate studies at their former university while Van had pursued her higher education training in Australia.

4.5.3 Vice-principals (Executives)

As part of the study, I originally intended to interview the principals of the high schools to provide me with an overall understanding about the school contexts. However, it turned out that, while they had a comprehensive understanding of their schools, they had less knowledge of the teachers, especially the English teachers, than their vice-principals did. At high schools, vice-principals are generally assigned to take charge of the teaching of some departments or the school facility. This was true especially in Van Lang. When I proposed interviewing the principal for some insight into the school context, the vice-principal expressed his interest in having the interview with me. I informed the principal about the vice-principal’s interest and requested his permission, which he readily provided. The principal of Nhan Van also directed me to interview the vice-principal, who consequently agreed to do an interview with me.

4.6 Data collection

As mentioned earlier, in Section 4.2, to understand the complex interplay between teachers’ cognitions and their classroom practices, a qualitative research approach was selected as an appropriate methodology for this study. Following the qualitative research, this study employed multiple methods of data collection including curriculum texts, interviews with the teacher educators and school vice-principals, classroom observations, and biographical and stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers. Descriptions of the data collection methods are given in the following sections.
4.6.1 Curriculum texts

Documents played an important role for this study, as they helped establish a solid background of the policies and curriculum for language teaching and learning in the context of Vietnam. The documents collected in this study were the National Foreign Language Policy issued by the Government (Decision_1400/QD-TTg, 2008), and the following curriculum texts: the Ministry of Education and Training’s English curriculum (MOET) (MOET, 2006), high school English textbooks and teachers’ manual (Van et al., 2013a; Van, Hoa, Minh, Phuong, & Tuan, 2013b), and the methodology syllabuses of the teacher education program (provided by the teacher educators). In the context of Vietnam, teachers are expected to follow the curriculum and textbooks issued by MOET. They are also encouraged to implement the theories and practices in language teaching and learning promoted in the university teacher education programs. In this sense, these curriculum texts serve as an overarching guide that teachers can rely on in teaching. These documents were analysed and crosschecked with the interviews with the teacher educators and novice teachers to help understand the policy context in relation to the expected teaching methods/approaches in Vietnam, and to observe how they were translated into the practice of the participating teachers in this study. While the language teaching policies and curriculum issued by the government and MOET were collected via a search engine on the Internet, the methodology syllabuses were provided by the participating teacher educators. The English textbooks; which included both the students’ textbooks and the teachers’ manual, were purchased from a bookshop.

4.6.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are widely used as an effective instrument in language teacher cognition research (Borg, 2015). According to Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood and Son (2004), the interview approach used in language teacher cognition research allows “teachers the opportunities and time to detail fully and freely the basis for their approaches to teaching, without the constraints of a set schedule of invariant questions” (p. 294). Semi-structured interviews have been substantially employed in a number of language teacher cognition studies (e.g. Baker, 2011b, 2014; Burri, Baker, et al., 2017; Burri, Chen, et al., 2017; Kouritzin, Piquemal, & Nakagawa, 2007; Nishino, 2009; Özmen, 2012; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Shi et al.; Shin, 2012). The use of semi-structured interviews
is therefore central to the development of language teacher cognition research, as they provide a gateway for the expression of the teachers’ voices and perspectives to be presented rather than those of the researcher (Elbaz, 1991).

In this study, semi-structural interviews were conducted with the teacher educators, novice teachers, and school vice-principals. The interviews with the university lecturers were conducted before interviewing the novice teachers. The interview questions were first trialled with another teacher educator who was also in charge of methodology courses, to ensure the clarity of the questions. The semi-structured interviews with the educators lasted approximately 40 minutes with each participant. The interviews with the vice-principals were conducted within a time range of 35-45 minutes. To conduct the semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall interviews mentioned below, I booked a room at the university where I was working to make sure that the interviews took place in a quiet and comfortable place. At times, to save traveling time for the teachers in the rural school, the interviews were conducted at the participants’ school in either an office or a classroom free from noise and distractions. The interviews with the vice-principals were conducted in their offices. Details of the interview questions with the teacher educators and the vice-principals are provided in Appendices J and N.

**Biographical interviews**

The purpose of the first semi-structured interviews with the novice teachers was to obtain biographical data about their early life experiences, prior schooling, professional coursework and current teaching contexts, as well as their cognitions about language teaching and learning. Adopting a biographical approach provided the means to gain an understanding of those elements and processes in the novice teachers’ lives that had influenced their cognitions and classroom practices. While Wright (2014, p. 1) argues for the value of biographies in the context of young people’s participation in physical activity, the following comment has broader relevance: she argues that, “biographies or life histories can provide a more nuanced understanding of how social, economic and cultural environments … shape the choices [people] do make and can make”. In the case of this thesis, understanding the teachers’ biographies provided insights into the beliefs and choices the teachers in the study made in relation to teaching English.

The primary challenge with such an approach for this study; however, was finding opportunities for lengthy and conversational interviews about experiences and values, when
the teachers were often in a hurry with busy teaching schedules. In order to minimize the potential issues and encourage the teachers to talk comfortably about their thinking, a number of steps were followed. Firstly, before the interviews, I explained the nature of the study to the novice teachers and invited them to ask questions at any time if they had any concerns about the study. I also assured them that their responses to the interview questions would not be judged. Such confirmation, as I observed, seemed to enable the novice teachers to be comfortable and open when responding to the interview questions. The questions used by Borg (1998) in his pre-observation semi-structured schedule were employed to guide the interview about contextual features that might have influenced their values and practices. I began with questions designed to construct a profile of the teachers, then presented questions about their prior language learning, previous learning memories, reasons for becoming a language teacher, and teaching methods/approaches used in previous learning and in current teaching. These include questions such as:

- Could you please tell me how you learnt English at secondary school and high school?
- What approaches were used at that time?
- Do you remember an unforgettable lesson that you had before?
- Why did you want to become an EFL teacher?
- What approaches did your university lecturers use to teach English?
- What approaches do you use in teaching? Why?
- How do your students influence your teaching?
- How do you use English and Vietnamese in class?
- How do you collaborate with other colleagues in teaching?
- Does this collaboration impact your teaching?

To accommodate the teachers’ busy teaching schedules, I asked the teachers to nominate a date and time that they might feel most comfortable with and available for the interviews. At times, the teachers had to teach two classes in the morning or afternoon and they had a 45-minute break in-between the two classes. However, the interviews were not scheduled during the teachers’ break since it could make them anxious about the time for the next lesson and hesitant in sharing with me. Thus, the interviews were mainly conducted when the teachers had no teaching duties or when they had finished their teaching on the day. These interviews were conducted prior to classroom observations. The interviews with the two teachers in the urban high school lasted approximately 60-70 minutes, and between 90-120 minutes with teachers in the district area. This was because I made changes to the interview questions in the second semester based on experiences learnt from the interviews and observations with the urban school teachers in the first semester. This led to some additional questions such as:
What activities do you think your students like most and why? How is your teaching similar to or different from other teachers? Can you compare your teaching this year with your first year teaching? The longer amount of time was also due to the rural teachers’ availability of time and interest in sharing more about their learning experiences, their students, and the teaching methods. Questions for the biographical interview with the teachers are provided in Appendix K.

Stimulated recall interviews

Stimulated recall interview has widely been used to “explore aspects of cognition that lie behind the participants’ decisions and actions” (Barnard & Burns, 2012, p. 145). Because teachers would find it difficult to verbalise their thoughts for their decision-making while they are teaching, retrospective verbal accounts in the form of stimulated recall interviews provide the means to prompt teachers’ recollective thinking (Borg, 2015). The eliciting of teachers’ retrospective thinking requires a stimulus such as a video recording of the activity (Barnard & Burns, 2012). Teachers are generally asked “to stop the videotape at points where they recollected their instructional decisions and explain why they chose to make those decisions” (Johnson, 1994, p. 442).

Stimulated recall interviews were brought into use in language teacher cognition research more than two decades ago (e.g. Borg, 1998; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1994; Woods, 1996); and since then their vital role in assisting the exploration of language teacher cognition has been established (e.g. Andrews & McNeill, 2005; Baker, 2011b, 2014; Basturkmen, Shawn, & Ellis, 2004; Canh, 2011; de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Erkmen, 2014; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Mak, 2011; Tůma, Píšová, Najvar, & Janíková, 2014; Viet, 2013).

For the present study, stimulated recall interview utilised recorded classroom observational stimuli to capture the teachers’ thinking for their decision-making after they had taught the lessons (Borg, 2015). The questions used to prompt the teachers to verbalise their responses about their decision-making were adapted from a number of empirical studies (e.g. Baker, 2011b; Canh, 2011; Viet, 2013). For example, I would ask the teachers questions such as: What were you thinking at this point? What were you thinking when you were doing this? Could you recall your thoughts why you were doing this? Would you always organize your lessons around other skills like that?
Although it is recommended that stimulated recall interviews be conducted as soon as possible after the observation, to yield more valid data (Borg, 2015), due to the teachers’ busy schedules with teaching and other personal activities, it was not always possible to carry out the stimulated recall interviews within one or two days after classroom visits. Despite the time span between classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews, I noticed that the teachers still maintained a fresh memory of the observed lessons.

The stimulated recall interviews with the teachers were administered as follows. Prior to the meeting with the teachers, I collected the notes from classroom observation as well as from the video extracts on which I wished the teachers to provide further explanation and detail. At the stimulated recall interviews, the teachers were invited to watch the video of the lessons and to make comments on any part of the lessons that they wished to. In addition, I informed the teachers that I would pause the video at some particular parts of the lessons that were recorded and ask them to provide rationales for those particular teaching behaviours. All of the stimulated recall interviews were audio recorded, and the time length varied between 35 and 90 minutes, depending on the number of questions that I proposed, the teachers’ responses, and the time available. Guidelines for stimulated recall interviews are provided in Appendix L.

4.6.3 Classroom observations

Observation is regarded as a useful method that provides additional and invaluable information about the topic being investigated (Yin, 1994, p. 87). According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), “observation is defined as the watching of behavioural patterns of people in certain situations to obtain information about the phenomenon of interest” (p. 211). They assert that observational data provide important information about people because their behavioural practice is not always congruent with what they say or do. Similar to other methods of data collection, observation also has both advantages and disadvantages. As noted by Creswell (2008), observation permits the researcher to gather information that occurs in a setting, to learn about actual behaviour, and to study people who may have struggle to express their thoughts. Nevertheless, it also bears some potential drawbacks, as the researcher may only have restricted access to the sites and situations and encounter difficulty in building rapport with people at the sites (Creswell, 2008). In addition to being more time-consuming and costly than other self-report approaches, observation may not necessarily help the researcher to ascertain precisely why people perform as they do through the lens of
observation, since people may behave differently when they know their actions are under observation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

In the field of language teacher cognition research, classroom observation is regarded as an essential tool to investigate teachers’ cognitions (Borg, 2003, 2015), with its value demonstrated by an increasing number of studies in recent years (Baker, 2011b, 2014; Canh, 2011; Erkmen, 2014; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Lee, 2017; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013; Zhu & Shu, 2017). As Borg (2003) argues:

> Can language teacher cognition be usefully studied without reference to what happens in classrooms? Personally I am sceptical, though it is clear that where large numbers of teachers are being studied and/or ideal typologies are being developed, analyses solely of teachers’ reported cognitions can provide a useful basis for further inquiry. Ultimately, though, we are interested in understanding teachers’ professional actions, not what or how they think in isolation of what they do. (p. 105)

Classroom observations also serve as a useful instrument to prompt teachers to think about what they do in the lessons. In this study, classroom observations were used: i) as a way of documenting and analysing teachers’ actions; and ii) as resources to confirm teachers’ reported cognitions and iii) as stimuli for the stimulated recall interviews to capture the teachers’ interactive thoughts and decision-making processes retrospectively.

When I commenced data collection for the study, there was not much time left in the first semester of the school year 2014-2015; therefore, it was not possible to implement the data collection with all of the five teachers in this semester. Instead, I decided to interview the urban school teachers (Tam and Mai) and observe their teaching performance first. The classroom observations with the urban school teachers began in November and finished in early December. I had to finish classroom observations by the middle of December because the semester was coming to the end and the teachers needed to prepare their students for the final exam. In February 2015, when schools finished end-of-semester examinations and celebrated the two-week traditional Lunar New Year holiday, I contacted Anh, Minh and Long, the teachers in the district school, and scheduled interviews and classroom observations with them. Observational data from these teachers’ classes were collected from March to April. A summary listing the dates when semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews took place can be found in Appendix M.
Each of the observations was video recorded and, prior to that, the camera had been tested in Tam and Mai’s classes before the official classroom visit to make sure the camera was placed in an appropriate position, at the back of the classroom with a good view for capturing the teacher’s movements and voice. This also enabled the students to be familiar with my presence in the classroom so that they would feel comfortable during my future classroom visits. The students seemed to be somewhat curious at first but, once the lessons commenced, they soon forgot about the camera. On the basis of the lessons learnt from this first set of observations at the district school, I came to the class earlier, positioned the camera, had a brief talk with the students about the research and told them just to study as they usually did in other English lessons. The students at the second location displayed similar reactions as their peers in the city.

The teachers’ lessons followed the units in the textbook. There were 16 units in the textbook, and each unit consisted of five lessons across the five language skills (i.e. Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing and Language Focus). Of the five teachers, I was able to observe each of the language skills once in Anh’s, Minh’s and Long’s classes. However, the skills that I observed were not necessarily within the same unit for each of the teachers. For example, I observed Anh’s teaching of a Writing lesson in unit 13 and a Reading lesson in unit 14. In total, I had five classroom observations for each of the teachers in the district. I was able to observe more of Tam’s and Mai’s teaching due to proximity of the school to where I lived and the greater number of available classes for observations in this semester. I observed eight lessons in Tam’s classes (1 Language Focus lesson, 4 Speaking lessons, 2 Reading lessons, 1 Listening lesson) and six lessons in Mai’s classes (1 Language Focus lesson, 1 Speaking lesson, 2 Reading lessons, 2 Listening lessons). I was unable to observe a Writing lesson in these teachers’ classes, but there were more observations on certain skills such as speaking and reading.

As seen in this study, a large amount of data was collected in order to help understand the cognitions and practices of the novice teachers. Transcribing the data for analysis, in this case, consumed considerable time, especially with the interview data collected from the novice teachers. To make this process more manageable and efficient, I requested the help of some Vietnamese postgraduate colleagues to transcribe the biographical and stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers as well as the interviews with the teacher educators and vice-principals. Since all of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, it was not very demanding for these postgraduate colleagues to listen and understand the conversations.
between the interviewees and me. These colleagues helped me make verbatim transcription of the interviews, and I offered them incentives in return for their kind support. After receiving the transcripts, I listened to the recordings again and double-checked to ensure that the interviews were fully transcribed. For the recorded classroom data which involved both English and Vietnamese language in the interactions between the teachers and students, I transcribed the data myself. All of the classroom practice data were transcribed into both English and Vietnamese according to what language the teachers had used in the classroom. The curriculum texts (i.e. language curriculum, textbooks, methodology teaching syllabuses) were obtained as either a soft copy or hard copy, which enabled me to read and analyse them. The translation of all the data in the study was not necessarily employed when the data were already transcribed. Instead, translation was used when an interview extract or recorded lesson episodes were selected to demonstrate a point or an argument presented in the thesis.

4.7 Data analysis

The data analysis of this study consisted of three stages, which are elaborated in detail below. These stages were not necessarily sequential but some occurred within the same time span, particularly in relation to the collection of data (e.g. observations of classrooms and interviews with the participating teachers occurred in the same period while I was visiting the different schools). The stages more describe a sequence of analysis as I sought to answer the research questions.

Stage 1:

I began the data analysis by examining the teachers’ classroom practices; thus, the focus of this stage was to address the second part the sub-question number 2, which is the teachers’ practices. My preliminary analysis from my observations of the teachers’ classroom practice in Van Lang revealed that, while following the prescribed textbooks, the teachers often diverged substantially from the activities presented in the textbooks. Further analysis of the data collected at Nhan Van also showed similar gaps between the textbooks and the teachers’ practices. This motivated the first stage of the analysis, which was to systematically visit each of the teachers’ recorded lessons and identify where the activities either conformed with, reproduced, or diverged from the textbooks. This resulted in the categorisation of activities, for example, retention, modification, omission and addition of activities.
Specifically, I watched the videos of the teachers’ lessons to have a sense of the activities the teachers used in the classroom. At the same time, I transcribed each of the lessons. For each activity, I stopped the video and wrote descriptions about it, for example: how the teachers led their students into the lessons; how they explained the instructions to their students; whether the activity was similar to or different from the textbook; how the students worked and performed the activity; and what language (i.e. L1 and L2) was employed in the activity. I was able to look more systematically into the teachers’ practices, and had a long list of descriptions of all of activities the teachers used in the class. I analysed and classified the activities which indicated different forms of the teachers’ PCK. The categorisation of the teachers’ classroom activities was based on the taxonomy of techniques originally developed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by Baker (2014). This categorisation allowed me to classify the teachers’ choice of classroom activities into three types: controlled, guided and free. Controlled activities refer to mechanical practice activities such as repetition or substitution exercises, with the teacher’s dominance over predictable responses regardless of students’ understanding about the language they are using. Free techniques relate to activities where students have a more prominent role in collaborating and negotiating with other peers involving unpredictable and opened responses in more real-life contexts. Guided techniques or semi-controlled techniques lie within the continuum of controlled and free techniques, and possess mixed attributes of these types of techniques. Guided techniques are still under the teacher’s control; however, responses for tasks of this type can be open-ended and unpredictable; for example, the teacher asks students to carry out an information-gap activity, which is a guided activity. To some extent, this is controlled because the teacher structures this activity; however, it involves students communicating with each other to find out unknown information, and in this they can use the language more freely as they wish.

The next step in this stage was that, for every lesson, I compared the classified activities with the textbook activities, to identify the variations between the teachers’ actual lessons and the textbook lessons. This comparison helped to provide a number of activities that were retained, modified, omitted and added by the teachers. By the end of this stage, I calculated the percentage of these activities in each of the teachers’ lessons.

**Stage 2:**

In this stage, the focus was primarily on answering all of the research questions (excluding the second part of the sub-research question number 2 about the teachers’ practices), with a
focus on the personal, situational and sociocultural factors influencing the teachers’ cognitions and practices as well as their choices of activities identified in stage 1. Within this stage, I drew on multiple sources of data (i.e. the curriculum texts, the teacher education program’s manuals and syllabuses, the teacher educators’ interviews, and the novice teachers’ biographical interviews and stimulated recall interviews), which enabled me to thematically analyse them for the key personal, situational and sociocultural influences, such as the school-based language learning, professional coursework, knowledge of learners, examination system, and professional support, on the participating teachers’ cognitions and practices.

Firstly, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, CLT was promoted as a preferred teaching method in the language policies and the teacher education program, I initiated this stage by examining the language curriculum and textbooks, teacher educators’ manual, and the methodology teaching syllabuses, for indicators of particular kinds of teaching theories that were privileged, and mapped the ways these were translated into particular forms of pedagogy in these resources. Similarly, the teacher educators’ interviews were analysed to identify the notions of language practice promoted and the kinds of resources that the novice teachers were likely to have from their teacher education. In this context, the language documents and the professional coursework were identified as the situational and sociocultural factors that had an impact on the cognitions and practices of the participating teachers. Since these factors appeared to mainly point to CLT as the predominant teaching approach, I analysed them in terms of the extent of the language use corresponding to CLT theories. In other words, my analysis focussed on coding these data in terms of how the principles and concepts of CLT (as discussed in Chapter 3) were evident.

The second method that I employed to examine how personal, situational and sociocultural factors influenced the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices was through analysing their biographical interviews. I began the analysis of these data by reading and writing narratives about the participating teachers with particular attention to their school-based learning, professional coursework, classroom and related contexts. By the end of this process, a thick and detailed description of each individual teacher’s biography, as well as an overall picture of how the teachers’ schooling, professional learning experiences and sociocultural factors impacted their values and beliefs about teaching English, were provided.
Finally, the teachers’ stimulated recall interviews were utilised to help explain what they did in the classroom. In other words, the stimulated recall interviews were analysed to identify the immediate situational factors that impacted the teachers’ choices of classroom activities. I read and coded the teachers’ interviews in terms of their explanations for what they did in the classroom, for example, their use of L1 and L2, and the variations between the teachers’ actual classroom activities and the textbook activities. The analysis of these data revealed that the students were the main factor that influenced the teachers’ classroom practices.

Stage 3:

At this final stage, the results of data analysis were organized to address all of the research questions. Because of the emphasis on CLT in Vietnamese language policy, as translated in the textbooks and teaching resources available to the teachers, much of the discussion in Chapter 7 focuses on the differences between what the teachers did and how they explained their practices in terms of the principles and/or concepts of CLT and TBLT. A further iterative process of data analysis occurred through many drafts of the findings chapters of the thesis, which were refined in consultation with my supervisors, as well as from feedback provided at presentations at conferences.

The overall procedure of data collection and analysis corresponding to the research questions is presented in Table 4.2.

*Table 4.2 A summary of data collection and analysis procedure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Data analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main research question</td>
<td>- Language curriculum and textbooks</td>
<td>- Thematic analysis and coding of the language use in these data in terms of how the principles and concepts of CLT were evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the novice teachers live and teach influence their cognitions and teaching of English in Vietnamese classrooms?</td>
<td>- Teacher education program’s manual and methodology teaching syllabuses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Teacher educators’ interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Novice teachers’ biographical interviews</td>
<td>- Reading and writing narratives about individual teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Analysing the teachers’ biographies with a focus on the influence of school-based learning, professional coursework and contextual contexts on their cognitions and practices about language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-questions</td>
<td>Stimulated recall interviews</td>
<td>Reading and coding teachers’ interviews in terms of their explanations for their choices of activities and the influence of immediate situational factors on their decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What theories and practices in relation to English teaching and learning are used in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam?</td>
<td>- Teacher education program’s manual and methodology teaching syllabuses</td>
<td>- Thematic analysis and coding of the language use in these data in terms of how the principles and concepts of CLT were evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher educators’ interviews</td>
<td>- Novice teachers’ biographical interviews</td>
<td>- Analysing and coding the teachers’ interviews in terms of how the principles and concepts of CLT were evident in their pre-service teacher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What beliefs and knowledge (cognitions) about teaching and learning English are held by the novice teachers in the study and how are these evident in their teaching?</td>
<td>- Novice teachers’ biographical interviews</td>
<td>- Analysing and coding the teachers’ interviews in terms of their cognitions about language teaching and learning (e.g. school-based learning, professional coursework, lesson sequencing, the use of L1 and L2, knowledge of learners)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Recorded classroom practices</td>
<td>- Watching videos and writing descriptions of each classroom activity</td>
<td>- Analysing and classifying activities into the taxonomy of techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Analysing and classifying activities into the taxonomy of techniques.</td>
<td>- Comparing teachers’ actual classroom activities with textbook activities.</td>
<td>- Comparing the teachers’ classroom activities with the theories and practices reflected in their interviews and the teacher education program data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Calculating the percentage of activities in each teacher’s lesson</td>
<td>- Calculating the percentage of activities in each teacher’s lesson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How are the theories and practices espoused in their teacher education evident in their classroom teaching?</td>
<td>- Recorded classroom practices</td>
<td>- Watching videos and taking notes of the teachers’ classroom activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Analysing and classifying activities into the taxonomy of techniques.</td>
<td>- Analysing and classifying activities into the taxonomy of techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Comparing the teachers’ classroom activities with the theories and practices reflected in their interviews and the teacher education program data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.8 Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness is an important quality of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A number of research strategies suggested by qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Mertens, 2005; Shento, 2004) were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the present study. These strategies include ways to develop rapport with participants, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, the use of Vietnamese, triangulation of multiple sources of information, accuracy of translated data, and frequent meeting sessions with supervisors to discuss interpretations.

I was able to build on the rapport and trust I had established with the novice teachers during their pre-service teacher education at my university. The teachers commented that they had positive learning experiences with me during this time. To further develop rapport and trust with the teachers, prior to conducting the study, I met with them to explain the research and obtain their consent. I made it clear with the participants that their participation was voluntary; thus, they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and would not be required to inform me about the reasons for their withdrawal. This point was especially emphasized with the novice teachers since they had to spend considerable time with me in the interviews and classroom observations. I also assured the participants that all collected data would be kept confidential and their identities would not be revealed to anyone. The teachers seemed pleased to participate in the study and none of them withdrew.

In addition, my prolonged engagement of six months in both schools contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. My relationships with the school teachers were positive and they seemed to perceive me as a colleague rather than an outsider coming to conduct research. This contributed significantly in alleviating any potential concerns or anxiety the teachers might have had. All of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, which provided a number of advantages. Using the first language helped the novice teachers feel comfortable and confident in sharing their thoughts. Communicating in Vietnamese also enabled the
novice teachers to respond directly and accurately to the interview questions without misunderstanding.

Data collected from various sources helped to provide corroborating evidence and shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013). In the case of the present study, for example, in order to identify and confirm that CLT is a preferred teaching approach in the English classrooms of the Vietnamese context, I analysed and triangulated the curriculum texts with the interviews with teacher educators and novice teachers.

A number of strategies were employed to help enhance the accuracy of translated data used in the study. As a native Vietnamese speaker, I initially translated the data excerpts (e.g. curriculum documents, teachers’ interviews, classroom data) that were to be included in the thesis. However, to ensure the accuracy of the translated data, I asked two postgraduate Vietnamese students to verify my English translations. In addition, throughout their supervision (e.g. frequent meetings and written feedback), my supervisors asked for clarification of the meaning of translated data to be used in the thesis, which helped to ensure that the intended meanings of the original Vietnamese oral and written texts were clearly conveyed in the English translations.

Finally, important and critical feedback from my frequent meeting sessions with my three supervisors had significant contributions to the trustworthiness of the study. During the research project, fortnightly meetings with the supervisors were consistently organized. In the meeting sessions, the supervisors challenged me with numerous questions to ensure that my procedures for data collection, analysis and interpretations were credible and trustworthy.

4.9 Summary

This chapter discussed the research methodology, methods and procedures of data collection that were employed in this study to investigate the cognitions and practices of EFL novice teachers in the context of Vietnam. Given the complex interplay between teachers’ cognitions and practices, a qualitative research design was confirmed to be the appropriate choice for this research project. In particular, multiple methods of data collection involving curriculum texts, interviews with the teacher educators, vice-principals, classroom observations as well as semi-structured and stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers, were employed to enable an in-depth description in the study. Data analysis, drawing on two theoretical models (Borg, 2015; Shulman, 1986, 1987) as well as research work in numerous studies,
was also presented. Finally, the chapter described a number of strategies that were utilised to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Results of data analysis will be presented in the following chapters.
Chapter 5

Sociocultural factors impacting teachers’ cognitions and practices: The role of curriculum and teacher education

5.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, Borg’s (2015) model suggests that, to understand teacher cognition, it is necessary to know about the context in which their cognitions are formed. According to Borg, teacher cognition is shaped by social and personal contexts, including teachers’ school-based experience, their professional coursework program, and contextual factors both inside and outside of their classrooms. For the teachers in the present study, these factors as well as the curriculum and textbook documents, which in large part determine what is taught in Vietnamese English classrooms, were deemed likely to have a significant impact on their cognition and classroom practices. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to identify the preferred theories and pedagogies that inform the Vietnamese curriculum, textbooks, teachers’ manual and methodology teaching syllabuses. This chapter also utilises the teacher educators’ interviews to identify the language theories and pedagogies promoted in their teacher education program.

This chapter is organized into ten sections. Following this introduction, the results of the analysis of the English teaching curriculum and textbook and the ways these documents might influence what and how the teachers taught are discussed from Sections 5.2 to 5.8. Section 5.9 then examines the theories and practices that inform pre-service EFL teacher education in Vietnam as evinced through interviews with teacher educators and their methodology course outlines. Finally, a brief summary of important theories and practices as well as factors influencing the participating teachers’ cognitions about teaching and learning English is given in Section 5.10.

5.2 Curriculum analysis: A curriculum commitment to CLT

As indicated in Chapter 1, the major goal of the National Language Policy is that most Vietnamese students will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, study and work. This section examines how the language policies proposed by the government and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) are translated into materials to guide practice in the English language curriculum and textbooks, ‘English 10’, ‘English 11’ and ‘English 12’, which serve as a de facto curriculum. The English language teaching curriculum used for analysis in this study is the one that was issued in Decision
A close examination of the high school English curriculum reveals that it generally supports communicative language teaching. Many principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) are evident throughout different parts of the curriculum (e.g. goals, contents, guidelines, assessment). For example, in the following quote, the curriculum states explicitly in its statement of goals that English language teaching aims to help students use English as a means of communication in the form of the different receptive and productive language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading and writing). In addition to this goal, students are also expected to have basic and comprehensive knowledge about English language forms and structures suitable to their level and age, which can assist them to perform the basic communicative language functions.

The goals of English teaching at high schools are to enable students to:

1. Use English as a means for basic communication both in spoken and written forms.
2. Acquire basic and relatively systematic knowledge of English suited to their levels of proficiency and age.
3. Obtain some general understanding of the people and cultures of some English-speaking countries and develop a positive attitude towards the people, cultures and language of these countries; nourish the pride in, love for and respect for the Vietnamese culture and language.

(Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 6)

In this sense, the focus on language communication in the curriculum is similar to the key principle of CLT as discussed in Section 3.4, that meaningful communication in learning English is the most important goal in language teaching and learning.

In addition, as evident in the following statement, the curriculum explicitly details that the English language teaching program at high school should adopt a communicative approach to language teaching as its guiding principle: “Communicative skills are the goals of the teaching and learning process; linguistic knowledge is the means by which communicative skills are formed and developed” (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 7).

In keeping with the CLT emphasis on a learner-centred approach through cooperative and collaborative learning, the curriculum also stipulates multiple modes of working such as individual work, pair work and group work. For example, in the following quote, the
curriculum describes teachers as organizers and guides who need to involve students in classroom activities:

To build up and develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills through working on linguistic knowledge such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, these basic teaching principles need to be recognised:

Teachers organize and guide students to participate actively in the learning process through individual, pair and group activities. (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 24)

Firstly, as illustrated in this quote, the curriculum maintains its focus on communicative abilities as the ultimate objective and considers linguistic knowledge as a necessary support to realise this goal. Secondly, teachers, as this quote suggests, need to be able to engage their students in classroom communication activities. In order to encourage students’ active participation, teachers are advised to provide and guide their students through communication opportunities in various modes of working (e.g. individual, pairs, groups).

In keeping with a learner-centred approach, students, as seen in the quote below, are to be considered active and creative agents in the learning process. They are to be encouraged to participate in communicative activities actively and to cooperate with their peers through pair and group work:

Students are active agents in the learning process. Students take part in learning and communicating activities actively and creatively with high spirit of cooperation. Students need to engage in communicative practice with full awareness in class and during self-study. (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 24)

The curriculum reveals its consonance with CLT through its emphasis on enabling students to achieve their communicative language targets through working creatively and collaboratively with their peers. More importantly, what is suggested in the curriculum is that, through frequent interactive activities, eventually students will become more autonomous language learners beyond classroom-based practice - an essential factor to qualitative change in greater language use proficiency (Benson, 2001).

The curriculum refers to other important features in communicative language teaching as identified in Chapter 3. These are implicit, but given the curriculum commitment to CLT, the reference to student motivation and L1 and L2 can be read in the context of CLT. From a CLT perspective, motivation is an important determinant of learners’ success regardless of their language aptitude or other cognitive characteristics. The curriculum explicitly identifies
students’ interest or motivation in learning as playing an essential part in a successful lesson. For example, in the following quote, teachers are advised by the curriculum to employ different ways of teaching strategies and techniques to help maintain and enhance students’ enthusiasm, commitment and persistence in the lessons. Noticeably, no teaching resources (e.g. methods, techniques, tools, materials) are specified as long as teachers are able to cultivate their students’ interest in learning the language:

Teachers need to appropriately combine teaching methods and techniques, use teaching tools and supporting materials effectively to create learning interest among students. Teachers need to use the mother tongue appropriately and efficiently in the teaching process. (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 24)

The quote above also makes mention of the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom. The use of L2 is regarded as an important feature of CLT for its provision of language exposure beneficial to learners’ language acquisition, although L1 use is also acceptable when needed. Likewise, the curriculum encourages teachers to provide students with more sufficient target language exposure and to make thoughtful decisions when giving support in the source language.

As further evidence of the curriculum’s commitment to CLT, the guidelines for designing the textbooks for Vietnamese language learners specify that authentic materials need to be incorporated. For example, in the quote below, textbook writers are advised that teaching materials need to be contextualized, authentic and applicable to real life communication:

Orientations for textbook writing:

Selections and arrangements of topics, communicative ability, linguistic knowledge, structures of lessons, exercises and communicative activities need to follow these principles:

- Contextualizing language through realistic communicative situations.
- Ensuring materials that are authentic and applicable in real-world communication.
- Ensuring an integration between the language skills and integration between language skills and linguistic knowledge.

(Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 23)

5.3 Assessment in the curriculum

Finally, with respect to assessing students’ learning progress, the curriculum suggests two forms of assessment: formative and summative. Despite the mention of formative assessment, there is limited mention of how this form of assessment might be conducted. By contrast, there are numerous examples of how summative assessment might be conducted, including:
checking knowledge from previous lessons prior to the new lesson; 15 minute-tests; 45
minute-tests, end-of-semester tests; and an end-of-the year tests. In particular, these tests are
recommended to target all four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
and linguistic knowledge (i.e. pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) with an equal focus
of 20% of the total Grade for each language skill and their relevant linguistic component(s).
The tests are expected to closely follow the specified knowledge and skills stated in the
curriculum and textbooks. For example, a detailed description of the extent to which students
are expected to master the knowledge and skills are given in the curriculum for Grades 10
and 11, shown in Table 5.1.

In keeping with CLT, the components of communicative competence need to be addressed
with sufficient emphasis in the curriculum; however, this description of the knowledge and
skills expected of students upon finishing Grades 10 and 11 reveals a focus in the assessment
component on summative tests and measures of language skills. The curriculum mentions
targeting and testing students’ capabilities in performing these language skills (i.e. listening,
speaking, reading and writing) and demonstrating their linguistic knowledge. However, there
is little evidence of integrating these language components with authentic and communicative
contexts into the forms of summative assessment. Among the components of communicative
competence, only students’ linguistic competence appears to be assessed. Other elements of
communicative competence, namely discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competencies,
are not easily discernible in the objectives or assessment of the curriculum. The lack of
evidence for formative assessment and other types of communicative competence in the
curriculum could lead to what and how the teachers might teach and assess their students’
language performance. In other words, the teachers might use the summative assessment to
evaluate their students’ linguistic knowledge and language skills as a priority, thus potentially
impacting students’ language development.
Table 5.1 General requirements for students’ language knowledge and skills by the end of Grade 10 and 11. (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, pp. 29-30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Listen and comprehend the main and specific ideas of the 120-150 word monologues / dialogues around the themes in the curriculum. Comprehend the document / text spoken at average / slow speed.</td>
<td>Question-Answer and present ideas about topics related to the themes in the curriculum. Perform basic communicative functions: giving directions / instructions, expressing opinions, asking for directions, asking for information, and providing information, etc.</td>
<td>Read and comprehend the main and specific ideas of the 190-230 word text around the themes in the curriculum. Develop vocabulary skills: using dictionary, context, etc.</td>
<td>Follow the sample writing and/or with cues for a 100-120 word text about the themes in the curriculum or to help / support personal and basic communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Listen and comprehend the main and specific ideas of the 150-180 word text around the themes in the curriculum. Understand / comprehend the listening text spoken at relatively close to a real-life speed.</td>
<td>Question-answer and present ideas about topics related to the themes in the curriculum. Perform basic communicative functions: expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction; agreement / disagreement; differentiate facts and opinions, etc.</td>
<td>Read and comprehend the main and specific ideas of 240-270 word reading text around the themes in the curriculum. Develop vocabulary skills: using dictionary, context, synonyms / antonyms. Recognize the grammatical components, text links.</td>
<td>Follow the sample writing and/or with cues for a 100-120 word text about the themes in the curriculum or to help / support personal and basic communication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, as MOET expects that the four language skills are to be assessed throughout the school year, provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) have recently translated this policy into practice by requiring schools to include language skills in the end of semester and end of year tests. However, the national curriculum does not discuss whether or how these language skills can be tested in high-stakes examinations. In reality, important examinations such as the high school graduation exam and entrance exam to university are traditional written-based tests with no listening and speaking components. As a result, there is
a discrepancy between what is assessed during the school year tests and in high-stake examinations. This discrepancy may result in potential backwash (Brown, 2010; Hughes, 2003), in which the teachers and students concentrate on preparing for the future high-stakes tests and pay peripheral attention to what is not included in those critical exams, due to the differences between the test format and its content.

5.4 Curriculum influences: In summary

In summary, a close examination of the curriculum shows that this guiding document, in principle, follows many important elements of CLT in order to address the expectations of the government as set out in its national language policy. Although there may be some ambiguity in interpreting its assessment in light of CLT features, the guidelines for textbook designers as well as classroom teachers seem to be in keeping with CLT principles and with the expectations of policy makers and language curriculum designers. However, the curriculum analysis reveals lopsidedness between its expectations in following CLT principles, its guidelines on language assessment, and the actual forms of high-stakes examinations. Such discrepancy may lead the teachers into a sophisticated/complicated sociocultural context where they need to make compromises in their teaching to target the curriculum expectations and assessment guidelines as well as the actual high-stake examinations, which could then have influential impact on their students’ learning outcome.

5.5 Textbook analysis: An overview

As mentioned earlier, teachers generally consider the textbooks as their ‘bible’ for teaching (see Chapter 4). The following section presents an analysis of the textbook to examine how the expectations and guidelines in the National Language Policy and curriculum are translated into the materials used in the teachers’ classrooms.

Textbooks, as Richards (2001b) suggests, are considered a key component in most language programs; or, as Sheldon (1988, p. 237) describes them, they are “the visible heart of any ELT (English Language Teaching) programme”. In many language teaching contexts, textbooks may be the principle source for much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs inside the classroom (Richards, 2001b). In Vietnam, the English textbooks are indeed the primary resource guiding teaching and learning for EFL teachers and learners, thus impacting what the teachers in the present study believed and how they behaved in the classroom.
At the time this study was conducted, there were two sets of textbooks written by the MOET for all school levels across the country, one for schools at advanced level and the other for schools at standard level. The advanced textbook is usually chosen for students of gifted high schools while the standard one is used for students of mainstream high schools. As there are generally only one or two high schools for gifted students in a province or city, most of the high schools including those in this study followed the standard textbook.

The English textbooks used for students in mainstream high schools (15-18 years of age) at Pre-intermediate level, “English 10”, “English 11”, and “English 12”, were written based on the National Curriculum. A group of textbook writers including teachers and educators teaching at universities and high schools across the country were invited by the MOET to design this textbook series. The textbooks were published by the Vietnam Education Publishing House, a central department of MOET, in 2008 and were still in use at the time this study took place. Each textbook consists of 16 teaching units and six review units. Each unit presents a topic and is organized into five corresponding lessons: Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language Focus. Each lesson is tailored to be taught in a 45-minute period. The total amount of time for English lessons in a school year is scheduled within 105 periods across two semesters, consisting of: 80 periods for classroom instruction; 16 periods for revision, assessment and testing correction; six periods for revision after two or three teaching units and in the form self-assessment; and three periods in reserve and for consolidation when necessary.

In general, the Reading and Listening lessons share a similar organizational structure, as they are both sequenced in three stages in the lesson. The first stage of each lesson begins with one or two Before you read/listen activities in which students are often provided with an opportunity to discuss questions related to the topic with their peers. Through involving students in peer discussion, these activities aim to lead students to the topic, and introduce new vocabulary that they may find while reading or listening (Teacher’s Manual, English 10). While you read/listen activities constitute the second stage of the lesson. During this stage, students will read a short text or listen to a passage or conversation and answer two or three questions from the reading or listening passage. The aim of reading activities in this stage is to develop reading skills and strategies, such as guessing meaning in context, skimming for the main idea, and scanning for specific ideas. For example, Task 1 in While you read, unit 7, English 11 provides students with a list of words that appear in the reading passage about World Population and asks them to fill the blanks of given sentences with
suitable words by reading the text. Correspondingly, the *listening activities* target micro skills such as listening for the main idea, and listening for specific or detailed information. These exercises are designed in the form of gap-filling questions, true-false questions, multiple choice questions, or open-ended questions. For example, students could be asked to listen to an interview with a world population expert and choose the best answer (i.e. A, B, C, D) for each of a statements of questions given in *Task 1 in While you listen, unit 7, English 11.*

Finally, *After you read/listen* activities conclude the lesson with further practice provided to students in the form of oral or written language production. More specifically, the reading activities in this stage usually aim to take students beyond the lesson by requiring them to discuss the questions related to the topic with their peers. The listening activities often involve students summarising or reproducing the listening passage verbally or in written form, and/or discussing questions related to the topic.

The Speaking lesson is not necessarily structured in the same way as the other two lessons. It generally consists of 3-4 activities\(^1\), where the first two activities often provide language input and develop some language competences or specific language functions such as making requests, describing personalities, and expressing agreements and disagreements. The remaining activities, with or without given prompts, may involve students and their peers in role plays, discussions, dialogues or presentations (English 10 &11; Teacher’s Manual, English 10).

The Writing lesson is also not made up from the three stages that the Reading and Listening lessons are. Instead, it may begin with a writing model that is accompanied with language prompts and/or examples of guided writing as a necessary support for students to work on the main writing activity. The Writing lesson includes a number of different writing genres, from personal and formal letters to reports, narratives, charts and table description paragraphs.

The Language Focus lesson is composed of two elements: Pronunciation; and Grammar and Vocabulary. As stated in the preface to the textbook, the Pronunciation part aims to provide practice on the sounds (e.g. vowels, consonants, and clusters) that might present some difficulty to students (English 11). These sounds are first presented and practiced as discrete forms and then incorporated into sentences for repetition practice. The Grammar and

\(^1\) The term “task” is used in the four language skills lessons, and the term “exercise” is used in the Language Focus lesson. However, the tasks in the textbook may not always correspond to the concept of task as defined by Skehan (1998) and Nunan (2004).
Vocabulary component presents the structures and vocabulary that are claimed as central ingredients in the development of students’ language skills in the unit. Despite the claim in the preface of the textbooks that these linguistic forms are to be presented and practiced in the form of exercises and communicative activities, such practice tends to be de-contextualised and non-communicative (see examples in Section 5.6).

The six revision units, identified as “Test Yourself”, aim to help students assess their own knowledge and progress after the completion of 2-3 teaching units. The four components - Listening, Reading, Writing and Language Focus - are included in the revision tests; however, no speaking component is provided.

5.6 A closer look: An analysis of a textbook unit

The overview of the textbooks’ organisation and contents has provided a general understanding of this teaching resource. The following paragraphs examine whether and how the textbooks, as a de facto curriculum, follow principles and/or features of CLT as espoused in the curriculum and described in Chapter 3. The analysis was done by selecting Unit 7, “World Population”, from the Grade 11 textbook. Unit 7 was considered representative of many of the units in the textbooks (Grades 10 and 112), for the following reasons. Firstly, a careful look throughout all the units in the textbooks showed that, although each unit might have some differences in their contents and activities, overall the units have a similar structure. For example, the reading lessons of most of the units in the textbook (e.g. units 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, English 11) consist of “Guessing meaning in context” and/or a “Comprehension passage”. Similar patterns are evident for the units in the textbook for Grade 10. The second reason for my choice of Unit 7 for analysis was that it was the unit taught by the teachers Tam and Mai and hence the unit for which most data were collected in the form of observations and stimulated recall interviews. Thus, a close analysis of one unit provided insights into the extent to which the textbooks were designed with communicative teaching principles and allowed some investigation of how these were translated by teachers in their classroom practices. Despite choosing one typical unit for analysis, when necessary, other units and/or their lessons in the textbooks were also drawn on to support my interpretations.

2 In general, English 12 has a similar organization as English 10 and 11. However, as this study primarily involved its data collection at Grades 10 and 11, it is more relevant to describe the textbooks used for these Grades.
According to the Teacher’s manual (English 10), the preferred teaching approach that the
textbooks follow is a learner-centred and communicative approach, with task-based language
teaching (TBLT) forming a central part of this approach. The teaching contents for each skill
in a unit are given in the book map found on the first page of the book. Generally, the
activities in the units are termed “tasks”, which are expected to correspond with the concept
of tasks as used in TBLT.

The table below presents unit 7’s contents across the four language skills, pronunciation and
grammar which would be taught, and the specific activities described in the textbook for each
of the lessons.

Table 5.2 Unit 7 - World Population - teaching contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Guessing meaning in context  &lt;br&gt;• Comprehension passage</td>
<td>• Identifying causes for population explosion  &lt;br&gt;• Identifying problems facing overpopulated countries  &lt;br&gt;• Working out solutions to problems of overpopulated countries  &lt;br&gt;• Talking about problems of overpopulation and offering solutions</td>
<td>Monologue:  &lt;br&gt;• Extensive listening: multiple-choice questions  &lt;br&gt;• Comprehension questions  &lt;br&gt;• Summarizing main ideas</td>
<td>• Interpreting statistics on population from a chart</td>
<td>• Pronunciation:  &lt;br&gt;/kl/ /gl/ /kr/ /gr/ /kw/  &lt;br&gt;• Grammar:  &lt;br&gt;- Conditional types 1 and 2  &lt;br&gt;- Conditional type 3  &lt;br&gt;- Conditional in reported speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the teaching contents given in the book map of the textbook, a number of activities
are given for each of the lessons in unit 7. Below is an outline of activities designed for the
lessons on the Language skills and Language Focus.

**Unit 7: Outline of activities**

**Reading:**

- Discussion with a partner (Identify where these scenes can be found, the meaning of the
  pictures, and state and explain if, the larger in population a country is, the stronger it is)
- Individual work (Read the text and fill in the blanks with suitable words from the text)
- Individual work (Read the text and answer the questions)
- Discussion with a partner (Find out the world’s five largest countries in population and say which is the richest and which is the poorest)

+ Speaking:

- Discussion with a partner (Put the causes of population explosion in order of importance and explain why)
- Discussion with a partner (List the problems facing poor and overpopulated countries and report the results to the class)
- Discussion with partners (Work out the solutions to the problems of overpopulation and report the results to the class)
- Discussion with partners (Talk about the problems of overpopulation and offer solutions using the results in the previous tasks)

+ Listening:

- Discussion with a partner (Discuss if our world is populated and what continent has the largest population)
- Individual work (Listen to the interview and choose the best answer from multiple-choice question task)
- Individual work (Listen to the interview again and answer the questions)
- Discussion with partners (Summarize the main ideas of the interview)

+ Writing:

- Individual work (Study the chart and write a paragraph of 100-120 words, describing the information in the chart)

+ Language Focus:

- Individual work (Listen and repeat the sounds)
- Practice with a partner (Practise reading aloud the dialogue)
- Individual work (Exercise 1: Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)
- Individual work (Exercise 2: Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)
- Individual work (Change the following conditional sentences into reported speech)
An analysis of the outline of activities in this unit demonstrates that the four language skills and linguistic knowledge are all learned and practiced through different activities. Noticeably, Reading, Speaking and Listening lessons include pairwork and groupwork activities, which are examples of cooperative learning. Writing and Language Focus lessons, however, do not involve such forms of learning, but instead might require students to work independently on tasks. The Language Focus lesson only includes drill practice rather than communicative and meaningful language drills. For example, while the Pronunciation lesson asks students to practice reading aloud the sounds incorporated into individual words and then in a dialogue, the Grammar lesson only asks them to identify the correct forms of the verbs or transform the conditional sentences into reported speech. These types of exercises may be useful for familiarising students with specific sounds or structures; however, they do not provide students with an opportunity to truly utilise these sounds and structures in a communicative manner in authentic and real life situations. This suggests that communicative activities tended to be more evident in the first three language skills, but not in Writing and Language Focus lessons.

To understand more thoroughly the nature of these activities with reference to communicative language teaching, first, these activities were examined against the taxonomy of language teaching techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by Baker (2011) (see Chapter 4). The purpose of this comparison was to determine the extent to which the activities in the textbook were mechanical, meaningful, or communicative. A description of Unit 7 activities using this taxonomy classification is outlined in Table 5.3 and discussed further below.

Table 5.3 Classifications of activities based on the taxonomy techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and Baker (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Activities/ Types of activities</th>
<th>Controlled</th>
<th>Guided</th>
<th>Free</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Question-answer referential: (Discussion with a partner: Identify where these scenes can be found, the meaning of the pictures, and state and explain if, the larger in population a country is, the stronger it is)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visual Identification: (Individual work: The words in the box all appear in the reading passage.)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read the passage and fill in the blanks of the sentences with suitable words from the passage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question-answer display: (Individual work: Read the text and answer the questions)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion: (Discussion with a partner: Find out world’s five largest countries in population and say where they are and which is the richest and which is the poorest)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming (Discussion with a partner: Put the causes of population explosion in order of importance and explain why)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation or Information exchange: (Discussion with a partner: List the problems facing poor and overpopulated countries and report the results to the class)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation or Information exchange: (Discussion with partners: Work out the solutions to the problems of overpopulation and report the results to the class)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion: (Discussion with partners: Put the causes of population explosion in order of importance and explain why)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion: (Discussion with partners: Talk about the problems of overpopulation and offer solutions using the results in the previous tasks)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion: (Discussion with a partner: discuss if our world is populated and what continent has the largest population)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Identification: (Individual work: Listen to the interview and choose the best answer from multiple-choice question task)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production-Audio Identification: (Individual work: Listen to the interview again and answer the questions)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap-up: (Discussion with partners: Listen again and summarize the main ideas of the interview in groups)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition: (Individual work: Study the chart and write a paragraph of 100-120 words, describing the information in the chart)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition: (Individual work: Listen and repeat the individual</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repetition: (Individual work: Listen and repeat the individual</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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What could be observed from the summary of techniques used in Table 5.3 is that there are opportunities for communicative interactions across the four language skills. This is evident through a proportionally greater number of guided (6 of 13) and free (4 of 13) than controlled activities (3 of 13) included in the language skills lessons. These guided and free activities usually involve students’ cooperative learning in pairs and groups. Examples of guided activities in Unit 7 were Brainstorming, Preparation, or Wrap-up, where students might be asked to work with their peers to answer the questions, and/or summarize the main ideas of what is taught. Likewise, free activities are primarily Discussion activities, where students are also requested to communicate with their peers, in a way similar to the guided activities, but in the free activities, they might be prompted to engage in exchanges which produce more unpredictable information. Similar to the activities in the Reading, Speaking and Listening lessons, the Writing lesson, which is usually designed with one or two activities, also provides students with guided and free activities. For example, the writing activity in this unit, categorised as a free activity, asks students to write a descriptive paragraph about a population chart. Despite a provision of supporting language phrases and statistics given in this activity, students can choose the ways they use language and structure the information in their paragraphs.

In contrast to the guided and free activities, the controlled activities in the language skills lessons are fewer in Unit 7, and students are usually expected to work independently instead of cooperatively. The three controlled practice activities in the language skills lessons are Visual Identification and Question-answer display in the Reading lesson and Audio Identification in the Listening lesson. For example, the first reading activity asks students to
Based on the continuum, suggested by Crookes and Chaudron (1991), that drill types develop from “mechanical” to “meaningful” to “communicative” for students’ language progression, the analysis of activities in the language skills lessons suggests that substantial attention was given to meaningful and free activities, whilst little attention was paid to mechanical activities. There appeared to be an effort in the textbooks to incorporate communicative practice into these lessons to uphold CLT principles and expectations stated in the curriculum.

Nevertheless, despite the endeavour to include more communicative practice in the language skills lessons, an examination of the Language Focus lesson reveals that its activities were generally designed as mechanical practice, thus giving students limited opportunity to utilise the language sounds and structures in meaningful and communicative practice. For the most part, the controlled drills in this lesson displayed a substantial focus on forms by asking students to repeat the sounds and a given dialogue, identify the correct verb forms, or give sentence transformations. These types of practice are contradictory to the suggestion in the preface of the textbook that the linguistic forms could be translated into communicative activities for students to practice in contexts that are more meaningful. In addition, the language forms appeared not to be integrated with the language skills, as suggested by CLT principles and the National curriculum, so that students might perform different functions and intended meanings. For example, the language features in the Language Focus lesson included the conditional clause Types 1, 2 and 3, which were used to talk about real and possible situations, unreal impossible or improbable situations, and unreal possible past situations, respectively. However, there was little evidence that these language forms were included in the language skills lessons to deliver their language functions. It would be expected that the language functions of these forms - making plans, predictions, or expressing regret - could be designed with interactive activities within the Language Focus lesson itself as well as in other lessons of the unit, so that students could have additional opportunities to convey their intended meaning using the language structures. In conjunction with the Language Focus lesson’s exclusion of activities for meaningful and communicative purposes, this also suggests a disconnection between the linguistic knowledge and language skills.
Furthermore, despite having students involved in a learner-centred approach through many
types of working (e.g. individual work, pairwork, and groupwork) and scaffolding learning
activities, the activities across the lessons in the unit did not necessarily lead students to
motivating language practice. There were real-life and scaffolding language activities for
students’ learning that could give students a sense of confidence; however, these activities did
not always present unpredictable information, as many of the answers to the questions could
be found with reference to the reading/listening passage or to the language prompts in the
speaking lesson, thus possibly making students less engaged in working on the activities. For
example, the final free speaking activity - Activity 4 in Unit 7, English 11 - asked students to
work with friends and talk about the problems of overpopulation and offer solutions and
report the results to the class. Prior to this activity, a number of cooperative and scaffolding
activities were given (See Table 5.3). Nevertheless, the last activity suggests students discuss
the information (i.e. problems of and solutions for overpopulation) that was introduced in the
earlier activities. In this sense, the activity suggested a correlation with CLT features (i.e.
cooperative language learning and scaffolding) but it may not conclude the speaking lesson
with learning that is motivating and engaging to the students.

5.7 The textbooks and the components of communicative competence in CLT

In keeping with the priority given to CLT in policy and the curriculum, it would be expected
that the textbooks address the four essential components of communicative competence of
CLT: linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. However, sociolinguistic
and strategic competences were less evident across the units in the textbooks. This smaller
proportion of these competences in the textbooks could be explained at least in part by the
emphasis on linguistic competence rather than communicative competence in the curriculum
and the domination, deriving from high-stakes examinations, of linguistic knowledge.

5.7.1 Linguistic competence

Activities designed to develop linguistic competence, including knowledge of vocabulary,
graham and pronunciation, appeared to be well represented across all lessons of the
textbooks. Firstly, knowledge of vocabulary was most evident in the language skills lessons.
However, there was limited association between knowledge of vocabulary and other types of
communicative competence. Despite circumstances where students were asked to provide
their own responses, the activities tended to have students retrieve information from the
reading/listening passage or speaking prompts for the questions, rather than extend and link
the vocabulary to other competencies. Thus, although the activities were communicative, they did not often lead to the use of language and topics in relation to other language competencies (i.e. discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence). For example, in the reading activities of Unit 7, English 11, students are asked to answer some of the questions about population with reference to the reading passage, while other activities pose more open-ended questions through working with their peers. However, these activities are not associated with the use of language, for example: for discourse competence, where students may make use of the topic and vocabulary to give a presentation, tell a story, or perform a role play about population; for sociolinguistic competence, where students could be taught about how to talk about the topic population using appropriate language in different situations; or for strategic competence, where students could learn how to cope with communication breakdowns and ensure successful communication with others.

A more substantial emphasis on linguistic knowledge regarding pronunciation and language structures was given in the Language Focus lesson. It was noticeable that the exercises in this lesson primarily focused on the correct use of sounds and grammatical forms instead of linking them with other types of communicative competence. For example, the Language Focus lesson in Unit 15, English 11 presents the grammatical points, *Could* and *Be able to*; however, it only involved practice drills of these forms. There was no evidence of activities or guidance on how to support students to use these language features in different genres (discourse competence), when and how to use these structures appropriately in specific social situations (sociolinguistic competence), or how to avoid communication problems caused by grammatical difficulties (strategic competence).

### 5.7.2 Discourse competence

Discourse competence appeared to be prominent in the textbooks; however, there was limited attention to important features such as language cohesion and coherence in keeping with the overall goals of CLT. The textbook analysis shows a coverage of multiple types of texts or genres across many units such as poems, weather reports, news, narratives, interviews, dialogues, and letter writing. However, despite genre diversity, the textbooks did not often present other features of discourse competence, such as language cohesion and coherence. These are features that students may need to be able to understand and produce the meaningful, cohesive and coherent language to successfully generate language in the various genres. In other words, a number of different genres and some supporting language were
provided but the procedures or features necessary for the task output were often not included. For example, Speaking Task 3 in Unit 1, English 11 asks students to make a role play with a friend, in which one student is a journalist who interviews someone whose friend has just won the first international prize in Mathematics. Students are given suggestions to ask for information from the friend such as, why he/she is interested in Maths, how much time he/she spends on Maths every day, and what made him/her successful. In this context, support for language coherence is given but there seems to be a lack of language cohesion support. For example, students are not told how to conduct an interview: they are not told how to start the interview, how to greet and address the interviewee, how to respond to the interviewer, what needs to be aware of during the interview, or how to close the interview. Thus, the absence of such guidance reduces the chances of students’ producing a well-organized interview.

By contrast, while there were circumstances where students were assigned activities that provided guidance in relation to features of discourse competence, the use of authentic and unpredictable language was rarely addressed in these activities. For example, Activity 3 of writing lesson of Unit 3, Grade 11 was presented as follows: “You are going to hold a party. You want to invite your classmates to the party. Write a letter of invitation, following these guidelines.” According to the guidelines, students could mention the following details in the letter: what kind of party they were going to organize, where and when they intended to organize the party, how many people they planned to invite and who they were, what activities would take place, and what food and drink would be served at the party. Following these helpful guidelines, students could write a coherent letter by addressing and putting these necessary details in order. However, students’ use of language as well as format and style for this friendly style invitation letter could be borrowed from a sample letter of invitation presented in an earlier activity of this writing lesson. Although this activity provided helpful scaffolding activities and addressed important elements of discourse competence, the guidelines in the writing activity were so similar to the details in the sample letter that the students’ letter could simply be a reproduction of the sample letter with them substituting information into the phrases and sentences of the sample one. In this context, the chances of meaningful and authentic language production become less likely.

5.7.3 Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the capacity to use appropriate language in specific social situations (Canale & Swain, 1980; Peterwagner, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).
The textbook analysis reveals that there was little evidence of activities designed to develop or elicit sociolinguistic competence in many of the units. There was limited provision of descriptions of either the roles of participants, the purpose of the communication, or the settings in which it was to take place. Especially, there was little evidence of appropriate language use for these verbal and nonverbal activities. For instance, Speaking Activity 3 in Unit 13, English 11, asked students: “Work with a partner and make a similar dialogue about collecting stamps using given suggestions.” These suggestions directed students to information, such as a type of hobby (i.e. collecting stamps), how to collect stamps, how to organize stamps, where to keep stamps, why to collect stamps and plan for the future. What was absent from the suggestions or the information provided to the students was information about the specific roles students might take, the purpose of their communication, and the language they should use in this context for their role. To do this activity, students would probably repeat the information provided from the sample dialogue that they had practiced earlier. The absence of sociolinguistic information was also evident in other language skills units.

Despite a limited inclusion of important features of sociolinguistic competence in the textbooks, there were a few occasions where this competence was fully addressed, especially where sociolinguistic competence was integrated with linguistic and discourse competences. This can be seen in the Speaking Activity 3 in Unit 9, English 11 (p. 104), which was described as follows:

Work in pairs. Imagine that one of you is a clerk at the post office and the other is a customer; make a dialogue for each of the following situations. (1) You want to subscribe to the Lao Dong daily for a year and have the newspaper delivered to your home every morning before 6.30. Your address is 67 Ngoc Ha Street, Hanoi. (2) Your best friend’s birthday is on 16th May. You want to use the Flower Telegram Service provided by the post office to send her a greetings card and a bunch of red roses on her birthday.

This task outlines features of sociolinguistic competence students need to draw on to successfully complete the task, including the context setting, the role of the participants in the role play, and the purpose of the communication. In relation to the discourse competence, this task enables students to use meaningful and coherent language for making requests for some service. Although, prior to this task, there was a sample dialogue for students to practice, the more authentic and real-life context in this task provided the means and incentive for students
to extend their vocabulary and grammar and hence their linguistic competence to perform the task.

### 5.7.4 Strategic competence

As described in Chapters 3 and 4, strategic competence refers to the ability to cope with communication breakdowns as well as to ensure successful communication. Examples of such strategies include: requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, coping with problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status, finding the right cohesion devices or using gap fillers (Canale & Swain, 1980; Peterwagner, 2005). Knowledge of such strategies is highlighted by Canale and Swain (1980) as playing an important role in the early stages of second language learning; while the need for certain strategies may change as a function of age and second language proficiency (p. 31). Despite its important role, these features of strategic competence were not explicitly described in the textbooks as for other types of communicative competence. The absence of important features of strategic competence in the textbooks may minimize students’ opportunities to handle communication difficulties or maintain successful communication through classroom practice or in real-life communication situations.

### 5.8 A summary of the textbook analysis

In conclusion, Sections 5.6 and 5.7 examined how language theory and pedagogies were translated into the design of textbooks used by the teachers in this study. Overall, the analysis revealed that considerable attention was given in designing the textbooks to maintain a communicative teaching approach through a number of guided and free communicative activities, allowing students’ opportunities for interaction with peers by answering questions, discussing, and role playing. Different genres and some real-life situations were included that could enable students to have meaningful communication. Nevertheless, some important features of CLT received limited attention. For instance, sociolinguistic and strategic competences were the least evident among the four components of communicative competence. There were also few examples of authentic and real-life contexts to provide students with opportunities for meaningful interactions in unrehearsed situations. As the literature argues (Brown, 2007; Guarento & Morley, 2001), such activities are important for student engagement and motivation. In addition, it was argued earlier in Section 5.5 that the textbooks are one of the key contextual factors influencing teachers’ cognitions and
classroom practices. Insights into how the participating teachers utilised the textbooks as resources for teaching will be discussed in Chapter 7.

5.9 Teacher education

As argued by Borg (2015), professional coursework in teacher education plays an influential role in shaping pre-service teachers’ cognitions about language teaching and learning. Analysis of the coursebook and course outlines used for the teaching methodology in the teacher education program, as well as the interviews with the teacher educators, provide insights into the theoretical and practical resources that the novice teachers had to draw on, from this source, to constitute their cognitions about English language teaching.

The analysis of the interviews with the teacher educators, the methodology course outlines, and coursebooks, suggests that, in principle, the teacher educators supported CLT as a preferred approach to use in schools. However, this analysis also reveals that the teacher educators identified several issues related to CLT application in teaching English in Vietnamese schools; for example, they mentioned the testing format as one of factors restricting the feasibility of CLT. The teacher educators offered suggestions on how to adapt CLT to the local context and expressed their expectation that pre-service teachers would be flexible in implementing this approach in their future classrooms.

5.9.1 CLT - A preferred teaching approach

In keeping with the expectations of the government and MOET, CLT was the preferred approach in the teacher education documents and for the teacher educators interviewed in this study. In general, the teacher education methodology courses tended to follow a number of CLT principles and/or features such as using language games, promoting cooperative and collaborative language learning, and encouraging the use of meaningful and authentic language as well as the target language. For example, language games, which are an important feature of CLT as identified in Chapter 3, due to their positive contribution to an enjoyable and communicative learning atmosphere for students, were included in the course outlines as warm-up activities to be used at the beginning of the lessons. Games nominated included Lucky numbers, Bingo, Guessing game, Slap the board, and Kim’s game (further explanation about some of these games is given in Chapter 7). Understanding these games and being able to select appropriate games to use in the classroom appeared to be an important requirement in the teacher education program. For example, games are outlined in
the course outline for Teaching Methodology 2, and “pre-service teachers need to be able to integrate them for micro teaching practice and later at high schools.” In addition, the teacher educators all mentioned games as an integral element of a lesson, serving a number of different purposes, such as motivation, revision, and transitions between lessons, and hence contribute to language development. For example, in the following quote, Huy describes how playing games contributed to the communicative nature of a lesson by enabling students to communicate with each other in English:

A communicative grammar lesson will integrate communicative activities, especially involve using games to present the lesson. Certainly, students will use English language in order to play the games, so they can use the language through games. This is a perspective of communicative language teaching. (TE - Interview with Huy)

Two other key features of CLT were taught as components of the teacher education materials, and they tended to occur simultaneously: the first feature was cooperative and collaborative learning in forms of pairs and small groups; the second was the importance of language communication that is meaningful and authentic. The importance of cooperative and collaborative learning was evident in the multiple forms of activities in the course outlines, such as discussions, interviews, debates, and role plays. The course outline for teaching speaking provides an example of the interaction of the two features (see Table 5.4 below). In the course outline, a number of interactive activities are provided for different stages in a lesson.

Table 5.4 Sample of the course outline for teaching speaking (Translated from Course outline, Module 2: Teaching speaking skills)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 2 Teaching speaking:</strong> <strong>2.1. Pre-speaking activities</strong></td>
<td>Students present activities that can be used in pre-speaking. - warming up activities - leading in - discussion questions - watching a</td>
<td>Students can practice designing appropriate pre-speaking activities for the textbooks in Grades 10, 11, 12. - warming up activities - leading in - discussion questions</td>
<td>Students are able to teach in front of the class. - warming up activities - leading in - discussion questions - watching a film/listening and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Module 2</td>
<td>Teaching speaking:</td>
<td>Students present activities that can be used in while-speaking.</td>
<td>Students can practice designing appropriate while-speaking activities for the textbooks in Grades 10, 11, 12.</td>
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<td>2.2. While-speaking activities</td>
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<th>Module 2</th>
<th>Teaching speaking:</th>
<th>Students present activities that can be used in post-speaking.</th>
<th>Students can practice designing appropriate post-speaking activities for the textbooks in Grades 10, 11, 12.</th>
<th>Students are able to teach in front of the class.</th>
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Activities that encourage learners to work together for real-world language use such as those mentioned above were also described in more detail in the coursebook. For example, the following activities from the post reading stage of a lesson included in the “Coursebook for Teaching Methodology”³ provide learners with opportunities to discuss and act out a role play for meaningful and real-life communication:

1. Discussion
   a) Discuss the reasons why some animals have become extinct.
   b) Suggest some solutions to protect engendered species.
2. Role play
   Work in pairs to make a conversation between a tourist from Thailand and a Vietnamese tour guide about the New Year’s celebration in the two countries.

   (Coursebook for Teaching Methodology, p. 121)

³ The Methodology language teaching coursebook used for the teacher education program in this study is not a commercially published book but seems to have been compiled by some language educators in Vietnam. However, the teacher educators in this study expressed their concerns that this coursebook was not systematic, and hoped to have a more methodological and standardised coursebook addressing the expectations of MOET and DOET.
In another example of cooperative language learning, in the following quote from the
coursebook, the benefits of pairwork are described in terms of engaging students in non-
confrontational working mode. In other words, learners are likely to feel more confident in
contributing to the tasks and using language when working with their peers as partners.
Furthermore, this quote states explicitly that it is crucial for the exchange among students to
include information gap activities. For example, it argues that if pairwork activities do not
incorporate an interchange for unprompted information, they cannot necessarily be regarded
as real information gap communication and thus learners may not have real reasons for
communication:

Pairwork is a non-confrontational way of getting all the students in a class to
participate: everyone must speak, contribute and interact with a partner, but they don't
have to do it in front of the whole class… pairwork is based on an information gap
between partners. This means one partner has one set of information and the other
partner has a different, but complementary, set of information. By getting together,
discussing what they have got, the pairwork task enables students to fit pieces of
knowledge together into a richer, or more complete, picture. Without an information
gap – and the need to 'co-operate' - the pairs do not have any real reason to talk to
each other.

(Coursebook for Teaching Methodology, p. 42)

Likewise, the teacher educators’ comments confirmed two principles of CLT - promoting
cooperative learning, and developing meaningful and authentic language use - as their
preferred forms of teaching in EFL classrooms, particularly in the production stage of the
lesson where more opportunities for language generation were expected among students.
Huy, for example, argued that real-life activities made the language communication
meaningful and practical. He emphasized that this approach was in keeping with foreign
language teaching policy in Vietnam, which aimed to foster learners’ communication
capabilities. By the production stage of a lesson, he expected that the teacher would provide
interactive activities so that students could use the language. He gave the example of how,
after a lesson about environment, teachers should design a real-life task – for example, asking
students to write a paragraph or give a presentation about how they would protect the
environment in their province. Huy added that, in order to help students do this well, teachers
had to design activities by providing them with information and ideas so that they could
discuss in pairs and groups about this topic.

Integrating communicative and real-life tasks as important principles and/or features of CLT
were also evident in the interviews with the other teacher educators. For example, Van
provided examples of how teachers should design role plays or interviews for students so that they could apply the grammatical forms for language production. This was what she expected her pre-service teachers to perform in micro-teaching practice and later at high schools when they became teachers. Likewise, Binh claimed that the communicative activities in the production stage played a key role in supporting learners’ language development and advised that, in order to equip students with communicative capacity, they needed more opportunities to use the language in reality through pictures or more real-life tasks and situations. He reasoned that the ultimate goals of teaching and learning English were to prepare learners to use English for communication in their daily life and work, for example, if they were traveling or meeting with foreigners. Thus, he expected pre-service teachers to display their creativity by adapting the tasks in the textbooks or designing new ones in order to attract students’ interest. He justified this position by saying that students need experience with everyday and practical topics to enable them to use English with people in real life with little difficulty.

In addition to following the aforementioned principles and/or features, the teacher educators said that they promoted the inclusion of a considerable use of the English language in the classroom, an important feature of CLT as discussed in Chapter 3. For Huy, the ideal portion of L1 and L2 in Communicative Language Teaching was 80% of English and 20% of Vietnamese. Although he acknowledged this ratio would depend on the school contexts and teacher’s competence, he hoped that his pre-service teachers would be able to maintain 70% and 30% of English and Vietnamese use in the classroom, respectively. Similar to Huy, Van also had high expectations regarding the use of the L2 of her pre-service teachers; however, she appeared to foresee contextual challenges that might obstruct L2 employment. In particular, Van said she asked her pre-service teachers to use English exclusively for micro-teaching practice, but through observing their grammar teaching practicum at high schools, she found that they used only 10% of English, primarily for giving instructions, and then the rest in Vietnamese for explaining the grammatical rules and doing grammar practice with their students. She assumed that they were probably more likely to use a considerable amount of Vietnamese in teaching. Like Huy, Van thought that it depended on the schools, and the teachers and students’ levels. For example, her pre-service teachers told her that, because the grammar was complicated, they focussed on explaining the meaning and rules of the grammar to their students and they would do whatever it took for their students to understand the meaning; thus, they switched to Vietnamese.
Similarly, Binh also suggested that the degree to which the target language was used in the classroom depended on the learners’ abilities. However, in contrast to Huy, he did not specify a proportion of the target language use. Instead, he suggested that, at a minimum, teachers should use English for simple instructions to provide learners more opportunities for language exposure. On the other hand, Binh recommended the “sandwich” technique to deal with students with a low proficiency in English. For example, after giving an English instruction, pre-service teachers could use Vietnamese to guide students, instead of providing a complete translation to make the instruction comprehensible to them.

The teacher educators’ views on the use of the target language were compatible with the CLT preference for teachers to expose their students as much as possible to the target language, in order to develop students’ language competence. The teacher educators recognised that teachers would be likely to teach in a range of contexts, including those where students’ language abilities are an important barrier; and while still maintaining their support for target language use, acknowledged that the ratio might have to be adapted to the context.

In summary, an examination of the teacher education methodology teaching documents and an analysis of the interviews with the teacher educators revealed that the teacher education program supported some important principles of CLT, in compliance with the expectations of the government and MOET. However, as will be demonstrated below from the interviews with the teacher educators, there are a number of challenges in implementing CLT. Therefore, some adaptations are required to apply this approach to classroom teaching in the context of Vietnam.

5.9.2 Adaptability issues and teaching flexibility with CLT

As discussed in Chapter 3, CLT is not an inflexible and uniform approach. Different versions of CLT (e.g. strong vs weak as discussed in Chapter 3) may be selected for specific contexts. For example, in the EFL context of Vietnam, where English is not spoken outside the classroom, students’ motivation and ability in English may be relatively low (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007; Viet, 2013). Consequently, choosing a strong version of CLT may be inappropriate because of the lack of real language environment inside and outside classroom. In recognition of these issues, the teacher education program provided the resources and strategies for teaching in ways representative of CLT but with the flexibility necessary to apply CLT appropriately in a range of different contexts. A weak version of CLT appeared to best fit this context.
Evidence for a preference for a weak version of CLT can first be seen in the course syllabi. Although the syllabi start with an introduction to different teaching approaches and methods, namely CLT, Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), Audio Lingual Method (ALM), Suggestopedia and Total Physical Response (TPR), the suggested lesson sequence predominantly followed the Presentation – Practice – Production (PPP) procedure, derived from Audiolingualism. Following this teaching procedure, for example, teachers are advised to provide their students with some form of language input in the presentation stage. Such input, for example, may involve students in: playing games and participating in preliminary discussions; introducing new vocabulary using different techniques; and explaining grammatical structures. Later in the practice stage, the course outlines describe opportunities for language practice, building on what the students learned in the previous stage. The practice stage tends to reflect some degree of both controlled and less controlled language use, with a variety of exercises across the language skills such as transformation writing, discussion, games, as well as in grammar lessons such as substitution drills, sentence building, and multiple choice questions. In the production stage, more interacting activities, including interviews, debates, discussions and role plays, are provided to elevate students’ language growth. These activities would enable students to move beyond what they might have acquired in the first two stages, by providing them with more communicative opportunities to develop their language skills.

Through the ways the activities are given and sequenced, the PPP cycle reveals a form-based approach and a hybrid of ALM and the weak version of CLT which links with teaching flexibility. Following the first two stages - indicative of ALM - allows teachers some flexibility through guiding students with scaffolding activities. An introduction to new language elements seems to be helpful for students’ familiarity with the topic, vocabulary or grammatical forms before a sufficient emphasis on the accuracy of language input (i.e. vocabulary or forms) is given in form of practice drills. While these stages are beneficial, they do not necessarily take students to communicative opportunities where their language could be developed, due to the language control. In this case, teachers are given another choice of flexibility through leading students to the production stage - indicative of a weak form of CLT - by providing more meaningful and communicative tasks to take students beyond the more controlled exercises earlier.

Similar to the course outlines, the coursebook also lists a number of teaching methods, but in general appears to align with PPP procedures as described in the course outlines. Again, this
teaching cycle presents some flexibility through inclusion of presentation and practice stage as necessary components of a lesson. These stages present a number of ways for teaching and providing support, for example exercises and cues that provide ways to memorise the new language or the new language patterns; however, these activities are not often communicative. This teaching cycle also allows more teaching flexibility that encourages more language interaction. This becomes evident in the production stage, where the coursebook advises an integration of the language items with other structures, functions, and vocabulary which students might have already learnt into a more natural language communication. In order for such authentic communication to occur, the coursebook suggests that teachers construct activities in ways that could promote communication and yet ensure that the new language would occur unprompted, naturally, and frequently in the context of other previous learnt language (Coursebook for Teaching Methodology, p. 76). The unguided manner in which the new language occurs is what distinguishes a production stage activity from a practice stage activity. Thus, in this sense, the coursebook provides the resources to work in contexts where students may have diverse abilities by suggesting teachers apply the PPP procedure and supply appropriate linguistic support as useful resources and flexibility in teaching.

As well as providing the PPP teaching cycle, the coursebook also explicitly advises teachers to be flexible in teaching by adapting the EFL textbooks to meet their goals, settings and learners:

Changes of some sort are inevitable if you want a book to fit your aims, your setting, and most of all your learners. There are various actions you can take to tailor a selected textbook to fit your teaching situation.

(Coursebook for Teaching Methodology, p. 165)

As recommended in the coursebook, there are a number of ways that teachers could make alterations of the activities, tasks or materials in the textbooks. For example, they could make small changes to the existing materials in the textbook, remove a textbook activity and replace it with another suitable one, or add an extra activity in an area that is not covered sufficiently in the textbook. These suggestions for textbook adaption offers teachers a wider range of choices for their pedagogical decisions in the classroom in order to harmonize with their teaching goals and learners’ interest and abilities in their contexts.

The teacher educators also described how they expected their pre-service teachers after graduation to combine different teaching methods suitable to teaching contexts and learners
as another way of flexible teaching. Their encouragement for flexible teaching could be due to how they perceived the variations in different sociocultural contexts, for example, students’ capabilities and their learning contexts. For example, Binh suggested that teachers must be flexible in their teaching by integrating different teaching approaches (i.e. Communicative Approach, ALM), because each method had its own advantages; however, he still argued that the communicative approach would play the primary role. He said that doing drills was necessary for students to practice and get familiar with a grammatical structure; thus, teachers might have to rely on other approaches rather than communicative approach at this step. Binh’s point of view regarding language teaching flexibility was more articulated in what Huy shared in his interview. Despite asserting that there was no one perfect teaching method since the choice of teaching methods essentially depended on student abilities in different areas and school equipment, Huy argued that teachers might not be successful in implementing CLT to adult learners; instead, using GTM and ALM first may be needed so that learners could have “practice feel” before getting involved in CLT. In addition, he added that CLT should be applied right from the beginning with active and dynamic students in urban areas, whereas GTM and ALM could be more applicable first to those in the rural areas with poor English learning facilities.

Besides recommending pre-service teachers integrate different teaching methods to correspond with various learners and contexts, the teacher educators’ perspectives through their interviews appeared to be consistent with the descriptions of the course syllabi and book regarding the resources and flexibility that the teacher education expected pre-service teachers to apply. Despite their interest in using CLT as a preferred approach, the interviews with the teacher educators suggest that they chose PPP procedure as a more acceptable response due to their recognition of issues in applying CLT in specific contexts. Similar to the course syllabi and coursebook, the teacher educators also saw activities in the presentation and practice stages as relevant and helpful in constructing students’ familiarity and interactive communication with the new language items. For example, although students’ language seemed to be more controlled in the practice stage, Huy argued that pre-service teachers could make their decisions in designing tasks that would follow the textbook requirements but also allow their students to have communicative interactions:

Depending on the skills in the practice stage, that teachers will design appropriate activities that fit with the textbook and communicative idea. For example, there are many While-reading activities in a reading lesson such as True/False, Reading
Comprehension, Gap-Fill, Using prompts to have students fill in the information gap, or having students play games to check their comprehension at the end of this stage. (TE- Interview with Huy)

In this context, the PPP cycle presented two ways of interpretation for teaching flexibility. Firstly, it was acceptable and necessary to have students practice with repetitions and drill exercises as part of the learning process. This teaching procedure allowed teachers to provide necessary scaffolding activities to fit students’ abilities so that they could feel secure and confident with new language input. In the meantime, the production stage of the lesson, as emphasized by the teacher educators, enabled teachers to cultivate students’ language growth through more communicative tasks. For example, in describing a communicative grammar lesson, Van said that it was acceptable for the earlier stages of the lesson to involve practice drills in order to make the grammatical structures comprehensible to students. Nevertheless, she asserted that communicative activities (e.g. role plays and interviews) through which students could employ the language patterns they just learnt must be introduced towards the end of the lesson:

The communicative approach will involve different techniques such as situations, dialogues, pictures or objects in order to set the scene, to provide meaningful situations. Thanks to that, high school students will practice and understand the situations. Pre-service teachers will provide the structure and have students practice. The practice is form focused but finally, in the production stage, there must be communicative activities such as role plays or interviews. (TE- Interview with Van)

In summary, the teacher educators’ comments suggest that they privileged PPP over CLT for teaching English. Their reason for doing so was due to its greater flexibility, that is, it provided their pre-service teachers with the resources for teaching a range of different classes and student capacities and interests.

5.9.3 Classroom constraints in implementing CLT

Although teaching principles and practices manifested in the teacher education were encouraged to be put in practice, all of the teacher educators acknowledged that lessons run at high schools may not necessarily follow the procedures and principles as taught in the teacher education program. There are a number of important constraints that impede the translation of the expectations raised in teacher education into classroom practice. The first obstacle is the testing format, which is still traditionally written. For example, both Van and Huy described how, in practice, high school teachers were more likely to follow the traditional grammar
teaching method in order to prepare their students for the written-based examinations. To do this, teachers would generally present examples to their students, elicit the forms, and ask them to do the exercises without offering them the opportunity to produce the interactive and meaningful language. Huy noted that this mode of teaching, with an emphasis on reading and writing, was usually applied to students in Grades 9 and 12 to help them become ready for graduation and entrance exams for high schools or universities. He claimed that teachers were unlikely to change their teaching practice without changes to the testing and evaluation format to include more assessment on speaking components:

First of all, the final examinations at high schools are writing examinations, so most teachers, despite having learnt many methods, tend to teach in traditional way in order to help students do well on their writing and reading tests. Thus, there is a gap between the MOET’s idea of communicative language teaching and language teaching reality. After graduation, many of our pre-service teachers have limited opportunities to apply communicative language teaching method or methods to help students active. It depends on the time, place and the idea of each school...so unless we changed the methods of testing, assessing students, teachers would probably change their teaching style. (TE - Interview with Huy)

The high load of teaching content and limited time allowance were also raised as crucial restrictions on implementing CLT. Although the teacher educators said that they would like to have seen more communicative teaching practices in keeping with CLT, these two factors appeared to be key challenges in putting their expectations into classroom practices. For example, Huy would like to see communicative activities employing the new structure in the classroom after a number of practice drills; however, he was not sure that it would be possible due to high quantity of teaching content and time restraint.

As well as the influence of the examination system on teaching in Grades 9 and 12, the teacher educators also saw some variations in how teachers structured their lessons to the pressure of time and the amount of content that had to be covered. For example, Huy noted a typical teaching practice in Grades 10 and 11 which reflected an integration of communicative and traditional teaching. This is because the lesson would usually begin with the teacher’s introduction with many interesting activities such as games, but at the practice stage, they tended to get students to do the exercises as a primary focus. As Huy explained, there was 45 minutes in one period, but with much content, if teachers did not convey this content they would run out of time. Likewise, from his classroom observations and experiences shared by his colleagues teaching at high schools, Binh assumed that there were
two other modes of teaching: one was for colleagues’ observation, and one was not. In case the lesson was being observed, all stages of the lesson would be covered (e.g. Warm-up, Presentation, Practice, Production), whilst for an unobserved lesson, only the practice part was taught. He explained that teachers had to cut off stages due to shortage of time and teaching content load. Binh stressed the importance of communicative and meaningful activities in the production stage and pointed out the consequences for excluding them. Specifically, he argued that students were unable to communicate because they only obtained the knowledge and practiced with exercises but did not yet have an opportunity to produce meaningful language output. The influence of time and content constraints appeared to be resulted in teachers’ inclination to practice drills and abandon communicative activities, as illustrated in the following quote by Binh:

What is the consequence? Students have just received the skills but they cannot produce the language. That means they have the input but not output, and as a result of that, they are not able to communicate. For example, when we read a newspaper, we want to share with our friends that, “Today I read this news on the paper”, we change from what we read into how we can use it. Doing so, students are able to memorise and develop it as their skills. Now if we abandon these stages, then it is only input and students cannot produce output, they cannot apply anything. (TE - Interview with Binh)

Another likely obstacle that might hinder teachers from applying new ideas presented in their teacher education into classrooms was due to the autonomy they had with the class during their teaching practicum. In this situation, pre-service teachers do not often have a chance to practice new techniques in classrooms due to their cooperating teachers’ guidance and evaluation, and so are less likely to implement these when they become teachers themselves. In particular, as Van said, pre-service teachers would choose “a safe solution”, for example using Vietnamese for elicitation, which was also easier for high school students owing to the fact they were familiar with such teaching technique:

That means pre-service teachers follow the teaching methods of high school teachers to be sure. They are not brave enough to apply new things because high school teachers are the ones that assess their performance. In addition, it is easier. High school students are familiar with such teaching methods. It could be complicated and difficult if pre-service teachers follow my techniques. They are afraid that they will not succeed, so they choose a safe solution. (TE - Interview with Van)

Similarly, in the interview with Binh, teaching autonomy was also identified as an obstacle for pre-service teachers to put innovative ideas into practice; and he hoped that, when pre-
service teachers became teachers, they would have the autonomy to apply the methods in order to attract students’ interest in learning:

They will still follow the teaching methods by going through all the steps but be flexible depending on situations. Only when they become real teachers with their own autonomy, they are able to apply the methods they have learnt more effectively. When they have teaching practice at high schools, they have to follow the teachers there. (TE- Interview with Binh)

However, knowledge of the students (their learning styles and capacities) appeared to offer primary resistance to pre-service teachers’ attempts to try out new practices. For example, the above quote in the interview with Van reveals that high school students were familiar with the common teaching and learning practices; thus, it would become complicated and difficult for them if pre-service teachers followed the techniques espoused in the methodology courses. In addition, students’ inadequate proficiencies did not appear to allow teachers to present communicative activities, for example in the production stage. In the interview with Binh, it was revealed that it would take a great deal amount of time and patience for teachers to support their students with limited language abilities to achieve better performance through communicative activities, and that teachers usually ignore this important part of the lesson. Thus, even though pre-service teachers, once they become real teachers, may not necessarily follow what they have learnt in the teacher education, they possibly have to adapt their teaching in response to their teaching contexts, for example to appropriate their learners’ capabilities.

In summary, this section has provided an overview of the theories and practice about English language teaching generated in the teacher education. In general, CLT was suggested as a preferred approach in keeping with the expectations of the government and MOET. A number of essential principles of CLT were underlined through the teacher educators’ interviews, their course syllabi and coursebook. However, from the perspective of the teacher educators, and CLT’s translation into the course outlines and methodology textbook, it may not be the best approach, as there are issues in implementing this approach in specific contexts. Hence, the teacher education offered suggestions so that pre-service teachers could coach their students with more flexibility. On the other hand, a number of key challenges to the implementation of CLT in the classroom were discussed, and these appeared to be evident in the contexts of Vietnamese classrooms.
5.10 Summary

Drawing on Borg’s (2015) model of language teacher cognition, this chapter has provided a discussion of the important factors shaping the participating teachers’ cognitions about English teaching and learning, including the language curriculum, textbooks, and the language teacher education program. Generally speaking, in recognition of the goals in language teaching as well as the expectations in the national language policy, these documents and the teacher education displayed considerable attention to alignment with communicative language teaching. One of the notable examples of these endeavours could be seen through more communicative and cooperative language learning activities, with meaningful language use given in the textbooks and expressed by the teacher educators and their teaching documents. Apart from these intentions, an analysis of these important resources also revealed limited specifications of other critical features of CLT as well as solutions to address contextual challenges in applying CLT. For example, although the curriculum was targeted at CLT, the summative assessment implied in the curriculum appeared to fit with the written-based high-stakes examinations, thus suggesting a mismatch with more communicative language testing. In addition to that, the lack of communicative competencies addressed in the textbooks could hinder how CLT is supposed to occur in the classroom. Besides this, a number of challenges in implementing CLT in the classroom were identified by the teacher educators, such as students’ lack of satisfactory language proficiencies, high teaching content loads and limited time allowance, traditional written-based tests for high-stakes examinations, and pre-service teachers’ lack of autonomy during teaching practicum; which did not appear, at this time, to have appropriate solutions. The important aforementioned factors are those that teachers may have to cope with in their daily teaching work while they are trying to follow CLT as expected by the government and MOET. In this context, these factors, as mentioned in Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model, not only reveal important limitations in supporting teachers to keep up with CLT but also impact on the ways teachers think and behave in the classroom.
Chapter 6
Impact of the teachers’ biographies on their cognitions

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the impact of the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the novice teachers have lived, studied and worked on their values and beliefs about language teaching. Borg (2015) argues that language teacher cognition is constructed in relation to social, psychological and environmental factors, including teachers’ school-based experiences, their professional coursework, and classroom contexts. This chapter uses a biographical approach to present those elements and processes in the novice teachers’ lives that were likely to influence their cognitions and classroom practices. The chapter is presented in five sections. Following this introduction, Section 6.2 presents a socioeconomic overview of the Mekong Delta where the participating teachers lived and taught. Section 6.3 then specifically provides biographies of the five participating teachers, including their family backgrounds, schooling experiences, professional coursework, and additional contextual factors both inside and outside of their classrooms, which influenced their teaching. Following the teachers’ biographies, the chapter provides a discussion (Section 6.4) and ends with a summary (Section 6.5) of how these social, psychological and environmental settings appear to have shaped their cognitions.

6.2 The sociocultural context: The Mekong Delta

The Mekong Delta, referred to in Vietnamese as Đồ Ðờng Sông Cửu Long (Nine Dragon river delta) or Miền Tây (Western region), is situated in the southwestern region of Vietnam, where the Mekong River flows through and empties into the sea through a network of distributaries. The Mekong Delta is located in an important and favorable geographical site, ideal for economic development. Located at the end of the Indochinese Peninsula, the Mekong Delta has a close and important bilateral cooperation with the Southern part of Vietnam. Having its border with Cambodia and sharing the Mekong river with other countries also provides the Mekong Delta with opportunities for exchanges and cooperation with the countries on the Penninsula, including Cambodia and Laos (Trang, 2013). In addition, being located in an area of international maritime and air traffic between South Asia and Southeast Asia as well as Australia and other Pacific islands, the Mekong Delta is in an
advantageous position for international exchanges (Trang, 2013). With a total area of 40,000 km², the Mekong Delta is home to an approximate population of 18 million residing in 13 provinces and cities (MDEC, 2014).

Despite its favorable geographical conditions for potential economic and international trade exchange, the Mekong Delta remains an agricultural-based region as the largest rice producer in the country. While the Delta is known for its prominent role in agricultural activities, other socioeconomic aspects of the region fall behind other parts of the country (Garschagen et al., 2012). These include industry and service sectors, education and qualifications of the workforce. Living in less advantaged socioeconomic conditions with less employment opportunities, people tend to migrate to big cities and/or provinces such as Ho Chi Minh city, Binh Duong and Dong Nai provinces in search of employment (Loi, 2005). Meanwhile, there is limited work, beyond agriculture, for those who decide to stay in the Delta. The low socioeconomic development in the Mekong Delta limits access to education as well as language learning resources, especially in rural areas (Garschagen et al., 2012). Students’ motivation to learn and high attrition rates from schools have become major issues in the area (Hai, 2011; Vietnamnet, 2013). Most students who drop out of school get involved in agricultural work or migrate with their parents to work in industrial parks away from their hometowns (Vietnamnet, 2013). As these types of employment primarily need manual labour skills, there are very limited opportunities for using English in the workplace. The lack of employment, as well as limited requirements for English at work, means that English is likely to be perceived to be of little value by parents and school students. This is likely to have a considerable impact on how English is learnt and taught in the Mekong Delta. For students, finding the motivation to learn English may be challenging in an environment with insufficient socioeconomic incentives and/or learning resources. For teachers, it can be difficult to work with unmotivated students who do not see the relevance of learning English.

6.3 The biographies of the participating teachers

The novice teachers in this study were all born and raised in the rural districts of the Mekong Delta. Except Tam, who came from a middle-class family background, the other teachers were brought up in low-income families. Despite Tam’s relatively more affluent family conditions, the low socioeconomic development in the Mekong Delta, as discussed above, limited the chances that she as well as other teachers in the study had in learning English in their early schooling. The novice teachers pointed out that, although they achieved good
English performance in the secondary and high schools, their communicative language skills were very limited. Even Tam, who was able to move from her rural school to a city high school for gifted students, found little progress in her language proficiency. Despite the teachers’ perceptions that learning English in their previous schooling made little contribution to their communicative language development, most of them were still interested in learning English. They all subsequently chose to pursue the English teaching education program at the same university in the Mekong Delta near their home. Their language training to become teachers significantly improved their language skills and teaching pedagogy as well as their enthusiasm in using communicative ways to teach English. Nevertheless, due to numerous contextual factors inside and outside their classroom, the novice teachers in this study struggled to find appropriate ways of teaching that could help them to apply what they learnt but also meet the needs of their students. The narratives below provide important insights, for the purpose of this study, into the role played by contextual factors such as prior learning, professional education and contextual factors in constructing the teachers’ cognitions and practices in relation to language teaching and learning.

6.3.1 Tam

At the time of the study, Tam was teaching at the Van Lang (VL), the urban school affiliated with the local university for four years. She taught English to four classes, with 11A1 class regarded as the top class, and the other three classes, 10A3, 10A4 and 10A5, the “weaker” classes. Every classroom was equipped with facilities for teaching such as projectors, cassette players, and speakers.

Unlike the typical backgrounds of her high school students, Tam was born and grew up in a district of the province in which a large proportion of the population were farmers with many children, who had to struggle to make ends meet, with little time left over to actively support their children’s learning. However, similar to her students, Tam grew up in a middle-class family, in which her parents were teachers of chemistry and geography, so they encouraged her study and supported it through buying good quality reference books. As her parents’ own second language education was French, she explained that they were unable to support her English language education extensively, but she endeavoured to study on her own. In her hometown, Tam said there were limited English language reference books available except textbooks devoted mainly to grammar and vocabulary. The first time Tam was able to listen to English was in a training class for an English contest for high performing students in Grade
9. When Tam moved to the city to study at a high school and university, she was supported in her English study both financially and through encouragement, from her aunt.

Tam’s experience of learning English dated back to Grade 6 (the first year of secondary school), which, according to her, was later than her peers from the city. At secondary school (Grades 6-9), Tam learnt English with three teachers, one of whom was her aunt. As Tam recalled these early lessons, she explicitly described the method used for teaching English as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM): her teachers would present examples and grammatical structures from the examples, then ask students to do the exercises in the books and write the answers on the board. As she emphasises in the quote below, there were few opportunities for teachers or students to choose other contents or activities different from those in the textbooks:

In my Grades 6 and 7, the method that my teacher used was Grammar Translation Method. She provided the examples, then the grammar rules and asked us to complete the exercises in the textbooks and write the answers on the board. Usually, she asked good students to write the answers on the board first, then weaker students. Weaker students were assigned with easier questions… The textbooks that we learnt before were not divided into skills as the current textbooks. They were all about grammar and grammar.

In addition, Tam said that she was less advantaged than her friends in the city because they could attend English classes in the evening. Despite living in an outlying district and having limited access to learning opportunities beyond classroom instruction, with her keenness for studying English, Tam read any new English books made available to her and worked on English grammar exercises during the summer holidays. With this additional study, however, she consequently found her teachers’ instructions redundant, commenting that her teachers did not teach anything new or introduce any other activities beyond what was available in the textbook.

Her first exposure to a communicative approach to language teaching occurred in Grade 6, when her aunt taught a lesson using a new teaching method that Tam could now retrospectively name as a Communicative Approach. Tam described her aunt’s lesson as being presented through a series of sequences, namely PPP or Pre- (Presentation), While- (Practice) and Post- (Production), which was all preceded by a game in Warm-up stage. She particularly enjoyed this lesson because she considered it much more interesting than previous lessons. She said that she realised that English could be fun to learn through playing games. However, her aunt’s lesson was taught only once for colleagues’ observation, and
only the best students in each class were selected for the one-off class. Furthermore, despite the structure of the lesson being more communicative, Tam said the lesson was still dominated by grammar translation. Tam suggested that her aunt must have assumed that her students did not understand much of what she said, so she gave translations for every English sentence she uttered.

While her aunt’s lesson significantly influenced Tam’s interest in learning English, she described another experience as the first event that really kindled her interest. This experience happened in Grade 5 when she visited a tourist site in the province and saw the tour guides speaking English so successfully to the foreigners. She described how she felt uncomfortable because she could not understand anything, which in turn prompted her desire to learn English in order to speak as these tour guides did to the foreign tourists. These memories remained with her and became strong motivations for her choice of English as her major at university.

After finishing secondary school (Grades 6-9), Tam moved to the city and studied in a gifted high school with an English specialization. She described how she was selected into classes where students would learn the language skills separately, although the textbook was not designed specifically for the individual skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Her teachers gave instructions in all the skills but the focus was on writing and grammar, while very little time was spent on speaking. Each month, the class consisted of two weeks of writing instruction, one week of listening lessons, and the remaining time spent on grammar. A speaking lesson was taught once every two months. Tam described how the teachers used GTM by “translating sentence by sentence” and did not encourage students to be creative in expressing ideas. She also recalled how her teachers usually asked stronger students to speak, giving limited opportunity for weaker students like Tam to contribute. Tam admitted that she was very timid, because unlike other students she could not practice English with anyone after school.

She described how she had a more positive experience with her university studies because the learning environment was completely different from her earlier education. Unlike the secondary and high schools where English was one of many compulsory subjects, at university it was the only language she had to study, and all lessons were conducted in English. In addition, the teaching styles at university differed from those at secondary and high schools. While the high school teachers tended to help students translate sentences from
Vietnamese into English, Tam described how the university lecturers showed students how to think in English and how to use words more appropriately. They encouraged students to be creative and interactive in learning English. At the same time, university provided opportunities to participate in many extracurricular activities which improved her English skills. For example, she attended an English Speaking Club, originally for social reasons, but this helped her enhance her listening and speaking skills with little effort. Tam described how she learnt a great deal from free writing techniques taught by her most senior lecturer in the first semester at university. Thanks to this “teacher’s meticulous instructions and support”, Tam and her friends made a lot of progress and became more confident when studying in another writing course with a foreign teacher in the following semester. In addition, she frequently had to read and present in front of the class. She commented that her skills improved remarkably thanks to the high demands of this education:

It was completely different between university and high school. At university, we were encouraged to be creative and involved in different learning activities…I remembered that my lecturers often asked us to give presentations, which required us to read, write and present regularly. Thanks to these activities, our skills improved dramatically but we were not even aware of that.

Tam’s desire to become a tour guide continued throughout her years at university until she did her teaching practicum at a high school when she was in her fourth year at university. Tam said within the two-month teaching practice she spent a great deal of time working with students and eventually came to love working with them. Her cooperating teachers’ feedback on her performance after each lesson also made Tam feel that she was improving and contributed to her decision to follow the teaching profession.

When asked to describe the teaching method encouraged by her teacher educators, Tam nominated the Communicative Approach (CA). She associated this approach with the use of games, the target language and communicative activities to help students develop their language proficiency. She explained that, while this was the approach that she originally thought she would use when she taught, the reality of her present classroom context made this difficult. She described her current students as “having limited English background” which considerably impeded her efforts to use the communicative teaching approach in the classroom:

At present, I am trying to use a Communicative Approach. But you know, my students’ English background is very limited, so it is very difficult for me to use it
I try to use as much and simple as possible. I merely ask them Yes/No questions but they still give the wrong answers.

Over time, her practice has changed. The more time she has spent in classroom, the more she has modified her approach and compromised her preference for CLT in response to classroom challenges. For example, she described how she had wanted to use more English in the classroom but, because of the very limited English background of the students in her two Grade 10 (Pre-intermediate level) classes, she had to use mostly Vietnamese. In contrast to these two classes, Tam said, when working with class 11A1 (Pre-intermediate level) in the previous year and this year (the year of the study), she was able to use more English due to their better language abilities. The Grade 11 classes were also often smaller, with high performing students, thus they were usually able to follow her instructions promptly and effectively. However, in the bigger classes students of lower levels of English proficiency and motivation struggled to remain on task. Tam described how she tried to use activities with these classes to encourage them to use English by using pairwork, groupwork and games; however, this was a constant challenge. For example, she explained that her students in the “weaker” classes often refused to play games even though she would give them bonus points if they participated. When they were not willing to play games, Tam switched to asking them questions, but they did not answer the questions or answered in Vietnamese, saying, “We don’t understand because you speak English!”

In general, Tam said that she believed all students were able to learn English but they had limited awareness of the importance of English to their lives, as she said: “I think my students are capable of learning English … but the problem is their low awareness about how important learning English is to their lives”. Meanwhile, students’ learning abilities appeared to play a role in what and how she preferred to teach. She described her positive initial experiences with students when she first began her teaching. For example, in her first two years, she enjoyed teaching speaking lessons because her students were good at this skill. However, in later years, she encountered difficult experiences with students of low English language background and behaviour, whom she described as struggling with learning English and having little learning motivation. To handle these classes, she described her teaching in ways which involved greater use of L1, practice drills and fewer communicative activities.

When asked whether the parents and students valued learning English, Tam commented that there were divergent opinions among them, mostly depending on the classes their children attended. For example, Tam said that the high performing students in class 10A1 or 11A1
highly appreciated the importance of English, thus were very keen on learning. This might be due to the fact that a majority of the parents of students in these classes were government employees, who were likely to recognize the important role of English. Tam described how they would ask her why their children had low marks, and many sent their children to attend the English classes in the evening. In contrast, according to Tam, such attention and investment were not evident with low performing students in other classes of Grades 10 and 11. She explained that their parents who were mainly workers or vendors did not seem to appreciate how English could be important to their children.

One of the most important factors, however, influencing both students’ and parents’ expectations and hence Tam’s teaching approach was the national examination system. Despite DOET changing the test format so that students had to take listening, speaking, reading, writing as well as grammar tests, the national graduation exam given by MOET was still grammar-based. Students had to pass the national graduation examinations to officially graduate from high school and be able to attend university, thus Tam’s students were very concerned about preparing for the graduation exam. Tam said that even her 11A1 class told her that the national graduation exam did not assess their listening and speaking skills but concentrated mainly on grammar; therefore, they asked her to focus merely on grammar and, only when the MOET changed the test format, they would then study the other skills:

Why do we have to invest into listening and speaking skills since they are not assessed in the entrance examination to university? The tests focus on grammar, so why don’t we focus on grammar? Unless, the test format is changed, we will then focus on listening and speaking skills.

In regard to teaching resources, Tam used the textbooks as the main teaching materials. In general, she described how she would follow the sequence of activities given in the textbooks. However, Tam said she used language games, which were not provided in the textbooks, to help her students be more involved in the lessons. In addition, despite following the sequence of textbook activities, Tam said she would judge whether the activities were appropriate to her students’ levels, otherwise she would modify them. For example, Tam said:

Commonly, I follow the textbooks if the activities are appropriate. If not, I will change them…For example, the \textit{while} stage in the textbooks, I find the activities in this stage very difficult so I adjust them to be easier. I never make them challenging because my students are pretty weak.
Besides the textbooks, Tam used other resources such as the teachers’ manuals and lesson designing books, but only in her first year of teaching. Now she mainly searched on the Internet, especially the webpage www.giaoan.violet.vn, for teaching resources and ideas from other teachers to use in her classes. She explained that such resources helped to provide students with more grammatical exercises as supplementary teaching materials.

In addition to resources collected from the Internet, Tam’s teaching was also influenced by her discussion with her colleagues. This was done occasionally in the form of classroom observations and sharing experiences. Tam said she had received feedback from her colleagues and applied it to her teaching. By contrast, she did not find the seminars organized by the DOET, in which teachers were provided with teaching demonstrations, beneficial or applicable to her teaching. She said that these demonstrations did not use any new techniques that she had not already learned at university. Moreover, these teaching demonstrations were targeted to advanced students at gifted schools and were not relevant to the students at her school.

In conclusion, Tam’s biography has illustrated how GTM was the dominant method during her school-based language learning, and how more innovative ways of teaching (i.e. CLT) were introduced during her professional coursework. Although Tam’s knowledge of language and language teaching appears to have been substantially learnt from her teacher education, her narrative suggests that, in her fourth year of teaching, she was still struggling to implement what she learnt and valued in her English language classrooms.

6.3.2 Mai

When the study was conducted, Mai was in her fourth year teaching at VL, the same school as Tam. She taught English to two high school classes, 11A4 and 11A5, which were regarded as “weak” classes in Grade 11. In contrast to Tam, Mai appeared more hesitant to talk about her early learning experiences. She provided short responses to interview questions, and thus her biographical details are less extensive.

Mai was born and grew up in a district where, as Mai put it, people had to strive hard to live. Unlike Tam, her parents were farmers, who “did not know much about education” and “could only help [her] when [she] was in primary school”. Despite these limited resources, Mai explained that, from childhood, she was always an independent learner. When she moved to secondary school she “studied by myself and made my own decisions in learning.”
Regarding her school-based English language learning, Mai and Tam appear to have had many learning experiences in common. From her first contact with English in Grade 6 until her high school completion, Mai remembered that her teachers, for the most part, taught reading and grammar without any listening and speaking instructions. They primarily used Vietnamese to provide translations for the students. Mai commented that she and her friends had few opportunities to develop their language skills. As she says in the following quote:

> We primarily learnt reading and grammar. There were no listening and speaking lessons…Our teachers, for the most part, only spoke Vietnamese, not English. It was like they translated everything for us. We rarely had opportunities to develop our skills. At high school, we had similar learning experiences as we merely learnt reading and grammar there was just more knowledge to learn.

Despite the prevalence of GTM in her early schooling, Mai still developed her love for learning English. This was particularly inspired by a young and newly-graduated English secondary school teacher who had ways of teaching with games and activities that aroused students’ interest. The teacher was important to Mai because he took a personal interest in the students, sharing how he overcame difficulties in life and learning:

> Especially, I learnt English with a teacher in my sixth Grade. He had a very interesting teaching manner and he really cared the students. He taught us from Grade 6 to 9. When we came to his house to prepare for the contest for good students, he always brought us home after class. When he taught our class, he introduced many fun games to us.

For Mai, her experience of learning English with this teacher “was fun … because [she] could play many games” and it was “much more fun than the lessons of other subjects [because she could] explore new things.” Her passion for learning English led her in Grade 10 to consider becoming an English teacher. In terms of practical purposes, she perceived this to be a promising future career based on her observations of her former English teachers and discussions with other older peers who had chosen English as their major.

However, like Tam, it was not the early schooling but university learning experiences that provided Mai with her first real experience of English in a communicative context. At university she was given many opportunities to practice language skills, especially listening and speaking skills. Her lecturers helped students to become acquainted with diverse activities such as group work, discussions and presentations. In the following quote, she explains how different her opportunities for learning English were at university compared to at school:
At university, we had many opportunities to use English and to practice our language skills, especially our listening and speaking skills through multiple activities such as discussions and presentations. We actually learnt a lot at university and developed our language skills compared with our learning at secondary and high school.

These valuable experiences at university enabled Mai to see that learning English meant to “study a new and fascinating language, to learn about a different culture and to be able to communicate with foreigners.”

To prepare for teaching English at high schools, Mai said she and her peers were introduced to different teaching methods in the teacher education program. Among these methods, her teacher educators encouraged the pre-service teachers to apply the Communicative Approach, “a learner-centered approach”. Mai said that this teaching approach expected teachers to act as facilitators and activity designers, for example helping students work in groups and practice their language skills, rather than talking and asking students to copy down what they said. Mai particularly enjoyed the teaching style of one educator who usually illustrated the theories she taught with relevant teaching demonstrations, for example, how to teach a grammar lesson, how to talk to students, how and where to stand in the classroom, and how to be humorous to attract students’ interest. Mai said that she and her friends learnt a great deal from this educator. In contrast, Mai said some other educators mainly talked about theory. These educators did not often demonstrate with their own teaching; instead, expecting Mai and her friends to perform micro-teaching practice in front of the class. While they provided detailed comments on the pre-service teachers’ teaching, she thought that this type of practice was less beneficial to her.

In describing how she sequenced an English lesson, Mai mentioned a number of procedures that she said she learnt from the teacher education and observed in other teachers’ practice at her present school. For example, her reading lesson would include stages such as Warm-up, Presentation, Practice and Production. In these stages, she would use games to stimulate students’ interest in the lesson, present new vocabulary for students to do the activities, ask students to write answers on the board, and assign students into pairs or groups for discussion. As Mai noted, her teaching methods would vary depending on her students’ levels. If the class was strong, she would increase the difficulty of the exercises and use more English in class, but do the reverse with weaker classes. Mai explained that she would try her best to give students opportunities to use English in class to enhance their language proficiency.
Mai described her two Grade 11 classes as the weakest among the Grade 11 classes. She said that they lacked a basic English language background, which obstructed their understanding and so they found it boring to learn English. She described them as lazy and placing little value on learning English. As she was also teaching higher level Grade 9 students, she saw the difference in their learning motivation. The younger students tended to be more diligent and motivated to complete assigned tasks, while the Grade 11 students had low motivation and concentration. In addition, the best students in Grade 9 usually chose to complete their further study at one of more recognized high schools in the city, leaving the weaker students at her school. Mai said she often highlighted the importance of learning English for her students in order to pass the national exam and get better jobs with their English competence.

Mai’s perceptions about her students and the importance of the examinations appeared to influence the language skills she wanted to teach. On one hand, Mai said her students were weak at writing, listening and speaking skills and she thought she should emphasise these language skills to improve their language abilities. These language skills would also be assessed in the end-of-semester tests as required by DOET. On the other hand, despite reporting that these skills needed to be emphasized and teachers had to help students prepare for the exams, Mai said, “I like teaching reading and grammar most”. As she explained, due to her students’ limited language proficiency, it would be better to teach them reading and grammar as preparatory knowledge for the development of the other language skills.

Mai’s use of the L1 and L2 in the classroom appeared to be contingent on her assumptions about her students’ capacities. Specifically, Mai appeared to have a clear idea of when she would use English instruction: “I use English for simple and familiar instructions and Vietnamese for grammatical structure explanation otherwise my students will not understand.” Although she stated that she would also encourage her students to use English when working in pairs and groups, she assumed students would choose the language that was easier for them to work in. Mai said she would go around the class and remind students to be disciplined and tell them to use English.

Commenting about how English is valued in her city, Mai said that English was highly regarded in the city and at her school. Mai said there were many English centres where all people could attend to improve their language skills. In addition to students’ regular classes, her school organized extra English classes taught by school teachers and sometimes by volunteer foreign teachers to improve students’ listening and speaking skills. The school also
organized an English speaking contest for students and was planning to run an English speaking club. The students were also encouraged to participate in the Internet-based Olympiad of English organized by the MOET, by taking the online test in the school’s language lab. The parents, according to Mai, placed considerable value on their children’s English learning. Mai said that they contacted the homeroom teacher to learn how their children were achieving in English as well as in other subjects. Some parents asked teachers about the extra classes at school or sent their children to the evening English classes in the city, and Mai saw many of her students attend these classes to improve their skills.

Like Tam, although Mai referred to the textbook manual as the official guide for teaching and said that she followed many of the textbook activities, she made modifications to the activities depending on the classes she taught. For example, she described how she would increase the activity difficulty for a stronger class and reduce it for a weaker class. In addition to the textbooks, Mai also collected materials from reference books and the Internet to provide supplementary materials for her students. Every class was equipped with a projector and speakers, so she was able to have electronic teaching lessons. Mai said that she would have liked to have a lab room with a smartboard so that students could work on computers and practice their listening skills.

Besides using textbooks and other teaching resources, regular classroom observations and meetings among other colleagues at her school appeared to have an impact on Mai’s teaching. As Mai reported, the English teachers in her school met twice a month to discuss and share issues about teaching, for example, how to make a complex grammatical structure more understandable to students. Mai said she applied her colleague’s experiences and feedback in her teaching. For instance, when Mai taught her students how to convert pronouns from direct speech into reported speech, one of her senior colleagues suggested an alternative way so that her students could remember this grammatical rule more easily and she applied it to her teaching.

In terms of professional development, Mai had attended the language training to improve teachers’ language competence to meet the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) required by the MOET, and organized by the DOET. She had achieved C1 level of the CERR but said that this training only helped to enhance teachers’ language skills but not their teaching methodology, so she did not really apply what she learnt from this course to her teaching. In addition, Mai attended teaching seminars and demonstrations
organized by the DOET, in which they invited teachers from other schools to suggest other teaching techniques or activities for difficult lessons. Mai said that she has once observed a colleague’s lesson and had found the mind mapping technique used in the class interesting and later applied it in her class.

In summary, Mai’s biographical interview indicated that her school-based learning experiences did not appear to have left her with many opportunities to improve her language skills. Her professional coursework, on the other hand, enabled her to develop her language proficiency and learn to teach English communicatively. This learning experience influenced how she perceived communicative language teaching and teaching. However, like Tam, Mai struggled to teach English communicatively in a context where students’ language proficiencies, learning motivation, and traditional written-based examinations, were the major constraints.

6.3.3 Anh

When the study was conducted, Anh had been teaching at Nhan Van (NV), the district school, for three years. She taught English to three classes, 10A6, 10A7 and 10A8. These were also regarded as “the weaker” classes.

Being born into a low income family and studying in a rural district impacted Anh’s studies. Her father used to work as a teacher but had to stop teaching because of his illness, and her mother was a housewife. Her parents had to rent their land for agricultural cultivation to receive some income to pay for living expenses. Anh explained that her family had to face many financial hardships, but she was fortunate to receive scholarships from the school principal to support her studies. Although her father’s earlier second language education background involved French, he cared about her studies and generally guided her study. Anh was not able to learn at the evening English classes due to insufficient finances or the long distance to a nearby language center.

Anh also had limited English learning exposure during her secondary and high school education. Despite playing an occasional game or listening to gap-fill exercises on a tape, which Anh admitted that she was not good at, she was most familiar with having grammar exercises assigned by the teachers. Although her teachers used to get students to work in pairs and groups, these were to discuss and give answers for the grammar exercises. Anh said there
were very rarely speaking activities in English lessons during her early days of schooling. As Anh said:

I was not impressed with learning English. My teachers primarily assigned exercises that did not involve interactive communication. Sometimes they introduced games and other activities in the class but there were very few speaking activities.

Her early experiences and low performing scores in English reduced Anh’s motivation to learn English; instead, she preferred to study literature at high school. However, she chose English as her major at university because she followed her father’s advice that being good at English would help her get a job more easily. Upon passing the university entrance exam and spending her first year at university, Anh said that she began to fall in love with learning English and realized that she was not mistaken in pursuing it. Learning English at university significantly improved Anh’s confidence in social communication, and she was able to use the knowledge and skills learnt from university to earn her living as an English tutor by the end of her first year.

Before she attended university, Anh described herself as barely able to introduce herself in English; however, Anh said that the communicative learning environment at university markedly improved her ability to use English in different contexts. Various activities such as presentations, role plays, skits, interviews, and reports assigned by her lecturers were important in the development of Anh’s skills. In particular, she learnt a great deal from presentations because she had to carry out multiple tasks such as searching for materials, rehearsing for presentations, and preparing questions.

Anh referred explicitly to CLT as the method currently being used at schools and encouraged by her teacher educators. Anh explained that using CLT or a learner-centered approach meant teachers should allow students to talk substantially, contrary to previous teaching practice in which teachers used to dominate the class. In particular, she said, “students should use more English than teachers, especially in a speaking lesson”; whereas teachers may need to talk and use more Vietnamese in a grammar lesson for explaining structures to students and asking them to explain their answers. Anh thought teachers should act as guides rather than just providers of information.

In addition, on the basis of her experiences as an English learner from her school-based and university learning, Anh had some definite ideas about how she would create a comfortable learning atmosphere so that her students would have no fear of learning English. She recalled
her high school teacher, who had a very good sense of humour, often used games to make English learning fun. However, he was critical of Anh’s performance in English and left her feeling discouraged. By contrast, she described her many pleasant learning experiences with lecturers at the university, particularly her first-year listening and speaking lecturer, who was very encouraging and shared with students many tips to practice listening and speaking, including talking to themselves in front of a mirror if they did not have a speaking partner. Anh also appreciated her methodology educators who offered enthusiastic and detailed instructions as well as demonstrations to teach specific language skills and techniques. From these experiences, she came to believe that teachers should care about students and listen to their feedback about the lesson, how they wanted to learn, whether the teachers’ instructions were suitable, and what modifications teachers could make to encourage students to learn.

While one of Anh’s important goals as an English teacher was to “prepare [her] students for the national graduation and university entrance examinations with high grades,” she acknowledged that, for her, the other important goal was to “help [her] students be able to use some English for communication after their high school graduation.” Anh said she would try to help students to achieve solid grammar understanding, like her former teacher in Grade 12. However, she wanted to teach differently from her school teachers. She wanted to help her students be able to speak more English, and to teach them real listening rather than copying answers from key books without understanding the why and how. Thus, while Anh reported using a substantial proportion of drills and exercises so that her students could become proficient with the linguistic knowledge, she also mentioned a number of strategies to enhance her students’ language skills, for example by asking them to report what they had listened to, to present a speaking topic in front of the class, or to interview their classmates.

Anh’s concern to support her students with both linguistic knowledge and language skills might also relate to the testing format required by DOET. This was evident in Anh’s comparison of her first year of teaching with her current teaching practice. In her first year, she did not focus on teaching listening and speaking skills or expect her students to be able to speak English because these skills were not required to be assessed. She only emphasized grammar. However, in 2012, listening and speaking skills were introduced into the DOET assessment regulations. Since then Anh has paid more attention to these skills and encouraged her students to speak English not only in the classroom but also beyond it.
However, Anh’s perception of her students’ capacities has had an impact on the degree to which she had to provide them with additional support. Anh described her three Grade 10 classes as belonging to the “weak” classes. Anh explained that her “students’ low language proficiency and learning motivation” were due to their limited English background from secondary school” and the lack of support from their parents, many of whom worked as farmers and sellers or had to migrate to other provinces for employment. Anh said that, when she asked them to prepare a talk for the speaking topics, they said to her, “This is so difficult, you have to do it for us”. As Anh was afraid of their low-score performance in the speaking tests, she wrote the speaking scripts for them. She commented that her students were different from other stronger students who would like to study English for communication, entertainment, computer proficiency, and career opportunities in future. In contrast, her weaker students only preferred having games and easy exercises in a comfortable learning atmosphere. They wanted just enough marks to pass the exams: they asked her, “Is 3.5 (out of 10) enough to pass the English course?” They also told her that they felt bored with studying because it was difficult to get jobs. Anh said that the explanations and translations she had to give to the students in the “weak” class “made her feel tired and bored”.

Despite her preference for a more communicative, learner-centred approach, Anh was less certain about the possibility of this approach in her current classroom, where, as she explained, her students were unable and reluctant to speak in English. She said that, while she was easily able to implement communicative teaching in micro-teaching practice to her peers, her present reality was completely different. She argued that it would be a challenge to encourage her current students to speak much, as with their limited English proficiency, they could only produce short sentences or learn the responses by heart. As Anh said, “Honestly, I am still very inexperienced as I do not know what to do so that my weak students will study”. In addition, Anh explained that her students had to study other subjects at school, thus it was not possible to emphasize one particular subject (i.e. English). As was the case for all of the teachers, Anh also pointed to how the students’ focus on passing the tests hindered her teaching of more communicative skills, such as scanning and skimming for reading. The students’ limited language proficiencies and learning motivation also influenced how Anh used the target language in the classroom. To help students improve their English listening, Anh said she would like to use 90% of English in listening, speaking and reading lessons, 60% in writing, but only 20% for grammar lessons because she needed to explain the structures in Vietnamese. Her students’ use of English was, however, minimal. They would
use English only when being directly asked to, otherwise they would use 90% of Vietnamese, especially for doing exercises.

According to Anh, English was valued at her school because it was one of the compulsory subjects in examinations, and her school usually organized extra English classes to prepare students for the exams. Anh said her school also organized an English speaking contest once a year to provide students opportunities for speaking, singing, performing skits, and dancing. Due to insufficient funding, the school was not able to establish an English speaking club to help students to improve language skills or to provide other facilities (i.e. projectors) to “help teachers plan more engaging lessons with pictures and videos to raise students’ learning interest”.

Commenting about the textbooks, Anh agreed that they had diverse topics and integrated skills but said that there were few pictures and too many things to teach. Anh said that she felt constrained to follow the textbooks because teachers were required to complete a lesson at a specific time in the week. Anh described how she had to stop the lesson when it was time to move on the next one though she or her students still wanted to practice speaking more. For example, she explained, after a lesson about nature conservation, students were not able to apply what they just learnt to talk or write about this topic, but they then had to move on to a new topic such as music with new vocabulary and knowledge. She suggested that there should be another period so that students could talk about conservation or the next topic should be related to the previous topic, otherwise students would forget what they learnt.

Besides using the teaching manual, Anh also referred to the grammar reference book that her high school teacher had used and the website www.tailieu.vn. These sources of materials supported Anh to keep herself updated with more vocabulary stock and grammar knowledge in case students asked for word meaning and in preparation for teaching various grammar structures among classes. In addition to using different resources in her teaching, Anh also had the support from her colleagues. As mentioned earlier, in spite of her keenness and confidence in teaching English, Anh said she found it challenging to work with “weaker” students, how to make them interested in learning. In looking for solutions, she sought help from colleagues and observed her colleagues’ teaching to gain experience about how to manage and teach weak and reluctant students. Anh also attended the teaching demonstrations organized by DOET but said it would be a challenge to apply what her colleagues shared in her classes. Their students were usually high performing, so it was
possible for the teachers to use English, while it would be an issue for her “weaker” classes. Meanwhile, unlike Tam and Mai, Anh found the English training for teachers’ professional development organized by DOET really helpful for her teaching. As she said, teachers did not usually have time to practice speaking and listening skills, thus such training offered them opportunities to consolidate their skills and pronunciation and to use more English with their students.

In summary, Anh’s biography revealed that she had experienced some difficulty in her life and learning due to her family background and that she did not obtain positive language learning experiences in her schooling years. The professional coursework at university, however, significantly enhanced her language skills as well as her knowledge and confidence in teaching. Nevertheless, similar to the other teachers, Anh also appeared to be in a teaching dilemma, which required her to use CLT with students of limited language abilities and learning motivation.

6.3.4 Minh

At the time of the study, Minh had been teaching at Nhan Van, for four years. She was in charge of teaching two Grade 12 classes, 12A14 and 12A15, and one Grade 11 class, 11A8. These classes were regarded as the “weak” classes.

Similar to Mai and Anh, Minh was born and grew up in a district in which her parents were both farmers; however, Minh said she received considerable support from her parents. According to Minh, her parents managed to provide the best conditions to afford her studies by buying reference books and a dictionary and registering her for extra classes. They also excused her from household chores so that she could spend time on her studies. Minh recalled that, although her parents were not able to guide her studies in secondary and high schools, they often mentored her primary school learning.

Growing up and learning in the rural districts in the similar period of time as the other teachers in the study, it was not surprising that the English learning experience that Minh had during her school-based learning was also dominated by GTM. As Minh explained, the focus of learning English in those years at secondary and high schools was on vocabulary and grammar. Even though her school teachers introduced games as lesson warm-ups, they spent the remaining time on presenting vocabulary and grammatical structures and doing drill practice. When her teachers asked the students to work in pairs, the pairwork exercises
primarily involved answering questions based on information provided in the textbook. Although Minh attended an extra English class with another teacher, Minh found his teaching was similar to that which she had learnt at school, with an emphasis on linguistic forms and very minimal attention to language skills. Minh remembered that, on a few occasions, her teachers might get the students to practice a scripted dialogue using the target grammar point, but Minh argued that it was not a genuine speaking activity because it did not involve any specific topic but grammar structure.

Although her school-based language learning did not leave her with good memories of language skill development, Minh became interested in learning English when she found that she was good at learning English by herself. Her regular self-study activities included taking notes, checking vocabulary meaning, translating, and doing reading and grammar exercises. Thus, her choice of English as a major at university was made on the basis of her interest and good performance in English, in addition to the free tuition policy applied to pedagogy students which helped alleviate her parents’ financial pressures.

Like the other teacher participants, Minh had a completely different learning experience at university. Similar to the other participants who had had very little experience of using English communicatively during their schooling, learning English in her first year with native English teachers was an interesting challenge because she and many of her classmates “could scarcely understand and interact in English with the teachers”. Minh remembered that she and her friends “began to use English to improve their communication with [their] teachers, by asking them to speak more slowly or to explain the meaning of a word”. Minh said that, although grammar was still taught as an individual subject, the other language skills were given sufficient emphasis for her to be able to gradually improve her skills. Looking back on her earlier education, Minh recalled that students would hold the paper or look at the textbook with pre-made scripted dialogues or answers and read from these, but in the context of university they were encouraged to organize their own ideas before speaking.

However, it took some time for Minh to abandon the habits of her earlier schooling. For example, she began by preferring to do the exercises on her own instead of having interactive communications. It took her some time to become familiar with working in groups with different classmates. Minh found her methodology courses practical and useful as they allowed pre-service teachers to perform micro-teaching and receive feedback from the teacher educators and peers. However, she commented that some of her teacher educators
tended to present the games and techniques in the form of theory rather than providing demonstrations, which she believed would have helped provide a better sense of how to teach them. She was also uncertain about the usefulness of the teaching manuals in the methodology courses, which she thought were written for teaching English in other countries rather than in the context of Vietnam.

Although Minh had chosen an English major as her teaching career, she gave little consideration to this profession until her teaching observation and practice at high schools in her third and fourth years. These initial experiences enabled Minh to see “the differences between what was taught in the teacher education and the realities of teaching high school students”. She described her micro-teaching with her peers as communicative and effective teaching, because they could communicate perfectly in English and successfully fulfil all of the activities she assigned. However, she realized that these similar teaching activities would not be applicable to high school students who were far less proficient at English. Nevertheless, her teaching observation and practicum experiences did not stop her from becoming a teacher. By contrast, as Minh said that she developed her own idea of being an English teacher who would help students to understand the lesson, encourage them to participate in classroom activities, and hopefully be remembered for her comprehensible lessons.

While Minh was barely able to recall the teaching methods introduced in her pre-service teacher education, her comments suggest some understanding and commitment to a communicative approach. For example, she said she would like her students to be able to use as much authentic English as possible, for example through talking about their own hobbies, and not just hobbies suggested by her. In addition, Minh mentioned using other activities as part of the communicative approach. These included having students play games to give them a fun and positive learning experience prior to commencing a lesson, or asking them to do pairwork and groupwork activities. Minh hoped that such activities would help her students to be able to use English in other contexts, such as in evening classes or at speaking tests at the language center, and especially to stimulate their interest in learning English for their future careers.

Although Minh expressed a preference for using CLT and teaching language skills such as listening and speaking, she admitted, “[I] tended to apply GTM in [my] current teaching.” The most important reasons for Minh’s employment of GTM as a primary method were due
to her perceptions of her students as lacking learning motivation and sufficient language skills. As Minh said, “Students began to learn the language skills (e.g. listening, speaking); however, they only focussed on studying to pass the language tests as opposed to studying motivated by a genuine desire to learn English”. Similar to Anh, Minh’s students also asked her to prepare the scripts for their speaking test, as they were either unwilling or unable to do it. In the speaking test, Minh had to speak slowly or ask them Yes-No questions so that they could answer easily. Minh’s perception about her students’ limited language proficiencies had an impact on how she presented classroom activities. For example, although Minh preferred having students work in groups or pairs, she described these activities as often involving multiple-choice questions, grammar drills, sentence transformations, and matching activities. In addition, Minh said that, like her own school-based experience, she often asked her students to translate sentences or texts to help them understand the text meaning and the context. Because of her students’ limited abilities, Minh said that she had to use more Vietnamese in class, while English was only employed for simple instructions such as, “Open your book! Close your book! Keep silent!” Working with students of limited language abilities and motivation appeared to be what most concerned Minh. Like Anh, Minh mentioned that her main challenge was looking for ways to teach and encourage reluctant and “weak” students to study.

Discussing how English was valued in her school and district, Minh reported that there was little importance accorded to learning English. Except for those who were government staff and teachers, many of her students’ parents were farmers or merchants and “they saw little value of learning English to their children, thus showing little concern about how their children performed at school”. To further illustrate how English was not highly valued by the parents, Minh talked about how her school opened an evening English center targeting communicative language skills, but it was soon closed due to very low enrolments.

Although Minh had to follow the textbooks as the main teaching manuals, she described some writing or speaking parts in the textbooks as being “not practical or meaningful” or beyond her students’ capacity. For example, she said, “The students were required to write a description about the post office near their house but they said they had never been to the post office before, so it did not motivate them to complete the activity”. In other circumstances, her students struggled with difficult topics such as environmental protection, which, as far as Minh was concerned, involved technical vocabulary (e.g. pesticide, insecticide) that was even hard for them to pronounce let alone ever use in speaking. Minh suggested that the topics
should be concise and familiar, with simple vocabulary; for example, students could share
their thoughts about littering. In addition to using textbooks as the main resources for
teaching, Minh said she occasionally drew on other resources such as the Internet, posters,
handouts, cassette players and projectors. However, it appears that she could rarely use the
projectors as another way for presenting her lessons, due to the shortage of projectors and the
time spent swapping to classrooms equipped with projectors.

Minh’s participation in various professional development activities also influenced her
teaching. In her second year of teaching, Minh attended an English training course organized
by the DOET to meet the CEFR standard as part of teachers’ professional development. Minh
said this course was an opportunity for her to review and strengthen knowledge and skills that
were not frequently practiced. During her preparation for the CEFR language assessment,
Minh said that she was able to reflect on her teaching and the difficulties her students had in
learning the language skills; these reflections then informed how she planned lessons. For
example, Minh applied the reading strategies learnt from this course to assist her students in
answering reading questions more quickly and effectively. Minh said that she had limited
opportunities to attend other seminars or training arranged by DOET, which were only for the
head of her English department; he sometimes shared these experiences, but only if he
thought them relevant and if there were time.

Unlike Long, one of the other teacher participants at her school, Minh felt comfortable
sharing and discussing how to deliver more effective lessons with her colleagues. For
instance, she often conversed with her senior colleagues about the weak students and how to
design speaking activities that were more understandable. Observing colleagues’ lessons and
having colleagues observe her own classes played a role in shaping Minh’s teaching as well.

In summary, Minh’s biography suggests that she had similar language learning experiences in
her school-based learning and professional coursework to other teachers in the study. What is
noted from her narrative was that, while Minh had to face similar contextual factors in
teaching as other teachers, it appears that she and the other participating teachers began to
think that these issues could not be resolved and tended to follow a more traditional teaching
method rather than trying out communicative activities with the students.
6.3.5 Long

Long was also teaching at Nhan Van and in his third year of teaching at the time of the study. He was responsible for teaching English to two Grade 12 classes, 12A4 and 12A5, and one Grade 10 class, 10A5. These were also considered as “weak” classes.

Born into a large, low-income family with seven siblings, Long found the learning journey to be quite challenging. Having little formal schooling and earning their living primarily from working as farmers and merchants, Long’s parents were able to give little support to their children’s studies and many of Long’s siblings had to leave school early. Long had the highest education degree in the family. Being aware of his family’s difficulties, Long started to save the money that he received from his parents to pay for his school fees and books from Grade 11 onwards. At university, he tried his best to get scholarships and worked as a tutor of English to cover his expenses. Thus, Long said he was not able to attend extra classes or English evening classes like many of his peers, but instead had to study on his own.

Like the other teachers in this study, the learning experiences at secondary and high school did not appear to have left Long with opportunities to improve his language skills, although he received considerable attention and compliments from his English teachers for his good learning performance on grammar exercises. Although their encouragement significantly motivated him to invest substantial time in this subject, his reason for learning English was primarily because “it was one of the core subjects [he] had to take for secondary and high school graduation exams”. Long said he was rarely exposed to listening and speaking instruction; on the contrary, much emphasis was given to grammar. Once he was selected to participate in an English contest for high performing students, but his teacher only provided him and his friends with preparatory training for the contest on reading, grammar and writing and ignored the listening part. As a result, he was not able to do the listening test well. However, Long enjoyed doing grammar exercises and was very good at it thanks to his acquisition of a substantial vocabulary, which helped him translate and comprehend the sentences even without having a complete understanding of the specific grammar. Nevertheless, Long said that he wished his teachers had taught him to be able to communicate in English, because he thought it was the most important goal of learning a foreign language.

Long’s choice to take English as his major at university in order to become an English teacher was simply pragmatic. He said that his interest in teaching was minimal and he
thought of studying at university to get a job, but not originally in the teaching profession. His choice to pursue the English pedagogical major was attributed to his good performance in English and the free tuition policy applied to students of pedagogy majors, which was important to Long due to his family’s low socioeconomic status.

Similar to the other novice teachers, Long said that his university education brought him positive learning experiences. While English appeared to be given perfunctory attention in his schooling, as he said, his higher education had a significant focus on the development of specific language skills through various communicative activities. Long believed that university education effectively equipped him with practical and beneficial skills and knowledge for his future career. He was particularly fond of giving presentations, which gave him opportunities to talk about diverse and authentic topics in public, and made an important contribution to his confidence and to a fluency that he did not have before attending university:

I was very nervous when speaking in front of many people at high school. Thanks to these activities [presentations], I learnt how to speak in public. At the beginning, I was still very worried and learnt the presentation by heart like a machine. However, in the following years, I accumulated my skills and became confident in communicating my ideas fluently and naturally. In general, university education taught me many skills that are very useful for my future.

In addition to classroom learning experiences, Long read many books in English to enrich his knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. He established a frequent practice of watching English television programs and listening to radio programs through which he practiced and imitated the speakers’ accents. He bought a radio and was especially keen on listening to the English news, which he found extremely helpful for his language development.

Although Long was not able to remember the teaching methods encouraged by his teacher educators, he said that he was committed to a learner-centered approach, by which he meant that developing students’ understanding was his most important goal. As part of a learner-centered approach, Long said he often required his students’ input to complete the classroom activities by themselves before he offered additional support. For example, instead of giving his students translations of the instructions or texts, he asked them to do this themselves and then he gave feedback and corrections if needed. Long said he also assigned students to work in pairs or groups on an activity, write the answers on the board, and explain why they chose the answers. Long welcomed the recent DOET requirements to include language skills in the tests, saying it was a positive sign for language teaching and learning. According to Long,
When all of the language skills were assessed, both teachers and students would be encouraged to teach and learn language communicatively instead of focusing on grammar and reading alone.

Nevertheless, despite Long’s keenness to teach all language skills, it appeared to be a great challenge for him to apply this into his classroom practice. Similar to the other novice teachers, Long found it challenging to apply communicative teaching with his weak and reluctant students. Although Long agreed that all language skills should be promoted, he assumed that his students would only be able to produce simple and basic language due to their limited language proficiencies. Long’s perception of his students’ abilities appears to have guided how he taught in the classroom. For example, while he agreed that students should be given opportunities to use English in the production stage, he thought that “it was not necessary to include this stage due to time constraint and students’ incapability”; he said, for this reason, that “teachers would tend to ignore the production stage.” By contrast, Long viewed the practice stage as the most important part of the lesson. The two activities that Long said he often asked students to practice in this stage were repetitions and substitution drills. He said doing repetition drills was very easy because teachers only had to read through the dialogue or write it on the board and ask students to repeat it. Meanwhile, substitution drills allowed students to replace underlined information or words with others given in the textbook and to practice these. Long noted that these activities were appropriate to the abilities of a majority of his students, because they could not go beyond these to more challenging activities such as presentations and reports.

Despite having confidence in his ability to deliver a lesson completely in English, Long was not convinced that using English as the main form of communication in a lesson would benefit his students. Long said that, while the DOET guidelines required that English should constitute 90% of the language used in the classroom, he found it difficult to give such a high proportion in his classrooms. Instead, he used 20-30% of English in a “weak” class and 50% in a “stronger” class, and provided translation if necessary.

Like Anh and Minh, Long also saw little interest from parents who were farmers or self-employed people in their children’s English study; however, this seemed to be changing at his school: as he said, “English is beginning to be valued in my school and in the district where I taught”. For example, Long described how the English speaking contest which was previously organized in the evening was now held on Monday morning so that all the
teachers, students and their parents could see the competitors’ performance. This event drew
the attention of neighbouring schools, local media, DOET, and students’ parents. He said,
“Many parents were joyful when their children participated in the contest while other parents
asked their children why they did not take part in this activity”.

Long used a range of resources in his teaching, with the textbooks serving as the core
resource. However, like the other teachers in the study, Long had reservations about the
textbooks, and commented, “My students are overloaded with the contents that they have to
study.” Besides using the textbooks, Long adapted materials from the teacher’s manual and
the Internet to provide supplementary exercises for his students. However, unlike the wealth
of resources available at Van Lang, Long had very limited access to projectors, which he
would have liked to use to present pictures and videos as a way of constructing more
interesting and effective lessons. At the time the study was conducted, Long said that his
school had only two projectors and a number of televisions but the projectors did not work
properly, and the television monitors were only installed in Grade 12 classes.

In addition to using various resources for teaching, Long’s teaching practice was also shaped
by the professional development activities that he attended. Similar to the other novice
teachers, classroom observations and sharing feedback were common activities at Long’s
school. Nevertheless, Long said that he did not often ask his colleagues about teaching,
because he thought it would reveal his knowledge shortcomings. He said that he usually tried
to resolve any issues with his teaching by himself before talking to his colleagues. Long also
attended the teaching seminars organized by DOET for several schools in his district, and
said that he sometimes applied what he found useful to his teaching. In addition, Long found
the language training courses provided by DOET useful in reinforcing his language skills and
providing some good strategies for teaching. Like Minh, Long also commented on seminars
on teaching methods that only the head of English department or senior teachers could attend.
He said that he would also have liked to attend these to update his pedagogical content
knowledge with new, innovative teaching techniques.

In conclusion, Long’s biography suggests that his financially impoverished family
background was a challenge in his education journey. Despite this, he strove hard to become
an English teacher. Similar to other novice teachers in this study, Long had limited language
skills from his school-based learning, while the professional coursework significantly
improved these as well as his capacity to teach English. While Long would like to teach
English communicatively to help enhance his students’ language skills, he appeared to struggle in looking for appropriate teaching alternatives to address his students’ limited language abilities and learning motivation.

6.4 Insights from teachers’ biographies

The life stories of the participating teachers enabled me to build up a picture of how their schooling, professional learning experiences and sociocultural factors impacted their values and beliefs about teaching English. In linking back to Borg’s model, the following paragraphs will discuss specific elements associated with the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the teachers lived and taught as well as the Subject Matter Content Knowledge (SMCK) and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) that the teachers learnt and would be likely to use in their teaching.

6.4.1 School-based experiences of language teaching and learning

All of the novice teachers in the study, despite their diverse backgrounds, described themselves as independent learners, and in terms of the measures of the time, performed well in English at school. Some of the teachers’ parents were teachers or professionals, and in the case of Tam and Anh, for example, these parents were able to give them some guidance and support related to their studies. However, other participants such as Mai, Minh and Long had parents who were farmers or sellers with limited education and who were unable to guide them in their learning. Among the teachers, Long and Anh appeared to find their learning journeys more of a struggle than the other three teachers. Among the teachers, only Tam and Minh were able to attend extra English classes, which, like their classes at school, were dominated by GTM instruction. As a result of these early experiences at school, despite later university and teacher education experiences, the teachers appeared to be most confident and proficient in linguistic knowledge (i.e. vocabulary and grammar).

Although these learning experiences did not necessarily provide the teachers with sufficient communicative language development, through the thousands of hours of “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 61) their schooling experiences influenced their cognitions about teaching and learning and how they approached their teacher education and teaching practice (Brown, 2005; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Johnson, 1994; Numrich, 1996; Peacock, 2001).
The preference for GTM by their school teachers left the participating teachers with less than favourable memories and experiences of learning English themselves. As reported by the novice teachers, their own teachers rarely introduced types of communicative competences (i.e. discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence) other than linguistic competence. Their teachers’ PCK, for the most part, appears to have been limited to activities defined by GTM rather than CLT. However, many of the novice teachers were interested in learning English and still chose English as their major at university and later as their teaching subject. In general, the teachers chose to major in English because of their family’s socioeconomic difficulties and their hope of a good job as an English teacher or in employment related to the English language.

In summary, the analysis of the novice teachers’ biographies suggests that, despite being born and growing up in rural districts of the Mekong Delta where resources for language learning were limited, they made a considerable effort and developed their interest in learning English. However, their English learning experiences during this time contributed little to the development of their language proficiency. The prevalence of GTM with its controlled practice was what the teachers remembered most about learning English in those early days. Their many hours learning and observing how English was taught at school, as Lortie (1975) points out, were thus likely to have had an impact on what these teachers believed and valued about language teaching and learning today.

6.4.2 Professional coursework

The novice teachers’ professional learning experience at university played a key role in facilitating the development of their language skills and confidence in social communication, by engaging them in multiple communicative and authentic activities including role plays, presentations, skits, interviews and reports. They all considered themselves to be proficient in English language, and they attributed this to the wide range of authentic and communicative activities by their teacher educators and university English lecturers. In general, the professional coursework left the teachers feeling positive towards teaching English and prepared in terms of various methodologies. For several of them it was during university that they began to enjoy learning English and decided to become English teachers.

While the teachers were introduced to a number of teaching approaches and/or methods, CLT was the approach they recognised as being most highly valued and encouraged by their teacher educators. They understood this approach as taking a learner-centred approach which
allows students to display more productive language cooperatively. However, their
description of the typical lesson sequence they were taught - Warm-up followed by PPP
(Presentation- Practice- Production) - and then used in their own classrooms seemed to be a
variation of the Audiolingual method rather than CLT. Despite their considerable
appreciation of the professional coursework in enhancing their language skills and guiding
their teaching, many of the teachers pointed to some shortcomings with the methodology
courses. Specifically, the teachers realised that the micro-teaching with their peers did not
prepare them for the realities of the classrooms in which they were currently teaching. In
contrast to working with high language proficiency peers, the teachers were now working
with students whom they perceived as having insufficient language skills and low learning
motivation. In this context, they all described struggling with the implementation of
communicative activities in the classroom.

6.4.3 The classroom and related contexts

The teachers described a number of contextual factors inside and outside of the classroom
that were obstacles to their implementation of CLT in their current classrooms. The most
important hurdle they nominated was their students’ lack of the necessary language abilities
to follow the communicative aspects of the lessons. The students’ language deficiency also
seemed to result in their apparent lack of interest in learning English. Although the teachers
said that students, in general, were capable of learning English, all of them affirmed that they
struggled to teach students who had very limited English proficiencies and motivation to
learn, and thus they tended to divert from the CLT approach they had learnt in their teacher
education. The teachers’ descriptions of their practice suggests that more priority was given
to controlled (i.e. repetitions, substitutions, mutiple-choice drills) rather than meaningful and
communicative activities. The teachers’ preference for controlled activities was also
influenced by the English testing formats. Despite DOET’s requirements for assessing
listening and speaking skills and the teachers’ preferences for helping their students to
improve these language skills, listening and speaking skills were not included in the
important high-stakes examinations. In this way, the testing regime, with its substantial
emphasis on grammar and reading language acquisition, impacted on how students would
like to learn English and thus influenced the ways teachers would think about and practice
teaching English in the classroom. The teachers described how they tended to deviate from
CLT goals to teach grammar and reading to fit with their cognitions about their students and
to prepare them for examinations. In other words, from the teachers’ reported beliefs, it
appears that there were limited opportunities to spend on other types of communicative competences other than linguistic competence in the classroom. The teachers drew on their PCK of controlled rather than communicative activities to convey linguistic knowledge to their students.

The teaching resources available to the teachers also appears to have influenced their cognitions about English teaching and learning. All the teachers mentioned using the textbooks as the main teaching manuals and supplementary materials on the Internet or reference books to supply extra exercises to their students. Nevertheless, these additional assignments appeared to be closely related to grammar practice rather than communicative language activities. This could be due to the teachers’ intention to meet their students’ expectation of preparing themselves for the written-based exams. In addition, the teachers found aspects of the textbooks that were not relevant to or beyond students’ abilities, which they then modified to be more appropriate (see more on this in Chapter 7). Some of the teachers also pointed out that the textbooks had few visual pictures but excessive teaching content without linkage among topics, thus making it hard for students to apply and relate what they learnt in successive lessons.

In terms of the audiovisual teaching resources, there was a remarkable difference between the two schools. Van Lang school was fully furnished with projectors, thus enabling the teachers to use the resources frequently in their teaching. By comparison, the teachers at Nhan Van reported that they would like to have similar resources to assist their teaching; however, they said that this was not the most important factor for their effective teaching. Instead, they tended to focus on how to have appropriate teaching methods suited to their students’ abilities and motivations.

The teachers’ exchanges with colleagues in their working environments appeared to have substantial impact on their cognitions. It was suggested that the teachers held frequent classroom observations and meetings with their colleagues for feedback on teaching, from which they applied their colleagues’ suggestions to their teaching. However, they primarily talked about how to make vocabulary, grammar or reading more comprehensible to students rather than how to design effective and communicative classroom activities to promote students’ language skills.

Finally, the professional development in the form of English language training courses and teaching seminars given by DOET appears to have had a varied influence on the teachers’
cognitions and practices. While all of the teachers highlighted the important contribution of
the English language training courses to improving their language skills, few of them found
the courses applicable to their teaching with their particular students. In addition, although
the teachers often attended the teaching seminars organized by DOET, they commented that
these seminars were not appropriate to their low-performing students, thus they rarely
implemented what they learnt from the seminars into their classroom practice. Wanting to
update their knowledge with innovative teaching techniques, some teachers expressed their
keenness to attend other methodology teaching seminars which were, at the moment, only
reserved for the heads of the English department or senior staff members and experienced
teachers, who then barely had time to share what they learnt with the novice teachers.

6.5 Summary

As Borg (2003, 2015) argues, to understand how language teachers’ cognitions are formed, it
is necessary to identify the contextual influences on their cognitions. However, what is not
included in Borg’s (2015) model is the impact of sociocultural contexts on students’ learning
motivation and language performance and how these in turn shape what the teachers value
and believe and how they act in the classroom.

To this end, through analysing the participating teachers’ biographies, this chapter has
presented an overview of personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the
teachers lived and taught and the possible impact of these factors on their cognitions. As
viewed in Borg’s (2015) model, the elements and processes of teaching cognitions of the
novice teachers in this study were formed by many years of learning English in their earlier
education, their professional coursework, and the current teaching contexts. While the
teachers expressed less appreciation for their school-based learning, they placed high value
on their teacher education program for its essential and practical contribution to enhancing
their language skills and preparing them for working in high schools. However, despite the
teachers’ enthusiasm in applying the theories and practices promoted in the teacher education
in the classroom, the contextual challenges inside and outside of the classroom were major
obstacles. Specifically, written-based examinations, and students’ low language abilities and
learning motivation impeded the teachers’ implementation of innovative teaching ideas into
the classroom. In this context, the teachers struggled to find ways of teaching that could allow
them to follow what they had learnt in the teacher education program and, at the same time,
attend to the needs and abilities of their students. Understanding how these teachers’
cognitions were established helps us to understand why the teachers did what they did in their classroom practice. In the following chapter these cognitions will be further explored as well as how various contextual factors influenced the teachers’ cognitions and practices.
Chapter 7
Teachers’ cognitions and classroom practices

7.1 Introduction

This section aims to answer the two sub-research questions:

2. What beliefs and knowledge (cognitions) about teaching and learning English are held by the novice teachers in the study and how are these evident in their teaching?

3. How are the theories and practices espoused in their teacher education evident in the teachers’ classroom practice?

In this chapter, these questions are addressed through an analysis of the teachers’ interview data and transcripts of their observed lessons. This analysis reveals a dynamic and complex relationship between the teachers’ cognitions about their learners and their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which was influenced by various contextual factors. In addition, the analysis of the interconnection between teachers’ beliefs and knowledge and their classroom practices illustrates how the theories and practices imparted in their teacher education were recontextualised or re-interpreted.

As indicated in Chapter 3, “knowledge of learners” constitutes an important part of teachers’ knowledge (Shulman, 1987). The analysis of the teachers’ decision-making, as articulated in their interviews and as observed in their practices, points to the key role of the teachers’ assumed knowledge of their students’ abilities in understanding and learning English in shaping their decisions. In addition, their decisions in terms of their specific practices, organization and choice of activities in their lessons provided insights into their PCK. The teachers’ perceived knowledge of their students and their PCK were interconnected in shaping how the teachers taught English to their students. In other words, the teachers’ perceived knowledge of their students influenced the implementation of their PCK in their classroom practice, as made apparent through their choice of activities or, alternatively, how they modified or transformed activities from the textbook. The teachers’ explanations for their classroom practice were generally consistent with the assumptions they shared about their learners in the biographical interviews discussed in Chapter 6. The teachers described
most of their students as struggling with both the language proficiency necessary to follow the communicative aspects of the lessons and the motivation required to learn English.

Due to the strong connection between the teachers’ assumed knowledge of their learners and their PCK, this chapter is organized in a way that provides a discussion of both types of knowledge, through: a focus on the teachers’ decision-making in relation to the English language textbooks (Section 7.2); their utilisation of L1 and L2 in the classroom (Section 7.3); and the extent to which they focused on form in grammar lessons (Section 7.4). Finally, Section 7.5 concludes with a summary of the key points presented in previous sections in relation to the participating teachers’ cognitions and classroom practices.

7.2 Activity selection

The activities selected by the teachers were informed by both their PCK of different activity types, and assumed knowledge about their students’ abilities and interests in conjunction with their beliefs about which activities would be effective in meeting the needs of their students. The stimulated recall interviews indicated that all five teachers in the study shared the same understanding: their students struggled with the language proficiency, and teachers viewed this as a barrier for them in learning how to master challenging and/or communicative activities. Although the teachers were required to comply with the timeline and sequence of units and lessons as outlined in the compulsory textbook, they made their own choices about whether to conform to, or diverge from, the actual prescribed activities. These decisions were frequently explained in terms of the teachers’ assumed knowledge of their students. For example, in the following quote from Tam’s pre-observation interview, she explains how she made the tasks in the textbooks easier for her students, based on her perceptions of their abilities:

…for example, the While-stage [e.g. While-reading stage] in the textbook, I find these activities so difficult, so I always make them easier. I never make them difficult because my students are a little weak. (NT-Tam-Pre-observation interview)

What can be inferred from Tam’s statement is that the teachers tended to select and/or adapt activities to fit with their assumed knowledge of the learners. The participating teachers thus made choices in relation to the activities. These choices have been categorised as follows: retention; modification; omission; and addition. A summary of each of these types of activity choices is provided, followed by an analysis of the teachers’ rationale for these choices and potential underlying cognitions at the time.
As a starting point, the proportion of each type of activity choice was determined by calculating the extent of each activity choice in relation to the total number of textbook activities that these teachers taught in each lesson, excluding activity additions. Classroom observations of the 29 lessons, listed in Appendix M, were used to determine which activities were retained, modified or omitted; and these were then organized into separate tables and included under each of the relevant sections below. The activities were classified by examining the nature of these activities as well as the ways the teachers asked their students to accomplish them, based on three categories: Controlled, Guided, and Free practice, discussed in Chapter 4. While the activities added by the teachers followed these classifications, they were calculated in a slightly different way. Similar to retained, modified and omitted activities, a sum total of added activities was given; however, the rate of added activities was calculated based on the total amount of activities taught in all of the observed lessons (not just the textbook activities). These calculations included all retained, modified and added activities in the lessons. Having the activities categorized and then calculated provided supporting evidence for the analysis of the teachers’ practices and their explanations for their decision-making. Likewise, insights from the teachers’ classroom practices and their explanations informed the calculations of the activities. These sections have been organized under headings which indicate the different choices that the teachers made in relation to the activities provided in the textbooks.

7.2.1 Retention of activities

Retaining an activity, as suggested by Viet (2014), refers to the teachers’ decision to use the activity as given in the textbooks for teaching without modifying, omitting or adding any elements of the activity. This definition is employed to describe the activities that were retained by the teachers in the study. An example of activity retention is as follows. The teacher follows the true/false or multiple-choice questions as given in the textbook. In addition, if the teacher adds some new statements to the true/false questions or more response options to the multiple choice questions without making complete changes in terms of the content and type of the activity (i.e. it is still a true/false or multiple choice activity), the activity is still regarded as a retained activity. This section provides a summary of retained activities as well as the types of activities that were remembered by the teachers. Following the analysis of retained activities is a discussion of the teachers’ PCK in relation to their retaining these activities and their explanations for their decisions. The choice to retain
activities provided in the textbook may reflect the teachers’ perceptions that the designated pedagogical content suits the needs of their students.

The classroom observations and interviews showed that, for the most part, the teachers tended to follow the activities given in the textbook. However, even in choosing to maintain textbook activities, their choices were often influenced by their assessment of the appropriateness of the activity difficulty based on their students’ abilities. Activities that were retained appeared to be mostly simple activities that were not very demanding. In other words, the teachers seemed to assess the activities in ways that could be associated with what was first mentioned by Brindley (1987) and modified by Nunan (2004, pp. 85-86) as “easier tasks.” These activities met one or more of the following criteria: they 1) involved low cognitive complexity; 2) had plenty of context/help provided; 3) enabled students to be confident about the task; and/or 4) suited students’ language skills. The classroom observations revealed that the students were often able to successfully handle these types of activities with ease. Before examining details of the teachers’ teaching practice in relation to activity retention and their explanations for retaining the activities, a summary of retained activities and classifications of these activities are given in Table 7.1 and 7.2.

Table 7.1 A summary of retained activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbook activities</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained activities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of retention</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 7.1, nearly half of the activities in the lessons observed (49%) were retained activities. The majority of these were in the Language Focus (67%), Writing (57%) and Reading (52%) lessons. The smallest number of activities retained were in the Listening lessons (33%) and Speaking lessons (44%). These differences in the proportion of retained activities suggest that the teachers judged activities in the Listening and Speaking lessons, both of which had a focus on oral language, to be either too easy or too challenging for their

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4 The percentage of retained activities is calculated as follows. Firstly, I counted all of the activities given in the textbook lessons that the teachers taught. Then, I counted the activities that the teachers retained across the lessons (e.g. Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language Focus). Finally, the percentage of retained activities was calculated based on the number of activities retained and the sum of activities provided in the textbook lessons that were observed. This method of calculation was also applied to modified and omitted activities.
students compared to those offered in the Language Focus, Writing and Reading lessons. The latter is most likely to be the case. In their stimulated recall interviews, the teachers explained that they had retained lessons that had fewer expectations of oral language and dropped those which placed more pressures on their students for using the target language. Further explanations are described in more detail below. Table 7.2 presents the number of activities retained by the teachers across the various types of lessons. It also provides an indication of whether the activities were Free (F), Guided (G) or Controlled (C).

Table 7.2 Types of retained activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Types of activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question-answer referential</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cued writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio identification</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking comprehension</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 7.2, of the 49% of the activities in the textbooks that were retained, very few were guided (7%) or free activities (2%) and a very large proportion were controlled activities (91%). The four activities (9%) which have been classified as ‘guided’ or ‘free’ were in the form of question-answer referential and discussion activities in the Reading lessons and a cued writing activity in the Writing lesson. In contrast, the controlled activities were evident across every lesson, with comprehension activities (49%) having the highest rate of controlled practice with nine activities in the Reading lessons and six activities in the Language Focus lessons. These activities often took the form of true/false questions, gap-fill exercises, comprehension questions and matching activities that occurred across the various language skills lessons and in the grammar exercises located within the Language Focus lessons. An example of a true/false activity was where the students were asked to read a passage and decide whether the statement was true or false; for grammar exercises, they had to give the correct forms of the verbs or preform sentence transformations.
A considerable number of controlled practice activities were also evident in the observed lessons. A considerable amount of classroom activities (28%) was devoted to drill practices in the lessons, five of which occurred in the Speaking lessons and six in the Language Focus lessons. The speaking drills primarily asked the students to practice scripted dialogues and replace information using substitution drills, whereas the pronunciation activities in the Language Focus lessons required students to listen to and repeat words containing the target sounds and later read aloud sentences or dialogues having these sounds. Another prominent type of controlled activity was the audio-identification activities in the Listening lessons. These took the form of gap-fill or multiple-choice activities, in which the students listened to a passage or talk and filled in the blanks or chose the best answer.

The teachers’ retention of controlled activities across different lessons contrasts with the higher rate of guided and free activities found from the textbook analysis in Chapter 5. However, disparities between these could be understandable, as in the classroom analysis controlled activities were counted across many lessons (29 lessons), while the textbook analysis looked into five lessons in one specific unit. What is apparent from this analysis is that the teachers appeared to choose to retain the less communicative activities, particularly those which were controlled and did not require students to engage in new language production. The high proportion of controlled activities retained also suggests that the teachers placed a considerable focus on form rather than on meaning.

As expected, given the compulsory status of the textbook, examples illustrating activity retentions could be found in many lessons among all of the teachers, as seen in Table 7.1. In explaining their decisions, the teachers all attributed their choice to retain the “simpler” or less complex activities to the low cognitive complexity of the activities or suitability for their students’ language abilities. Activities that were more complex were omitted; but this category of activity will be described in detail in the next section. The following examples illustrate the teachers’ PCK in retaining activities, and how they explained their retention of activities based on the level of task difficulty and their assessment of the students’ abilities outlined above.

As a starting point, drawing on their PCK, the teachers explained their decision to retain activities as due to the concordance that they saw between the sequence of activities in the textbooks and their students’ language capabilities. This attention to the sequence of activities aligns with Nunan’s (2004) task dependency principle: that is, tasks that are sequenced in the
order of difficulty, starting with easier tasks and working towards more difficult tasks. This principle suggests that, by the end of a sequence, students are able to complete a “pedagogical task” (Nunan, 2004, p. 35), involving free communication with peers, for example in the form of discussion and decision-making, as an ideal outcome of learning. In order to lead students to this stage, teachers need to guide their students systematically to exploit and build upon previous tasks. The activities in the textbooks were often sequenced in this way to provide necessary scaffolding to students. In general, they were designed in three stages: Pre-task (e.g. Before you read), While-task (e.g. While you read), and Post-task (e.g. After you read). Following these stages, activities in Pre-task and While-task in the textbooks were often simpler and easier, and students could look for the answers from the information available in the textbooks. The utilisation of the task dependency principle in the textbooks appears intended to guide students from receptive activities (listening and reading) to productive activities (speaking and writing), in which they could spend more time with language generation. In this context, the teachers’ employment of the task dependency demonstrates that they had a fair understanding about their students and decided to sequence activities to meet their students’ abilities accordingly.

The example below from Tam’s listening lesson (Unit 7, English 10) is a representative illustration of how the teachers’ explanations around their decision to retain activities were based on task dependency. This practice was evident across all the teachers, although this was more prominently observed than explained explicitly. In relation to Tam’s lesson, she explained that she had decided not to make any changes to the four listening activities because the progression between activities and their level of difficulty were suitable to her students’ abilities. My analysis of these activities suggests that these activities were constructed by starting with an easier activity and moving towards more challenging ones. For example, for the first activity, the students were asked to listen to two news stories and only had to select the words they heard in the column of news story 1 or 2 from a list. For the second activity, the students listened to the news stories again but this time they had to fill in the two paragraphs with the words they heard. The third activity was more challenging, as the students had to provide answers to the questions about the news stories, and later, for the final activity, they had to choose one of the news stories and tell their class about it. By completing these activities, the students had an opportunity to progress from receptive to more productive language activities. In the following quote, Tam describes how the activities were dependent
on one another and how her students could do the later activities thanks to what they accomplished in the previous ones:

…because I think they are appropriate. First, they will listen for the key words… then in the second activity, they will also use these key words to fill in the blanks and in the third activity, we will combine them all and answer the questions. They are linked with one another. They are compatible with one another so I do not necessarily need to change them. In addition, they are suitable with my students’ abilities. (NT-SRI with Tam-Listening lesson)

Tam’s explanation in this quote for why she retained the textbook activities points to her understanding and valuing of the sequence of steps in the textbook activity as an appropriate way of supporting her students’ learning at this point in their abilities. However, even when the teachers followed the sequence of activities provided in the textbook, in practice, observations of their classroom practice suggest that there were few opportunities where language practice was provided to the students. Despite the activities offering language practice, the ways in which the teachers had their students accomplish the activities limited the students’ chances of building up their language proficiency. For example, in guiding her students to complete Activity 2 (Gap-fill) and Activity 3 (Comprehension questions), Tam asked them to write the answers on the board rather than respond orally.

For Activity 4, the students were asked to choose one of the news stories and tell their peers about it. The aim of this activity was clearly to involve students in verbal language production. While Tam provided speaking prompts on the board to assist her students, the students mainly referred to the listening scripts in the textbook as their main resource, and read from it rather than using the speaking cues. Consequently, the students had very little opportunity to generate new language or use it communicatively, as they did not attempt to speak without relying on the exact wording in the textbook.

Tam explained her decision to have her students present their answers on the board rather than read their answers in terms of her uncertainty about their pronunciation competence (i.e. ‘word stress’). In the case of the fourth activity, Tam suggested that, because her students could look at the textbook to give the summary of the news story, this would make the task easier for them. What this appears to suggest is that, despite her choice to retain the activities due to their sequencing, she varied how she wanted the activities to be accomplished based on her assessment of the task difficulty in relation to the assumed capacities of their students. This was a common practice amongst all of the teachers.
Since the teachers’ pedagogical decisions to retain activities were primarily derived from how they saw the appropriateness between the textbook activities and their students’ needs, they tended to retain “simpler and easier” activities and leave out the more challenging so that their students were able to complete them. The following example taken from Minh’s reading class (Unit 16, English 11) provides further understanding into how the teachers drew on their PCK to select activities suitable for their specific learners. As observed in this lesson, Minh asked her students to work on the first two activities (e.g. Activity 1 - Fill in the blanks with suitable words from the passage, and Activity 2 - Answer the questions) and not to continue further with subsequent activities in the textbook, one of which asks them to work in pairs and discuss the question, “Which of the wonders of the world do you prefer and why?” To do the first two activities, students could refer to the reading passage for the answers. These are common reading assignments where students are asked to answer gap-fill, true/false, multiple-choice, or other closed-ended items. As these reading activities are usually associated with the topic of the reading passage, students only need to look for the answers by skimming or scanning the reading passage, as opposed to retrieving answers from previously acquired or background knowledge. In addition, prior to doing these activities, the teachers often supplied their students with the vocabulary related to the activities. Thus, these types of activities could be said to involve little cognitive complexity due to the degree of support available (e.g. vocabulary support) and context provided (e.g. students reference to the reading passage).

In the stimulated recall interview, Minh described the first activity as a “relatively” simple activity. She explained that her students were challenged by these activities, which were an acceptable match to their current ability; in addition, she said that the translations for some words in the activities were not difficult for them:

I think this activity is relatively [simple]. Some words in the activity are not long and difficult for translation, so I retained the activity…Now we have to accept students using old textbooks or answering key books … as long as they choose the right words and are able to give translation [for the sentences]. Because they are so weak, we can not be too demanding of them. (NT-SRI with Minh - Reading lesson)

Minh’s explanation demonstrates how she draws on the first criterion for task difficulty presented above: low cognitive complexity. In this case, Minh’s reported practice and explanation suggest that the topic and types of activities were familiar and predictable to the students. These retained activities also allowed the students to have access to sufficient information available in the reading text.
While Minh experienced little difficulty with her students completing the first activity, observational data showed that, once the first activity was completed, it was difficult to motivate the students to complete the second activity. This activity involved students’ responses to the closed-ended questions about the reading passage. Minh only asked the students to answer three out of five questions and to complete the remainder for homework. She asked the students to work in groups and assigned only one question to each of the groups. Despite language support given prior to this activity, Minh’s students still experienced difficulty in completing this activity. In fact, the observational data showed that the students were not fully engaged with the activity.

The students’ lack of attention and interest in the activity may be attributed to a number of reasons, all of which reflect a potential gap between the teachers’ assumed knowledge of their students and the students’ actual interests and abilities. Firstly, the students’ lack of interest in learning might relate to the lack of (real-life) authenticity in the information presented in the reading passage, as well as the lack of relevance of the questions to their personal lives in Vietnam. For example, the students were asked questions about the Great Pyramid of Giza (e.g. “Where is the Great Pyramid of Giza situated and when was it built? How high and large was the Great Pyramid of Giza?”). However, this information has little to no relevance to their daily lives in Vietnam, which can be problematic given that research has shown that authentic materials are useful resources in engaging students in learning language. The choice to retain this reading passage activity appears to illustrate the teacher’s struggle to select activities that effectively motivate her students. As argued by Guariento and Morley (2001), the use of authentic materials helps to promote students’ motivation in learning, as students feel that they are learning “real” language. This is likely due to what Gebhard (2006) suggests are the ways that authentic materials “contextualize” the language learning. Wilkins (1976) claims that authentic texts help to bridge the gap between language taught in the classroom and language used in the real world. In the context of this lesson, the students’ lack of enthusiasm in accomplishing this activity could be explained in terms of a disconnection between the classroom language practice and the students’ real-life language and relevance to their everyday lives.

In addition, the challenge that the students faced in completing this activity could relate to their limited language proficiency as assessed by the teachers. This was observed in the way the students struggled to look for and then articulate their answers. Firstly, although the answers to these questions could be found in the passage, Minh’s students found it difficult to
find them. Secondly, if the answers were found, they struggled with their pronunciation when reading from the textbook. The classroom observations showed that Minh had to spend considerable time completing this activity through asking different students for the proper responses and providing them with additional support in terms of pronunciation and hints to find the answers. The following extract taken when Minh was checking her students’ responses provides an illustration of the challenge that both Minh and her students encountered. In this extract, Minh had to ask four different students before one of them was able to provide an answer for the first question. She also had to either talk to her students in Vietnamese to elicit their responses or provide answers for the remaining part of the question (e.g. Where was it built?):

Extract #1

Minh: Finished hé! Translate hé! (Trans: Finished? Translate!?) Dịch cải câu đó ra hé! (Give translation to the sentence!) Number 1, one asks and one answers! And the one who answers will go to the board and write down. Now number 1, Thu ask and Phu answer.

S1: Where is the Great Pyramid of Giza situated and when was it built?

S2: Thưa cô là… (Trans: teacher..) it is situated (mispronounces the word “situated” and he could not give the answer)

Minh: Where? Who can? Hầu! Answer number one please! Em phụ trách câu một phải không? Rồi trả lời câu một cho cô đi! (Trans: You are in charge of number one, right? Now answer number one for me!)

S3: Đã thưa cô là (Trans: yes, teacher..)

Minh: Nó được xây dựng ở đâu, khi nào? Mãy bạn ngợi dúvida nói chuyên không hay gì vậy? (Trans: where is it built and when? So are you just gossiping there?)

S3: Đã thưa cô nó được xây dựng ở.. (Trans: it is built… but he could not answer)

Minh: Who can? Number one? Sang? Number one?

S4: The Great Pyramid of Giza was built by the Egyptian pharaoh Khufu around the year 2560 BC (student read the answer from the textbook with Minh’s support in pronunciation)

Minh: Where? Còn where nưa? (Trans: How about where?) Paragraph 4, line 1 and 2. So, it is on the west bank of the River Nile. (teacher gave the answer and wrote it on the board)

(Reading task 2, Unit 16, English 11)

Language proficiency has been claimed to be an important aspect contributing to students’ academic learning performance (Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015); and the greater the understanding that teachers have of their students’ language proficiency, the better they are able to support their students to succeed in their studies. As reported in his study on the impact of IELTS scores on performance at an Australian university, Feast (2002) found a
significant and positive correlation between language proficiency of international university
students and their academic performance. Ghenghesh (2015) argues that students who have
insufficient language skills will find it difficult to engage in the learning process and struggle
to make progress in their learning. Thus, as observed through their difficulties in looking for
the answers and pronouncing the words, the students in Minh’s class appeared to lack the
necessary language skills to handle the classroom activities.

By contrast, although Tam retained the textbook activities, like Minh and other teachers in
the study, the ways she drew on her PCK to retain the activities appeared to be different from
the others. As mentioned in Chapter 4, of the five teachers, Tam was the only teacher who
had a higher performing class (class 11A1); and, to some extent, her pedagogical decisions
reflected this. Most of the teachers retained beginning activities and had to modify or omit
more challenging ones. However, based on her knowledge of the students, Tam thus followed
most of the activities in the textbook, and then employed her PCK by making some minor
modifications for her 11A1 class. This helped to enhance the authenticity and relevance of
the information for the students. For example, in a speaking lesson about holidays and
celebrations in Unit 8, Tam and her students worked through all of the three activities given
in the textbook. Her only modification was to change the holiday designated as the stimulus
for conversation in Activity 2, from the three given holidays, including two Western holidays
(Thanksgiving and Valentine’s Day) and one Vietnamese holiday (Mid-Autumn Festival), to
Vietnamese Teachers’ Day. Tam said that she introduced this holiday because she wanted her
students to relate to an important event in their own culture instead of following the holidays
given in the textbook. The introduction of this holiday seemed to motivate her students’
interest, as they tried to respond to her questions about this holiday and later actively
practiced the dialogue with their peers. In other words, Tam appeared to retain the more
challenging and/or communicative activities from the textbooks because she assumed that her
students had the ability to accomplish them. In addition, although the activity that Tam chose
to retain was controlled practice, her choice of another local holiday rather than the Western
holidays appears to have derived from her understanding that her students would be able and
more engaged to work with a topic that was relevant and meaningful to them. This change in
topic demonstrates that Tam may possess a relatively strong knowledge of her students’
interests and can apply this knowledge while retaining the pedagogical orientation of the
activity. Tam’s explanation for her decision is given in the following quote:
Here I asked them to change the information, based on the celebrations they have just learnt, so that they could have something of their own and did not follow the information in the previous holidays. They just replaced the information but still followed the structure. (NT-SRI with Tam - Speaking lesson)

Despite her students’ seeming interest to accomplish all three activities, the ways that they responded to the activities revealed that they did not take advantage of the opportunities they were given to enhance their oral language skills. For the most part, the students followed the language structures and patterns in the sample dialogue closely, and they did this by substituting the information about different holidays and reading aloud from the textbook. In the following quote, which further demonstrates her knowledge of the students’ language proficiencies, Tam explains why her students’ continued to be dependent on the sample dialogue although they were one of the top classes in the Grade 11:

Yes, I think they could do it [getting the ideas from the dialogue instead of following exact language patterns]. It would be great. However, these students still had to follow the language patterns. Although they were the high performing class in Grade 11, they were not completely gifted students in an English class and thus they were dependent on the language patterns. (NT-Tam-SRI-Speaking lesson)

While Tam regarded this particular class as having higher performing language proficiency and potential for learning than other classes, she still did not appear to see them as capable enough for her to encourage them to work beyond their reliance on the sample language patterns. Thus, when moving to the final activity where the students were expected to generate their own language, the activity became challenging for them, as they were not able to use their own language. This suggests that, in the previous activities, the students were not provided with opportunities which enabled them to use the language more independently and freely. The examples from Tam’s classroom practices suggest that teachers perceived high performing students as being able to accomplish the textbook activities, and often followed many of the activities in the textbooks. Nevertheless, they tended to believe that their students were not fully ready and capable to use the language on their own, and thus were hesitant to liberate their students from utilising the language patterns provided in the textbooks.

In summary, this section has illustrated how the teachers utilised their PCK to retain the textbook activities based on their perceived knowledge of their learners. Through retained activities, the teachers hoped to see their students become more confident and comfortable working with the activities appropriate to their capabilities. However, there are several noticeable issues apparent in the retention of simple activities. The first problem is that, if the teachers and their students remained working with “simple” activities, it is likely that they
would not have substantial time to move on with more challenging and/or communicative activities. In the reading lesson above, Minh intended to get to the last two activities, as seen in her lesson plan; however, completing the first two tasks took up all of the class time available. Thus, when the bell rang by the end of this period, she was still working with students on this activity and not able to move forward onto the final two, more challenging activities. Secondly, the ways the teachers worked with their students in relation to the retained activities offers some indication of the depth of their PCK as well as their understanding about their learners. The teachers reported that their students’ lack of necessary language competence impeded the students’ ability to accomplish the activities in a communicative manner; however, classroom observations and the teachers’ explanations suggest that the ways they wanted the activities to be completed contributed little to their students’ progress toward more confident and communicative interaction. To complete these simple activities, students looked for information in the textbooks, read aloud directly from the textbook, and transferred this information onto the backboard with little to no verbal or interactive communication amongst themselves or with their teachers. The teachers’ focus on language form and accuracy tended to reduce opportunities for their students to practice language for production. In addition, the teachers did not seem to “trust” their learners’ abilities; they rarely removed their language support or provided more challenging and/or communicative activities so that the students could have opportunities to extend their language or take risks in using new language. The lack of language practice might thus impact their confidence and result in them finding other challenging and/or communicative activities less manageable. In this context, the teachers’ PCK in retaining the activities was informed by their knowledge of learners; yet, what the teachers seemed to struggle with was following alternative approaches to the traditional emphasis on language form and accuracy in a way that might assist these relatively unmotivated and struggling students to use English communicatively as part of these activities.

What was more revealing of the influence of the teachers’ knowledge of their students on their decision-making were the ways in which they chose to diverge from the activities in the textbooks by modifying, omitting and adding tasks. Such divergences will be explained in detail in the sections below.
7.2.2 Modification of activities

The teachers’ PCK and their knowledge of students are further revealed in how they modified activities to better suit the needs of their students. Activities are regarded as modified, for the purpose of this study, if the teachers made changes to the activity to some extent but retained the content of the activity. For example, an activity was categorised as modified if the teacher drew on her PCK to convert a question-answer referential activity into a question-answer display activity or a discussion activity to a drill activity, but at the same time ensured that the content being assessed in the original activity remained the same as in the modified one. As one way of giving support so that their students could successfully manage the activities, the teachers deviated from the textbooks by simplifying the activities to present challenges that suited their assumed knowledge about their students’ language capacities. This section begins with a summary of activities that were modified and the categorisations of these activities. It then provides further discussion of how the teachers drew on their PCK to modify the activities and their explanations for doing so.

Most of the activities that the teachers assessed as challenging for their students were communicative activities that, for example, asked students to answer the questions verbally or summarise what they had read or heard. The teachers prepared their students for the activities by providing relevant vocabulary earlier in the lessons, primarily on the board, and later explaining activity instructions and key vocabulary, often with direct translations. Despite this preliminary support, the teachers chose to modify activities as another way to continue assisting their students. When simplifying activities, the teachers tended to modify the practice so that the activities were less demanding of their students’ language competence, especially their oral language skills. Table 7.3 provides a summary of the modified activities observed in the teachers’ lessons.

Table 7.3 A summary of modified activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities in the textbook</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified activities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of activities modified</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 7.3, more than a quarter of the activities in the lessons observed (29%) were modified, compared with the rate of activities that remained unchanged (49%) discussed.
in the previous section. The majority of modified activities were in the Writing lessons (43%), and in two other lesson types with an emphasis on oral language, Speaking (50%) and Listening (33%). Unlike the other lessons, which often had three to five activities, the Writing lesson usually had one or two activities; thus, there was a high rate of retention (57%) or modification (43%) and no omission of writing activities. The modification of half of the textbook activities in the Speaking lessons suggests that the teachers found many of the oral activities challenging for their students. By contrast, the Reading lessons had a smaller rate of modified activities (28%). In these lessons, the lower proportion of modified reading activities was due to the high rate of retained reading activities (52%). It might also indicate that the Reading lessons were less demanding on the students’ oral language abilities compared to the Speaking and Listening lessons. Despite variations in the proportion of modified activities in the language skills lessons (i.e. Reading, Speaking, Listening and Writing), this suggests that the teachers judged activities in these lessons to be challenging to their students. This argument is supported by the teachers’ explanations for their modification of activities further in this section, as well as the classification of modified activities given in Table 7.4 below. For the most part, the teachers modified activities with more expectations of oral language to activities with less challenging requirement of the students’ oral language production.

While the activities in the language skills lessons were modified, the activities in the Language Focus lessons remained unchanged (0%). Since no modifications were made in the Language Focus lessons, and 67% were retained, the remaining activities were omitted. The textbook analysis (see Chapter 5) as well as the examination of activities retained in the Language Focus lessons showed that the activities were primarily controlled practice. This appears to fit with the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ preferences for grammar exercises instead of practicing communication language skills, and thus explains the teachers’ choice not to modify the Language Focus activities. Table 7.4 demonstrates how the original activities in the textbooks were modified. Original and modified activities are categorised as Free (F), Guided (G) or Controlled (C), as discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 7.4 Types of modified activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original activities</th>
<th>Modified activities</th>
<th>Transformations of activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question-answer referential (4)</td>
<td>Checking comprehension (3)</td>
<td>G → C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking comprehension (2)</td>
<td>Question-answer referential (1)</td>
<td>G → G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking comprehension (2)</td>
<td>Checking comprehension (2)</td>
<td>C → C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As calculated in Table 7.3, of the 29% of the activities in the textbooks that were modified, there were a large proportion of controlled activities modified from original activities, which were classified as guided (60%) or free activities (12%), thus suggesting the teachers’ priority for more mechanical rather than communicative practice. The original communicative activities, often in the form of discussion, narration, wrap-up, report, and production-audio identification, were adapted into controlled practice in the form of drill, checking comprehension and audio identification. For example, writing activities, originally designed as narrative writing where students would have more choices for guided writing, were altered into drilling writing activities, in which the students used the information to substitute into the sample writing. Both the information and samples for the writing activities were provided by their teachers.

Only 12% of activities remained as guided practice after they had been modified into another type of activity. For example, a wrap-up listening activity, where students needed to talk about the World Cup winners, was adapted into a cued narrative where the teacher provided prompts to assist with their expression. Some activities which were originally controlled (16%) were modified further to become a simpler form of controlled activity to require less from the students. For example, while one original activity asked students to answer the comprehension questions based on the reading passage, it was turned into a multiple-choice activity where the students responded to the questions based on suggested answers. In brief, these figures reveal that an extensive proportion of the communicative activities were modified into more mechanical practice; which means that opportunities for communicative language production became more limited for the students. To modify the activities, the teachers drew on different sources of their own PCK and their knowledge of the learners to meet the specific needs of their students.
A typical example that demonstrates how the teachers modified activities, and also their explanations for this practice, was a listening lesson taught by Anh (Task 2, Unit 16, English 10). In this lesson, the original activity asked the students to listen to a talk about a tourist site and answer the questions about it verbally. The possible challenge of this activity was that the students had to identify the information as they listened and respond with complete answers orally. Anh chose to turn this activity into a multiple-choice activity, which still followed the questions in the original activity; however, each of the questions was made available with four alternatives of choice. The modified activity, thus, became less demanding for the students, as they were provided with more supporting cues that they could choose from instead of generating answers from the English text themselves. In addition, the classroom observation showed that the students simply answered the questions by saying the number and the letter to nominate the options they chose (e.g. 1A, 2D, 3B) or by reading the words already provided in the answers (e.g. 1. “It lies on the Thu Bon River”). The students were then asked to write the answers on the board (e.g. 1A, 2D, 3B) rather than articulating them orally in English.

As Anh explains below, she assessed the listening activities as being too difficult for her students. Consequently, she redesigned most of the listening activities so that they took the form of true/false or multiple choice activities. These were also the kinds of activities that the students would do in their listening test and exam:

> Because my students are going to take the examination, so I adapted it based on the format of the exam, that is True/False and Multiple-choice questions. Usually, I modify the listening activities to be easier because the listening activities in the textbooks are very difficult. (NT-Anh-SRI-Listening lesson)

Anh’s example and explanation for activity modification were similar to those from the other teachers. Based on their assumed knowledge of the students’ abilities, the teachers employed their PCK to modify the activities to become less complicated and demanding. The teachers tended to avoid oral activities that they believed would be challenging for their students, such as activities that asked students to summarize or answer Wh- and How questions from what they had read or listened. Instead, the teachers redesigned the activities, for example by changing them into multiple-choice questions or simplified questions that students could answer by reference to the textbooks or handouts. In addition, they modified the activities by supplying more support in the form of cues or prompts so that their students were better able to speak and write accordingly. The adapted activities often allowed the students to write the
answers on the board rather than giving verbal responses. Thus, the students would encounter minimal code and cognitive complexity and, as a result, from the teachers’ perspectives, find the activities more manageable.

While the above example illustrates how the teachers used their PCK to modify oral activities to be less challenging or less communicative activities, the following examples reveal the teachers’ simplification of “difficult” activities into less demanding activities. In this situation, the teachers provided their students with less difficult activities than those in the textbook, to familiarize them with the topic. For example, in her stimulated recall interview, Mai described how, foreseeing that the first reading activity in the textbook might pose some difficulty for her students, she decided to omit the activity and present the subsequent two activities with modifications. The original activity, a gap-filling exercise where students had to fill in the blanks with provided words in the reading passage about the world population, Mai explained, posed a considerable challenge for her students. Although the topic of the reading passage was about world population, the statements in the activity appeared not to be related to the topic, giving the students very little contextual or topical clues. In addition, despite being able to reference the reading passage to figure out the meaning of the provided vocabulary terms (e.g. “figures”, “resources”, “method”, “control”, “increase”) which could be used in the blanks, these terms were likely to present potential difficulty due to their unfamiliarity to the students. As argued by Richards and Renandya (2002), such complexities “pose severe processing problems for lower-proficiency learners” (p. 103), and so learners need to be provided with different types of support so that the task difficulty can be adjusted to the learners’ interest and motivation.

Anticipating the challenges posed by the complexity of this activity for her students, Mai chose not to include it in her teaching even though she had provided the vocabulary and meanings in an earlier part of the lesson. Instead, the two activities that Mai introduced were simplified primarily from Activity 2 and the reading text in the textbook. Although Mai still used Activity 2 later in the class, she turned the oral questions in this activity into much easier activities as a form of scaffolding: the first one required students to complete a table with figures; and the second asked them to give true/false answers for the statements through reading the passage. These activities were all derived from the reading text but included short and familiar content and less complicated vocabulary. The students could simply find the answers in the text once they had read it. Compared with the omitted activity, these activities presented little complexity and allowed Mai to check her students’ comprehension of the text.
My field notes indicate that, once provided with plenty of contextual clues and an activity that did not require good reading skills, the students became involved in these activities and correctly answered all activity questions.

As Mai explains in the following quote, her purpose for presenting these activities was to give her students more reading skill practice and to add diversity to the lesson. It was evident that the students could practice some reading skills by skimming and scanning the text with less hassle due to provisions of familiar and clear contextual clues. However, as is evident from the quote, what Mai meant by ‘diversity’ was more about providing students with more drills and easier scaffolded practice, rather than more diverse activities (such as pairwork, groupwork) or connections with other language skills (e.g. speaking or writing):

...because the activity in the textbook checks the new vocabulary, students read from the passage, then they fill these vocabulary into the blanks of the given sentences. Those parts are difficult to them. Besides, they can do these parts at home to check the vocabulary they have just learnt. Thus, there is only one activity left, which is activity 2 in the textbook. There are five questions in this activity. I think this activity is short, so I added these activities to diversify the lesson and students can use more techniques to do the reading exercise. (NT-Mai-SRI-Reading lesson)

Despite the teachers’ provision of simplified activities to avoid “difficult” activities and to help their students become accustomed to the topic, the students had little opportunity to produce the target language, due to the ways they were asked to work on these simplified activities. For example, Mai only asked her students to write the answers on the board, with limited opportunities for an oral response from the students. Like the choices made around the retained activities, the teachers’ choices to modify activities suggested a stress on language form and accuracy and the teachers’ hesitation to encourage language interaction among their students. A priority on language accuracy appeared to have an impact on how the students engaged in interaction. For instance, when Mai asked her students to do Activity 3 by working in pairs and answering the questions about the world population in a reading passage, my observations indicated that, although the students were sitting with their peers, there was very little interaction between them.

While the teachers in Nhan Van school (Anh, Minh, and Long) rarely retained or modified but tended to omit the post language skills activities such as After you read, After you listen or the final speaking activities, the teachers in Van Lang school (Tam and Mai) were inclined to follow or modify these activities rather than exclude them. Nevertheless, even when these teachers chose to use these activities, they tended to make them less demanding for the
students. The following example from Mai’s listening lesson (Unit 7, English 11) provides an illustration of this practice. Although the *After you listen* activity asked the students to work in groups and summarize the main ideas of the listening passage, Mai turned it into a game to check her students’ comprehension. To run this game, Mai divided the class into two teams and asked them to choose a number on the screen, which was corresponded to a question. If the students gave the correct answer to the question, their team would receive the points. In the quote below, Mai explains that her employment of this game was to consolidate her students’ comprehension about the topic and develop their speaking skills:

> [This game is given] in order to reinforce the information about world population and help the students to memorize the information after the listening activities. We can also help students extend other skills, for example in a listening lesson, we can ask them to practice speaking. [In this lesson] I think it is speaking as I asked them to stand up and answer. (NT-Mai-SRI-Listening lesson)

Thus, although the game engaged the students’ participation as they tried to answer the questions, it moved away from the intention of the original activity, which was to generate the students’ use of language by summarising what they had heard. To accomplish the original activity, the students would have needed to provide a response that required more than just repeating back what they had done in the earlier activity. The modified activity only asked them to answer questions whose answers could be traced back to the scripts that Mai provided her students for a gap-fill activity earlier. In addition, to answer these questions, the students, for the most part, only had to give very short answers. In the following quote, Mai explains that, due to her assessment of the activity difficulty and the students’ abilities, she only asked her students to tell her how many solutions there were for reducing population growth rather than requiring them to list the solutions:

> If I asked them what the solutions were, they would have to think of the answers in English. As I asked them spontaneously without letting them discuss first, I think they could not answer the difficult parts. This question is about solutions [for population explosion] and it would also be difficult for them to list the solutions as these solutions are associated with difficult vocabulary. The vocabulary was also difficult to remember and it would take them much more time to read [the answers]. (NT-Mai-SRI-Listening lesson)

The greater number of retained and modified activities, particularly final activities, which required students to produce more language, as observed in Tam and Mai’s classes, suggests that the students in Van Lang school were perceived by their teachers to be capable of accomplishing more classroom activities than the students in Nhan Van school. Despite this, these teachers were still reluctant to have their students try the original activities. The ways
they modified the activities to present a lower degree of challenge and communicativeness suggests they still perceived their students to lack sufficient language skills to complete the original activities.

To sum up, based on their PCK and understanding of their students’ language abilities and needs, the teachers simplified the activities into less challenging and/or communicative ones. My analysis of these modified activities suggests that the teachers provided the students with fewer opportunities to use the language communicatively. This is in contrast to the original activities which were designed to facilitate students’ use of language and prepare them for the more communicative activities in the production stage. These teachers were challenged to find alternative approaches to modify these activities into ways that could bring communicative opportunities to their students’ perceived low language abilities.

7.2.3 Omission of activities

The teachers’ choice to omit activities further reveals insights into their cognitions. Omitting an activity, as defined by Viet (2013), refers to the teachers’ removal of an activity from the lesson without replacing it. An example of an activity omission is as follows: the teachers do not use the After you read activity in the textbook and do not replace it with any other activities. The teachers, as was the case for modifications, omitted activities due to their assessment of task difficulty and perceptions of their students’ abilities. Thus, most of the activities omitted involved communicative practice, since the teachers saw these as too challenging for their students. A summary of omitted activities and the classifications of these activities are provided in Tables 7.5 and 7.6. The lower rate of omitted activities in the lessons is due to the high proportion of retained and modified activities. Following the discussion of these tables are the teachers’ rationales for removing the activities from their lessons.

Table 7.5 Table of activity omission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities in the textbook</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities in the textbook</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omitted activities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of omission</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

170
As indicated in Table 7.5, less than a quarter of the activities in the lessons observed (22%) were omitted. The omitted activities had the lowest rate in comparison with the modified activities (29%) and retained activities (49%). The majority of omitted activities were in the Language Focus (33%) and Listening (33%) lessons. The lessons having a smaller rate of omission were Reading (20%) and Speaking (6%), while there were no omissions in the Writing (0%) lessons. The fact that the Writing lessons had no omissions could be due to the smaller number of activities in the textbook for these lessons (1-2 activities/lesson) in comparison with other lessons. By contrast, the Language Focus lessons often had more activities (3-5 activities/lesson) and the teachers regularly spent considerable time explaining the pronunciation and grammar content prior to asking their students to do the exercises. It is likely that their lack of time for these lessons led to their decisions to exclude the final activities in the lessons.

Although the remaining language skills lessons (i.e. Reading, Speaking and Listening) did not have very high rates of activity omission, the activities excluded in these lessons require some discussion. As indicated earlier, the retained and modified activities were, for the most part, controlled practice, thus indicating the importance that the teachers appear to place on language form rather than on meaning negotiation. As documented below, the omitted activities were primarily communicative activities. Excluding these activities from the lessons further limited the students’ opportunities for communicative language exposure.

Further details on the types of activities omitted in the teachers’ lessons are provided in Table 7.6.

Table 7.6 Types of omitted activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Types of activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Identification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion (Pre-discussion)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap-up</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 7.6, of the 22% of activities in the textbooks that were omitted, the majority were free and guided activities (58%), compared to a slightly smaller proportion of controlled activities (42%). Among the controlled practice activities, there were six grammar
exercises (75%) and the other two activities (25%) found in the Reading lessons. The grammar exercises often asked students to do sentence transformations, whereas the controlled reading activities required them to identify the meaning of the words with reference to the reading passage. By contrast, the other omitted activities were communicative activities which took the form of pre-discussion questions, wrap-up and discussion. The Listening lessons had the most omitted activities compared with the Reading and Speaking lessons. Of eleven omitted activities in these lessons, there were seven listening (64%), three reading (27%) and one speaking (9%) activity. This suggests that the teachers found the listening activities more challenging for their students and thus decided to remove them from the lessons. The higher proportion of omitted communicative activities in this table again points to the teachers’ reluctance to include interactive activities in their classes, which is consistent with their having their students work on language form rather than negotiate language meaning.

For the most part, the teachers explained their decisions for omitting activities in terms of their students’ lack of confidence and limited language skills in relation to the cognitive complexities of the activities that they were required to complete. As indicated above, communicative activities were regarded as a considerable challenge by the teachers, especially those in the rural school. As mentioned earlier in the modification section, unlike their colleagues in the urban school, who tended to modify the final activities, the teachers in the rural school tended to omit these activities. The following example from Anh’s Listening lesson provides further insights in how and why these teachers omitted the final activities from their lessons.

In a stimulated recall interview, Anh described her decision to omit the After you listen activity. This activity required the students to work in groups to give a summary in English after listening to a description about the ancient town of Hoi An. An analysis of the activity itself suggests that it was not intrinsically difficult, because the students could retrieve information from the listening activity that they had listened to repeatedly and worked on in previous activities (e.g. Multiple-choice activities). In addition, in regard to Brindley’s (1987) elements of task factors, the students were provided with plenty of context and support prior to this activity. They were likely to be familiar with the topic, “Historical Places”, in this unit through preceding Reading and Speaking lessons, which were also designed to involve students in discussing historical places. For example, the Reading lesson presented a reading passage and tasks about Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam (Trans: the Temple of Literature) in
Hanoi as the first university of Vietnam established in 1070. The Speaking lesson involved students working with their peers about other historical places in Vietnam such as Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Hue Imperial City, and Thong Nhat Conference Hall. In this context, the listening passage about Hoi An and the associated activities followed a theme and sequence similar to the other lessons. This summary activity is also a common post-activity used at the end of many lessons, where students are required to generate language on their own. Thus, it could be assumed that there was little cognitive complexity imposed on the students. However, from Anh’s perspective, the activity was beyond her students’ capacities. As Anh explained in her stimulated recall interview, her students had struggled with the previous activities in the same listening lesson. Even though she had modified those activities into multiple-choice activities, which she thought would be very easy for her students, she explained that they still found these activities very challenging. Anh said she had played the tape many times but her students were still not able to give the answers. As she explains in the following quote, although the *After you listen* activity was not very demanding, her students lacked the vocabulary, grammar and necessary language skills such as writing and speaking, and also lacked the motivation, and so the activity seemed to be too difficult for them:

> I don’t understand why. I have made the activities very easy for them but they were very quiet and did not raise their hands. That means they did not understand, so I had to play the tape repeatedly …The students are weak at vocabulary, grammar, writing, speaking and so they are also weak at listening …It is mainly about their motivation. My students are primarily average students and they do not have learning motivation in any subjects… Actually, after they listened, I would ask them to compare answers with partners in pairs or groups but my lesson was having problems so I omitted those parts. (NT-Anh-SRI-Listening lesson)

Classroom observations supported Anh’s comments about the challenge of completing the listening activity. Anh expected her students to tell her the right answers as well as identify the key sentences or phrases from the listening text where they found the answer. However, her students were unable to provide the answers, thus requiring Anh to play the tape repeatedly. Only after multiple playbacks could the students tell her the answers, and only then by reading the answer from the list of options provided, for example, “1A - It lies on the Thu Bon River”, rather than providing a complete answer including evidence for what they chose. After each answer, Anh played the tape and paused at the script where the answer was found. The whole process of working with students through this activity seemed to be time consuming and difficult for Anh. The given time for this teaching period was over before
Anh and her students completed this activity. As a consequence, there was no time left for the summary activity and she had to omit it.

Anh’s explanation is similar to Long’s explanation for why he excluded this same activity in his class. He said that his students did not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge, and so the activity posed a significant challenge to their listening comprehension and ability to answer even simple questions. He emphasized the difficulty of post activities such as After you listen and After you read and suggested that these are extensions mainly for students with strong language skills and beyond the capacities of his own students. Instead, he assigned these activities as the students’ homework:

The activities such as After you read and After you listen are difficult parts. They are the extensions for students. It is not compulsory. If students are strong, we can ask them to do in order to develop more ideas and produce their own language. Otherwise, if the students are average, we will not ask them to do these activities. (NT-Long-SRI-Listening lesson)

Similar to Anh and Long, in another example, Minh also decided to exclude the final activity in the Speaking lesson, drawing on her judgement that the students would not be able to complete the activity. The omitted task asked the students to discuss possible answers to the questions about the Great Pyramid of Giza with their peers. Some of the questions could be resolved by students tracing back to the earlier reading passage. However, they would not find similar contextual hints in the passage for other questions but would need to rely on their background knowledge, analysis or assumptions (e.g. “Where did the builders find the stones?” “How could they build the Pyramid so high?”). In addition, these Wh- and How questions were likely to impose code and cognitive complexity for the students, as they would simultaneously have to look for answers to these less predictable questions and choose relevant vocabulary for their responses.

As Minh explains in the following quote, she had predicted that her students would be unable to do this activity as they would find it difficult to construct answers due to their lack of language proficiency. My observation of her practice suggested that, while Minh decided not to use this activity, she had modified the previous activity into drill practice, in which the students had to practice the scripted dialogue and substitute with given information. This modified activity has been discussed previously in the modification section, and the classroom observation showed that the students spent all of the remaining time working with their peers on this activity:
I had them read again the two sentences in activity 2 [This activity asked the students to look at the list of sentences in activity 1 and decide which sentence is fact or opinion]. I had them read [these] instead of doing activity 3 where they had to think: “Who built the Pyramid? In how long? [To answer these questions], they had to think and give their own answers...Weak students ... cannot think of the answers, like “how long?”, some of them don’t even want to cooperate or think. So I just showed it to them and they can practice, memorize and do the substitution...Even so, they could not do it. (NT-Minh-SRI-Speaking lesson)

As was the case for Minh’s lesson above, while the scaffolding the teachers provided to their students might help them achieve some verbal interaction, the language communication through these simplified and easier activities did not appear to make significant improvement in the students’ language skills.

In summary, the teachers’ omission of activities suggests that they faced a dilemma: they wanted to help their students achieve communicative language but ended up having them work instead on more form-focused activities. The teachers’ assessment of their students’ capabilities and the activity difficulty were the main reasons provided for their avoidance of communicative activities. On one hand, it could be argued that their exclusion of these difficult activities might have improved the students’ confidence and motivation, as they could work on more familiar and predictable activities with reasonable challenge for their current language levels. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the teachers’ removal of more difficult activities meant that their students were rarely challenged with more demanding and/or communicative activities which could improve their language skills as well as their confidence and motivation at a higher level through more language engagement. Thus, it seemed to become difficult for these teachers in looking for appropriate approaches to both meet their students’ levels and improve their language abilities. This indicates a gap in their PCK to sufficiently address their knowledge of their students’ language needs.

For the most part, the activities that were excluded were often the more communicative-oriented post-activities, which frequently were assigned as homework. These activities were generally designed to develop students’ speaking language competence. This goal was unlikely to be realised, however, as it could be assumed that there were limited resources at home for students to accomplish the activities. The students were unlikely to meet with their peers outside class for this purpose, or be able to ask their teachers or their parents for help. Given their low motivation and capacity for learning English, putting the effort in to seek out these opportunities would seem to be unlikely. Thus, this suggests that the teachers attributed
limited importance to these activities, and perhaps did not value CLT to the same degree as reported in the interviews.

7.2.4 Addition of activities

In addition to diverging from the activities in the textbooks through modifying and omitting activities, the teachers drew on their PCK to add activities which were quite different from those provided in the textbooks. In particular, they added language games, provided additional vocabulary, and specifically designed activities to provide their students with more scaffolding for learning. The following sections provide further discussion into these types of activities and the teachers’ explanations for presenting them to their students. A summary of the added activities and classifications of these activities are given in Tables 7.7 and 7.8.

Table 7.7 A summary of activity addition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities used in the lessons (retained, modified, added)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added activities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of addition</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 7.7, the rate of activity addition was considerable (42%) in relation to the total activities observed across the lessons. The proportion of activities added was slightly lower than those retained (49%) but much higher than those modified (29%) and omitted (22%). The majority of added activities were in the Writing (50%), Speaking and Listening (46%) and Reading lessons (39%). The Language Focus lessons had the smallest rate of added activities (29%).

The percentage of added activities was calculated similarly to other (retained, modified and omitted) activities. However, there was a slight difference in terms of the total activities between these two groups. Total activities used for calculating the percentage of added activities were based on the activities that were actually used by the teachers in the lessons including retained, modified and added activities.
As indicated in Table 7.8, although there was a high rate of added activities, almost all of these activities were classified as controlled (98%), with very few guided activities (2%). The majority of controlled practice was found in the warm-up activities (34%) such as vocabulary games and content explanation (50%) in the form of presenting vocabulary and identifying new vocabulary. These two types of activities appears to have been essential parts of the teachers’ lessons, as they were present in almost every lesson.

Apart from a large proportion of controlled activities, there was some evidence of the teachers’ addition of meaningful language activities. These meaningful drills were found in the Speaking and Language Focus lessons. However, the inclusion of such types of activities in the teachers’ classrooms was infrequent (6%) in the context of the total of controlled activities. Thus, there were limited chances for the students to elevate their language abilities. The following sections will provide further examination into the teachers’ employment of these activities as well as their explanations for their decisions.

Table 7.8 Types of added activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Types of activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warm-up</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content explanation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking comprehension</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful drill</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question-answer referential</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The addition of games

Language learning is a difficult task, and continuous effort needs to be maintained over a long period of time (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 1984). It is not surprising, then, that a common concern for the teachers was their students’ lack of motivation to learn English, which often made engaging their students in their lessons a significant challenge. To address this, the teachers looked for ways that could enliven their students and promote their motivation in learning English. One way they did this was through the introduction of games at the beginning of the lesson. The teachers seemed to follow Byrne’s (1995) and Hadfield’s (1990) definition of games as a form of entertainment conducted by rules and required to be
fun and enjoyable. In addition, like Lee (1986), the participating teachers did not consider games as time-filling activities but treated them as central to language teaching. In this way, they regarded games as an important tool to sustain learners’ interest to learn the target language (Ersöz, 2000; Wright et al., 1984).

There were a variety of games that the teachers brought to the classrooms. These included Hangman, Kim’s game, Pelmanism, Matching, Guessing, Shark attack, Slap the board and Brainstorming, all common games on TESOL resource sites. Most of these games, as explained by the teachers, were introduced during the teaching methodology courses in the teacher education program. Three of the games used in the classes I observed were Hangman, Kim’s game, and Slap the Board. Hangman is a guessing game where the teacher thinks of a word and provides the students with some clues. Then the students try to guess the word by suggesting the letters of the word. If the students suggest a letter which occurs in the word, the teacher writes the letter on the board in its correct position. If the suggested letter does not occur in the word, the teacher begins constructing the gibbet and then, for further incorrect answers, adds a body part of the hangman stick figure. Students can either choose to suggest the letter or to guess the whole word. If the word is correct, the game is over and they win.

‘Kim’s game’ is a game designed to develop students’ capacity to concentrate and memorise details. For example, the teacher might show students a video clip with images. Then, each team of students will try to write out the words for these images from memory. The team that has the most correct words is the winner. “Slap the board” is a game where the teacher writes different words on the board, and invites two teams to the front. When the teacher says a word, the team that slaps their hand on the correct word first will get the point. The team that has the most slaps on the correct words is the winner. Below is an example from Minh’s class in which she began her Writing lesson with the game, “Slap the board”:

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6 Resources for the language games can be found at a number of TESOL websites, for example, [https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk) and [http://www.onestopenglish.com](http://www.onestopenglish.com).


Minh: Ok we will play a game!
Ss: Yes!
Minh: I would like to divide our class into two groups. Group A and Group B. Our game is Slap the board! Ok!
Ss: Yes!
Minh: So five volunteers will come here. And I will read the word and you will slap the board! If you slap fast, I will give you points, ten points! The first word is stamp. What does it mean? [The teacher illustrates the action for slapping the board then she writes individual word on the board and asks students for the meaning]
Ss: Con tem (Trans: Stamp)
Minh: Ok. Books?
Ss: Cuộn sách (Trans: books)
Minh: Coins?
Ss: Tiền (money)
Minh: Tiền nhưng mà là tiền gì (Trans: Money but what form of money is it?)
Ss: Tiền giấy! Tiền xu! (Trans: paper note, coin)
Minh: Tiền xu. (Trans: coin). Ok!

The teachers’ explanations for their choice of games demonstrate how they selected materials to enhance the students’ enjoyment in language learning (Chen, 2005; Ersöz, 2000). The ways that the teachers explained their use of games also resonates with Wright et al.’s (1984) description of games as helping and encouraging “many learners to sustain their interest and work” (p.1). For example, Tam said that the Hangman game could help her students relax after one period of working on grammar exercises, and help to set up a better atmosphere for the next lesson which followed directly after. Similarly, for Minh, games provided an opportunity for fun and laughter between a listening lesson and the next lesson:

It is because they have just finished the grammar exercises and may feel tired. In addition, these words are important for me to lead in the new lesson, so the game helps them to relax after an exercise lesson and helps me to lead in the new lesson easily. (NT-Tam-SRI-speaking lesson)

This game is just for fun. Because they are tired from the listening lesson so I mainly like to make them laugh and have fun. (NT-Minh-SRI-Writing lesson)

As seen in the quotes above, the teachers often taught two consecutive lessons, for example a 45-minute Listening lesson might be immediately followed by a Writing lesson. From the teachers’ perspective, this decreased their students’ participation in the next lesson. By adding games, the teachers said that they hoped to regain their students’ attention and enthusiasm in learning when transitioning between lessons. This is supported as an
appropriate pedagogy by research suggesting that using effective transitions can help teachers minimize disruptive behaviours, maximize instructional time, and maintain optimal learning conditions (Arlin, 1979; Cangelosi, 2004; Sainato, 1990). Observational data and the teachers’ explanations indicated that the games successfully helped to reduce student disruptions as well as retrieve their learning enthusiasm in the next lesson.

The teachers’ use of games was not only about having fun and transitioning from a lesson. The teachers also reported using games as a more enjoyable way to introduce new knowledge or to make bridges between old and new knowledge. The teachers’ selection of games assisted them in reviewing the previous lesson and connecting to the next lesson. For instance, Mai involved her students in playing Kim’s game, in which they watched a video clip with pictures and accompanying vocabulary about population and then wrote down the words they remembered. She said her students learnt the vocabulary in their previous reading lesson, so this game was to consolidate their vocabulary and relate it to the Listening lesson.

Similarly, explaining her use of the Matching game, Anh said she wanted her students to recall the types of films presented earlier in the Speaking lesson, to help them link these with the Writing lesson where they were expected to write about one of the films they liked:

I introduce different types of films so that students can remember their speaking lesson in which they learnt about types of films. So today I have my students play the game in order to review the vocabulary about film category and use it for the new lesson, in which they will write about one of the films they like. (NT-Anh-SRI-Writing lesson)

The teachers’ explanations for their inclusion of games to revise their students’ vocabulary is similar to other researchers’ arguments that using games is an effective activity for vocabulary revision (Luu Trong, 2012; Taheri, 2014; Uberman, 1998). The teachers’ utilisation of games appeared not only to motivate and entertain their students but also to assist their retention and retrieval of what had been previously learnt in conjunction with what would come in the next lesson.

While other teachers talked about establishing the link between the games with the lessons to come, Long talked more explicitly about how he used games, such as Bingo, to equip his students with some background knowledge. For example, before his Pronunciation instruction on the sounds /g/ and /k/, Long provided eight words that contained either of these sounds (e.g. “goal”, “game”, “dog”, “again”, “weak”, “school”, “kick”, “cup”) on the board, and his students each chose four of them. After that, Long randomly read four of the eight
words. If the students had selected exactly the same words as those Long read, they were the winners. Long explained that the game provided a simple and suitable means to introduce the pronunciation features that he was going to teach:

I have my class play this game in order to lead them into the lesson. This game is called Bingo, in which I provide the words related to pronunciation lesson that I am going to teach...I selected this game because it is simple and suitable with the main content of the lesson today. Because pronunciation lesson is the first part of the lesson and involves these sounds, I chose this game to introduce these sounds. (NT-Long-SRI-Pronunciation-Language Focus)

In his other game for the Listening lesson, Long asked his students, once divided into two groups, to write the names of famous places in Vietnam on the board. He said the list could be later linked to the listening lesson:

The purpose of this game is to have students list the famous places in Vietnam so that I can lead them into the lesson, as the listening lesson will mention some well-known places in Vietnam, especially Hue Imperial City. Students will list these locations and remember something special about them in their minds so that I will introduce to the listening lesson. (Long-SRI-Listening lesson)

The way Long explained his use of games is similar to Uberman’s (1998) suggestion to use games to present new vocabulary. As these vocabulary terms were associated with the lessons that he was going to teach, having them integrated into games appeared to assist Long to introduce new words to the students and begin the lessons in an enjoyable way.

In addition to establishing an enjoyable atmosphere and serving as a useful transition, the incorporation of games appeared to provide language practice and encourage the students to communicate. As seen in the excerpt above, Minh created a situation which allowed an interaction between her and the students. In English, she suggested playing “Slap the board”, and then explained how to play the game. She familiarized her students with the words used in this game through elicitation. To participate into this game, the students had to attend and communicate with Minh by listening and responding to her questions. Such interaction suggests that the game provided the students with the opportunity for real communication (Wright et al., 1984).

In summary, based on the teachers’ understanding about their students’ language skills and learning motivation, the teachers utilised their PCK to include games to support their students’ learning. Although games were not given privileged positions in the textbooks, based on their perceptions of their learners the teachers opted to use games. This indicates that the teachers employed the PCK that they learnt from the teacher education program and
added resources from the Internet to introduce games into their teaching practices. The use of games as described in this study was useful as it enabled the teachers to achieve a number of pedagogical purposes including providing a fun and comfortable learning atmosphere, stimulating students’ learning interest, and transitioning between lessons. In addition to these advantages, as Deguang (2012) argues, games are often considered as “effective in developing students’ communicative ability” (p. 801) as, through playing games, students “can practise their skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing comprehensively” (p. 802). Perhaps the teachers in this study also saw the potential benefits of using games as useful resources for their students’ oral interaction and development. However, due to the teachers’ assessment of their students’ language skills, this potential was not fully exploited. There was little English language communication between the students and the teachers and/or among the students when the games were used. In addition, the teachers may have been restricted by the time available, as they had to move to other textbook activities in order to finish the lessons at a specific time suggested by DOET. Thus, they may have felt hesitant to spend additional time developing more interactive possibilities using games with their students.

Adding vocabulary

In addition to games, an integral component of the PCK was integrating vocabulary instruction in lessons. All the teachers in the study provided language support through explaining vocabulary meaning. Such scaffolding was a common practice in many of the lessons, and was provided in two stages: the first one was at the beginning of the lesson; and the second was before the students did the activities. In the case of the first stage, after the games, the teachers often led their students into the lesson by explaining new vocabulary. In this stage, the teachers usually selected six to eight new vocabulary items for which the students would need the meaning and associated features (e.g. stress, part of speech) in order to do the activities in the textbooks. Each teacher employed different techniques (e.g. pictures, explanation, and translation) to involve students in figuring out the word meaning. For example, the teachers would write the word with all its attributes, including its meaning (in Vietnamese), category (i.e. noun, verb, adjective) and word stress on the board and ask their students to copy this down into their notebooks. The students would then be asked to read the vocabulary in chorus after the teachers, and then some individual students would be invited to do the repetitions individually. For the most part, the words were presented as isolated words, rather than in different contexts where the students could see how they were
used. Below is a typical example taken from a speaking lesson in Tam’s class to illustrate how Tam, like the other teachers in the study, would present the vocabulary to the students as a way of scaffolding the lesson:

**Extract #3**

Tam: À cái tình trạng overpopulation mình còn gọi là gì nữa các em? *(Trans: Ah, what is another word that we use instead of overpopulation?)*
Ss: Bùng nổ dân số. *(Trans: Population explosion)*
Tam: Very good! Bùng nổ in English? Bùng nổ in English? *(Trans: How do you say bùng nổ in English?)* Thu!
S: Explosion [speaking very softly, almost inaudible]
Tam: Explosion! Right or wrong, class?
S: Right! Very good.
Tam: Now repeat after me! Explosion! Explosion!
Ss: Explosion! Explosion!
Tam: Trung! [Teacher asks individual students to repeat the word]
S: Explosion.
Tam: Hoang!
S: Explosion.
Tam: Tuan!
S: Explosion.
Tam: Now what does it mean, explosion, class?
S: Sự bùng nổ *(Translation: Explosion)*
Tam: À sự bùng nổ hé! *(Translation: Yes, explosion.)*
Tam: Noun, adjective or verb?
S: Noun.
Tam: Yes, it is a noun. Stress?
S: Second.
Tam: Ok. It is the second.

*(NT-Tam- Speaking lesson)*

While vocabulary presentation appears to have been an indispensable part of most of the teachers’ lessons, they rarely talked about this explicitly. Mai, however, did explain, and as she indicates in the following quote, chose vocabulary that would help her students understand and complete the activities:

…these words are new and related to the activities that my students are going to do, so they can rely on these words to do the activities…They know other words. Because I have taught them [since beginning of the school year], I know what words they do not know. These are important words while others are not so I did not explain them.

*(NT-Mai-SRI-Speaking lesson)*

Mai’s explanation illustrates her knowledge of the students, accumulated over her time teaching them. In this context, based on her experience, Mai has made an assessment about
the students’ shortage of vocabulary and how this would be a disadvantage when they were going to work on the activities.

In the second stage of vocabulary support, the teachers ran through word meanings in the activities after they explained the instructions. They usually asked their students if they found any new vocabulary in the activities, and the teachers often told their students directly the meaning in Vietnamese. This type of scaffolding was a common component of the teachers’ PCK and was seen across all of the teachers’ lessons. The example below demonstrates how Tam identified new vocabulary with her students before a speaking activity (Speaking activity 1, Unit 7, English 11) which asked students to match causes of population explosion and their reasons. Explaining the vocabulary in this activity appeared to help the students to understand, firstly, the vocabulary meaning, and then the sentence meaning, so that they could do the matching exercise correctly:

**Extract #4**

Tam: So you look at number 1. Any new words in number 1, class? Yes or No?

Ss: Aware.

Tam: Aware of! Nhận thức về *(Trans: Aware of).*

Tam: Number 2? Yes or No?

Ss: No.

Tam: No. Number 3?

Ss: Believe

Tam: Believe? Believe means trust!

Tam: Number 4? Fewer? Ít hơn *(Trans: Fewer)*

Tam: Encourage? Khuyến khích *(Trans: Encourage)*

Tam: Now number 5! Large! It means very big!

Tam: Now you look at the letters!

A? New words? Yes or No? No

B? No.

C? No.

D? No. And E? Knowledge? Do you know knowledge?

Ss: No.

Tam: Tri thức *(Trans: Knowledge)*

*(NT-Tam-Speaking lesson)*

Tam said identifying vocabulary such as this was a typical practice among colleagues at her school. However, she said, while her colleagues only chose to explain the key words in the activities, she had to go over the vocabulary in each of the sentences in the activities due to the students’ need to understand the meaning of unknown words. Tam’s explanation for her decision was congruent with other teachers’ explanations for why they provided additional
support on vocabulary to the students. For example, in the following quote, Minh emphasizes
the importance of students’ understanding new words in the activity for their successful
completion of the activity:

    Here I am going through the meaning of these words so that students can fill in the
    blanks. Normally, in general methodology, these words will be identified and students
    will fill in the blanks themselves but teachers will not explain the words. However,
    this class is weak, I had to provide the meaning so they could learn as well. As they
    are weak, if we let them do the translation of these words themselves, they will be
    bored and not do it. I had to give the translation for them so that they could do it
    easily. (Minh-SRI-Reading lesson)

Minh’s explanation suggests that she had made an assumption about her students’ vocabulary
knowledge and believed that, without giving sufficient help, they would be unable to
accomplish the activity. As reported by Minh and other teachers in the study, providing such
scaffolding was a regular practice among their school colleagues.

In language teaching, vocabulary acquisition has been viewed as an essential part of language
learners’ successful communication (Gu, 2003; Harmon, Wood, & Kiser, 2009; Laufer &
Nation, 1999; Rodriguez & Sadoski, 2000). According to Nation (2001), the relationship
between vocabulary knowledge and language use is complementary in that the knowledge of
vocabulary assists language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in
vocabulary knowledge. In this sense, the inclusion of vocabulary presentation suggests the
teachers’ substantial emphasis on the important role of vocabulary in language learning. Such
vocabulary support was assumed to help the students to identify word meaning and to use this
to complete the activities.

Although the teachers drew on the PCK to introduce new vocabulary to support their students
in understanding the texts and doing the exercises, the vocabulary was presented with little
connection to communicative and authentic interaction, and thus this activity was not as
beneficial to the students’ communicative language development as it could have been. As
seen in the excerpts above, the vocabulary provided had little association with meaningful
contexts and opportunities for actual language use. This phenomenon is described by Webb
(2005) as “receptive” and “productive vocabulary learning” (p.34). Receptive vocabulary
learning is associated with teachers’ interpretation of word meaning, spelling and
pronunciation but less relevant to the students’ authentic use of the vocabulary. Productive
vocabulary learning, however, involves students using vocabulary constructively for speaking
or writing activities. As Gu (2003) argues, “knowing a word means knowing at least its form,
its meaning, and its basic usage in context receptively and productively” (p. 75). In the context of the present study, the ways vocabulary was presented to support the students rarely provided them with opportunities to practice the vocabulary in a productive and communicative way. For the most part, the vocabulary was presented with a focus on form, that is, on literal meaning, parts of speech, word stress and through repetition drills rather than in a meaning-based context where the students could see the contexts where the vocabulary was used and had an opportunity to use it. In this sense, the teachers’ presentation of vocabulary displayed a strong inclination toward receptive rather than productive vocabulary delivery. The teachers’ practices here are very similar to those described by Tran (2015) in his study of Vietnamese teachers’ cognitions in relation to the implementation of the task-based curriculum. Tran finds that his participants also spent considerable time explaining the form of vocabulary with minimal attention to the meaning of vocabulary.

The teachers’ focus on form rather than meaning was also evident in the ways they presented vocabulary. As discussed previously, most of the class activities involved controlled practice, and the students tended to give responses by reading the available answers in the textbooks or handouts and later copying them on the board. Although the students obtained knowledge of vocabulary (i.e. its meaning, form, stress), they often used it in a mechanical way instead of making their own vocabulary choices to deliver the intended meaning in more authentic or meaningful contexts. Following Webb (2005), vocabulary learning could thus be categorised as receptive rather than productive. In addition, one of the limitations of scaffolding, according to Nunan (2004), is that, if the scaffolding lasts for too long, it can result in the students’ loss of independence for language use autonomy. In this context, the teachers’ provision of vocabulary meaning, given in two different stages, could limit their students’ language skills development, since the students did not need to make an effort, for example by guessing the word meaning in context or negotiating its meaning with peers.

*Other additional activities*

In addition to integrating games and vocabulary, the teachers employed their PCK to supplement textbook activities with specifically designed activities to provide their students with further scaffolding for learning. While games and vocabulary presentation were observed in lessons across all five teachers, the addition of other new activities was observed in lessons taught by Mai, Minh and Long. Again, the teachers explained their inclusion of this type of scaffolding in terms of their understanding of their students’ abilities and the task
difficulty. Their inclusion of other additional activities took two primary forms: providing preparatory activities before the main activities; and providing extended activities for students to use the language. Of these three teachers, while Minh added only one preparatory activity in the lessons I observed and Long added one advanced activity, Mai added four activities, which were designed for two purposes as will be discussed below.

In the first instance, the teachers integrated additional preparatory or introductory activities into their lessons before they had students work on the activities in the textbook, to provide supplementary support. The teachers selected activities which would assist in preparing subsequent activities. The activity choices made in Minh’s Writing class (Unit 13, English 11) provide an illustrative example. The writing activity in the textbook required students to, *Write about your collection [e.g. stamp collection, rock collection], real or imaginary,* following these guidelines. The guidelines instructed students to name the collection, describe how they collect the items, how they keep them, and so on. However, before having students work on this activity, Minh prepared her students with a handout about a person’s hobby of collecting books and asked them to answer the questions in the handout. As shared in her stimulated recall interview, Minh thought that it would be difficult for her students to write about this topic without having a writing sample to follow. Since the textbook did not provide such support, she aided her students by designing this additional activity with questions to bridge the gap with the main writing activity. In addition, through providing this writing sample, it appeared that Minh wanted them to use its language patterns and vocabulary for the main activity. Observational data showed that the students’ groupwork writing posters for this activity followed the provided writing sample closely:

The purpose is to give a writing sample, for example, if they write about a hobby, this will be a sample for that. So they need to write, firstly, what their hobby is, what they collect, how they classify them, and how they keep their collection…so there is a procedure and they can follow that to write. Otherwise, if we only ask them to write, they have nothing to write about. (NT-Minh-SRI-Writing lesson)

In a similar situation, Mai provided an additional activity when she saw that her students were not ready to do the main textbook exercise. Before asking students to work on transforming conditional sentences into reported speech in a grammar lesson, Mai presented a yes/no exercise in which her students checked whether the conditional sentences had been transformed into reported speech correctly or not by answering “yes” or “no”. She explained
in her stimulated recall interview that students might not be ready to do sentence transformation; thus, it would be helpful to ask them to start with an easier exercise:

…this exercise is not in the textbook, eh, I designed it so that students can get familiar with the easiest level. That means they can identify the mistakes and correct them. It is because they are not able to write any sentences by themselves, they need to identify the right and wrong answer to imagine first. (NT-Mai- SRI-Grammar lesson)

The additional activities provided by Minh and Mai, before textbook activities, had more emphasis on students’ comprehension and practice on language form rather than students’ negotiation with language meaning.

In contrast with these activities, the teachers’ addition of activities after using activities in the textbooks was found to be more authentic and communicative. They explained that they extended the activities to help their students go beyond the existing activities in the textbooks and produce more language. For example, in Long’s grammar class, after giving students instructions about the two grammatical points, will and be going to, and having them do the drill practice, at the end of the lesson, without prior planning, Long encouraged his students to make their own sentences with will and be going to verbally. Although there was insufficient time to complete this activity and only one student was able to tell the class his sentence, Long’s addition of such an activity was a good illustration of his capacity to draw on his PCK to create an activity that kept his students engaged and use English productively:

There is still time left here whereas I have finished teaching all content, so I wanted to extend the lesson a little bit. I asked students to develop their ideas by explaining the sentences or they make their own sentences using the two grammatical structures they have just learnt to see whether they have mastered these structures. (NT-Long-SRI-Grammar lesson-Language focus)

In a similar way, Mai presented a new activity as her post-speaking activity after the students finished other activities in the textbook. For this activity, she asked the students to talk by themselves about one of the holidays they learnt about and talked about with their friends earlier. Although the students were asked to talk about the holiday in three sentences and Mai made some prompts available to assist them, this extra activity demonstrated her intention to encourage her students to use more English. The quote below expresses her wish that her students could use more English even though they still needed the teacher’s help:

Activity 4 [the added activity] here lets the students present individually by themselves about a holiday. I provide them with a frame and they will put in the information to talk…This activity is not in the textbook because the textbook does not have a post activity…the activity in the textbook is only Ask and answer, so I designed this one. (NT-Mai-SRI-Speaking lesson)
Although additions of activities as another form of scaffolding were not evident in all teachers’ classes, the above examples provide some snapshots of the teachers’ efforts in assisting students to develop their language production. The scaffolding provided through these activities to enable their students to generate more language on their own was congruent with the valuing of communication described by the teachers in their biographical interviews.

The teachers’ incorporation of additional activities suggests that they were made according to the teachers’ assessment of their students’ learning abilities and interests. These activities demonstrated their usefulness in assisting the students to maintain their motivation for learning as well as to provide support necessary for activity completion. In addition, there were instances where some of the activities were designed with the intention of promoting the students’ language use; however, these activities were limited. Nevertheless, despite providing the class with some basic assistance, most of the additional activities were found to be mechanical practice, thus presenting little authentic or communicative opportunity for the students’ expansion of their current language performance.

7.2.5 **In summary**

The section on activity selection has provided a detailed examination of the choices the teachers made in the classroom as well as the rationale for their decisions, providing an in-depth look at the knowledge, beliefs and perceptions of the teachers’ in regards to their teaching practices. As discussed throughout this section, their assessment of activity difficulty and assumption about their students’ language abilities and motivation had a significant impact on how they arrived at their classroom decisions. Despite its dominant role as the teaching resource, the textbook was frequently adapted by the teachers to better accommodate their students’ language capabilities. Classroom observations suggest that, for the most part, adaptations of activities rarely extended students’ opportunities for oral and communicative interaction. For example, when retaining textbook activities, the teachers kept those least demanding of communicative interaction; when modifying activities, they modified in ways that converted meaning-focused activities into form-focused ones to reduce the potential interaction; when omitting activities, the meaning-focused activities requiring more interaction were those typically removed from the lessons; when adding activities, the teachers included less communicative interaction activities and focused more on language input activities. Even when the extra activities involved games, they limited the students’ chances to speak. The teachers’ decision-making as discussed in this section suggests that
their knowledge of students had a strong influence on whether they followed or diverged from the textbooks. These observed activities appeared to meet their students’ needs; however, what seemed to be missing in the teachers’ PCK is alternative pedagogies which could simultaneously address their students’ low language ability and learning motivation and still provide them with opportunities to use language more meaningfully and communicatively.

7.3 The use of target and source language

The interconnection between the teachers’ assumed knowledge of their students and their pedagogical decisions was also evident through their use of L1 (Vietnamese) and L2 (English) in the classroom. In addition to the similarities among the teachers in employing L1 and L2 for teaching, a more nuanced analysis of the classroom interactions revealed some differences between the teachers in using L1 and L2.

The classroom observations showed that the teachers’ most frequent use of English as the main medium of communication with their students was in the context of games at the beginning of lessons. The following example taken from Anh’s lesson illustrates how English was employed to enable communication between the teachers and their students:

*Extract #5*

Anh  Now play one more game?
Ss    Yes!
Anh  Yes. We will play a game called Brainstorming You know this one?
S     No.
Anh  No!? For example, I will write down here, here…. [Anh draws some bubbles on the board to illustrate the game]
Ss    Ah yes!
Anh  So, look! If I write “school”, you will write down here…this one? [writing “school” in the bubbles and drawing a line from “school” to prompt the students’ responses]
Ss    Class, students, teachers, books, pens
Anh  Yes, class, students, teachers….just example. How many groups?
S     Two groups
Anh  Are you ready?
Ss    Yes.
Anh  Now two groups. Group A and group B…

(NT-Anh-Matching game- Speaking lesson)
As seen in this example, the L2 was used as the main vehicle of communication between Anh and her students. However, the degree of language use varied between Anh and the students. For the most part, her use of the L2 involved longer chunks of information to question or provide explanations to her students. As explained by Anh in the quote below, she was able to use English in this way because this matching game was familiar and understandable to her students:

My students have played this game before. These instructions are simple and understandable to them, so I used mainly English…and when my students are able to understand, I feel successful in that lesson. Because it is very good that we use English in class and it is great that students can listen and understand it. (NT-Anh-SRI-Speaking lesson).

In the exchange, Anh uses English to request her students to play the game, explain how to play the game, and elicit the answers from them. In contrast to Anh’s greater use of English, there was a limited use of English from the students, despite their interest in the game, to respond to Anh’s questions. Most of their responses were in very short phrases (i.e. yes, no, class, students, books) rather than longer expressions of information.

Anh’s use of English in the context of games was similar to that of most of the participating teachers. English was used to present simple and familiar language instructions to students, because of the students’ familiarity with the games and because the games only required English instructions of limited linguistic complexity. Observational data showed that the teachers’ greater use of the L2 in comparison to that of their students was a common phenomenon across all of the teachers’ lessons. In this context, the students’ limited use of L2 could be due to the type of game and the questions posed by the teachers. Most of the games were simple in that they did not necessarily require the students to utilise considerable English. As Anh suggested, the teachers’ goals did not go beyond assisting the students’ comprehension of the game rules and participation in the games. In addition, the teachers’ questions, which might have provided opportunities for longer sections of responses or complete responses from the students, were limited.

Despite the limited use of English by the students, as many researchers suggest, there are still considerable benefits in listening to English (e.g. Brown, 2007; Siegel, 2014; Vandergrift, 1999, 2007). Listening comprehension is considered as the nucleus of language learning (Vandergrift, 2007), and the improvement of listening skills reveals a significant impact on
the development of other skills (Dunkel, 1991). Thus, in this context, the students’ exposure to listening to English instructions could be helpful to their language development.

An analysis of observational data revealed that the games in the beginning stage were generally the only place in the lessons where there was a sustained exchange in English between the teachers and students. When the teachers moved on to other parts of the lessons, they started to use less L2, mostly employed code-switching between L1 and L2, and in some circumstances, utilised L1 for direct translation or instruction. Code switching, for example, was evident in how the teachers presented new vocabulary to their students. The following extract, from a listening lesson in Long’s class, demonstrates how Long, as other teachers did, employed both L2 and L1 to present vocabulary:

Extract #6

Long
And before this, I have some vocabulary for you. So everyone, listen to me! So we have the people who sell things in the market. People who sell goods or things in the market. How do we call them? Những người mà bán hàng hóa hay là những vật dụng thì mình gọi những người đó là gì đây? (Trans: How do we call the people who sell goods or stuff?)

S
Thương gia (Trans: Merchant)

Long
So how do we call thương gia in English? Who knows? Raise your hand! Hung?

S
Thưa thầy là merchant. (Trans: Teacher, it is merchant.)

Long
Ok. Merchant. Right or wrong? Now repeat after me! Merchant! Merchant!

Ss
Merchant. Merchant.

It is a noun. It means thương gia. Where is the stress?

Ss
First.

Long
First one. Now the second word. So we have a boat. Look at this! What is it. It is a boat. It is very big so how we call it in English. Cái này là cái gì đây? A cái thuyền. Thuyền mà lớn đi ở đại dương thì gọi là gì đây? Huong! (Trans: So what is it? It is a boat. How do we call a big boat in the ocean, Huong?)

S
Thưa thầy là vessel (Trans: Teacher, it is vessel.)

Long
Ok. Vessel. Very good! Now listen and repeat after me! Vessel!

(NT-Long-Listening lesson)

As seen in the excerpt above, Long begins this part of the lesson by explaining word meaning to assist his students with the listening activities. Firstly, he utilises L2 to provide cues so that the students can identify the words being referred to. However, when the students do not respond, Long switches to L1 by translating what he just said to the students. The students then provide the word matching its description in L2. After that, Long returns to L2 to ask his
students for choral repetition and to identify the word stress. In the following quote, Long explains that his decision to switch to Vietnamese was based on his observation that his students might not understand what he said in English:

> When I speak English, if my students do not understand and do not show any signs of raising hands, I will explain in Vietnamese so that they can understand and tell me what the exact word is. We have to try all means to teach the word, and not necessarily with one single technique. A teaching method generally has many techniques and we are not restricted to use this technique or the other one as long as we are able to present the vocabulary. (NT-Long-SRI-Listening lesson)

The code switching that Long used to teach vocabulary was similar to that of other teachers. In this context, vocabulary teaching often involved the teachers’ provision of L2 explanations or examples, supported by L1 translations if necessary depending on the students’ responses.

Switching between the L2 and L1, however, was not the teachers’ only classroom choice, as they often chose L1 to explain the meaning of vocabulary. A typical example of this choice was found in Anh’s reading lesson, in which she used only Vietnamese with her students for vocabulary elicitation (e.g. champion, title). Anh explained this choice as a way of facilitating students’ comprehension and saving time. In a similar way, Long explained switching between L1 and L2 was also about saving time when presenting vocabulary.

The teachers’ use of code switching or only L1 was also observed in later stages of the lessons such as explaining activity instructions, running through vocabulary before the activity, and checking the answers. The teachers’ common explanations for their choices here were derived from their assessment that L1 was needed to ensure their students’ comprehension.

In comparison to the language skills lessons, the grammar lessons appeared to have the greatest use of L1. Apart from the simple and familiar language used for gaining the students’ attention or raising questions, Vietnamese was the language most often used in the grammar lessons. The extract below taken from Mai’s grammar lesson illustrates the use of L1 in this context:

**Extract #7**

Mai | Look at the screen! Look at these sentences! What grammar point do we use in these sentences? What structure? Who knows? Tai, please!
--- | ---
S | If-clause.
Mai | If clause. Or we can say, conditional sentences. O bàn trước chúng
ta có học về câu điều kiện rồi phải không? Rồi hôm nay có sẽ dạy cho máy đưa một phần khác cũng liên quan đến câu điều kiện nữa. Đó là câu trích thuật hé! (Trans: In our previous lesson, we learnt conditional sentences, didn’t we? So today I will teach you another part related to conditional sentences. This is reported speech!)
…Nhắc lại dìm cò, lớp 10 học rồi. Nguyên tắc đổi ngôi thế nào? . Có mình Tai vậy? Nhắc lại dìm cò cói Duy! (Trans: Now tell me how we change the person in the reported speech. You learnt this in Grade 10. Why only Tai? How about Duy?

S Đạ thua có mình đổi ngôi thứ nhất I, We thì mình đổi theo người nói. Còn người thứ hai là you thì đổi theo người người nghe. Ngôi thứ ba: ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’, ‘they’ thì không đổi. (Trans: Yes, teacher. For the first person like I, We, we make changes according to the speaker. For the second person: You, we make changes according to the listener. And the third person: He, She, It, They, there is no change.

Mai Không đổi? Right or wrong?
Ss Right.

(NT-Mai-Language Focus lesson)

In the beginning of this exchange, Mai employs English to direct her students’ attention to the sentences on the board and asks them about the form of grammar. However, as the lesson moves on, she gradually adopts more L1 instruction. Both Mai and her students primarily use Vietnamese to clarify the grammar point. Mai explained her substantial use of L1 as well as acceptance of her students’ L1 responses in terms of her goal to help the students understand the grammar that was being taught. According to Mai, if the explanations were in English, her students would not be able to understand, as they did not have strong language abilities, thus using L1 would make it easier for them.

In contrast to other teachers’ constant use of L1 for grammar instructions, Tam used considerably more L2 in the observed grammar lesson with her high performing class -11A1. The following example illustrates her greater use of L2:

Extract #8

Tam Now everyone, look at the board. I have an example and the sentence is that “We’ll come back again”. And in the transformation sentence, I give the verb “promise” (Tam wrote on the board: They promise…) . So tell me after the verb promise, we use gerund or To-infinitive?”

Ss To infinitive
To infinitive, okay. So, look at this sentence. Tell me what is the main verb in this sentence?
S Come
In this excerpt, while her students’ L2 responses were short and simple, Tam employed a sizable proportion of L2 to direct her students to the structure. In the following quote, Tam explains that her English use was based on the students’ language abilities and prior knowledge on this grammar rule. In this case, as she said, the example was simple and her students had known the use of the word “promise”; thus, she tried to use as much English as possible to further explain the form of reported speech with “infinitive”:

First, my students could recall the use of the word “promise”. Second, this is a simple example so we need to make use of English as much as possible to help students understand. Generally, if it is something simple, we need to try using English. If it is something complicated and students do not understand, we can try with another sentence. If they still cannot understand, then we have to explain in Vietnamese. (NT-Tam-SRI-Grammar-11A)

In addition, commenting on her use of English in this lesson, Tam said that she would like to involve a great deal of English for communication with the students. She expressed her keeness in teaching students such as those in this class where she was able to use so much more English. As was the case with the other teachers, her assessment of the students’ language abilities played an important part in her integration of English more frequently in this lesson.

Observations of most of the lessons showed that there was little evidence of students’ engagement in using English for communication with their teachers. For the most part, the students rarely communicated with their teachers in English; instead, they only responded when asked direct questions in English, often providing short answers (e.g Yes, No, Agree, Disagree) or with information available from the textbooks. In addition, the students were rarely involved in using English for interaction with their peers. Thus, even though the students were asked to use English when working in pairs or groups, they often used Vietnamese to accomplish the activities, except when they had to practice reading the dialogues. From the teachers’ perspective, this was due to the students’ limited language
proficiencies: they were more comfortable and confident conversing with their peers in Vietnamese, and the teachers allowed this in order to have the activities completed. In this case, in a context in which teachers experience significant time pressures and high teaching loads, activity completion seems to be more important than mastery of the language proficiency. Teachers had to teach the specified curriculum as scheduled by DOET to adequately prepare students for examinations.

7.4 Form-focused grammar instruction

Grammar acquisition is one of the components of language proficiency; thus teaching grammar also plays an essential role in language teaching (Deng & Lin, 2016; Wang, 2010). In relation to how to teach grammar following CLT, Ellis (2006) suggests, “the grammar taught should be one that emphasises not just form but also the meanings and uses of different grammatical structures” (p.102). As indicated in Chapters 5 and 6, the teachers formed their PCK and compiled resources to teach grammar from their school-based experiences and their teacher education program. Data from teacher interviews and classroom observations indicated that the participating teachers treated grammar teaching as an important element in their classroom. Therefore, an examination into how the teachers provided grammar lessons to their students and their explanations for their instructions provides further insights into their cognitions and practices about language teaching.

Grammar lessons were generally incorporated into the teaching period called “Language Focus”, with the grammar component taking up at least two-thirds of the class time. The goal of grammar teaching, as discussed by the teachers, primarily involved teachers’ explanation of the form and provision of exercises to help their students understand the structure. For example, as explained after her grammar lesson, Minh said that her focus in teaching grammar was to present the grammar structure as simply as possible to her students and help them do the grammar exercises. Furthermore, although the teachers said they wanted to sequence their lessons as PPP, observations of their grammar instructions revealed that, while they followed the initial stages of the PPP format (e.g. Warm-up, Presentation and Practice), they often ignored the Production stage.

The grammar instruction was usually incorporated with and preceded by a lesson on pronunciation in a 45-minute teaching period on Language Focus. Similar to the sequence of the language skills lessons, the Language Focus lesson sometimes began with warm-up activities in the form of games, which were either related to pronunciation or grammar
depending on the lesson focus. On completion of the pronunciation lesson, which involved the students’ listening and repetition of sounds and dialogues, the teachers began giving instructions for the grammar lesson. Despite the teachers’ mention of using dialogues to present the grammar form, none of the teachers employed dialogues for this purpose. By contrast, they often provided examples through which the students were expected to identify the grammar form. For example, as seen in the extract below, Tam’s primary aim was to present the example, and she then expected her students to identify the form of the reported speech with an infinitive from this example:

**Extract #9**

Tam  Now everyone, look at the board. I have an example and the sentence is that: “We’ll come back again”. And in the transformation sentence, I give the verb “promise” [Tam wrote on the board: They promise...]. So tell me after the verb promise, we use gerund or To- infinitive?”

Ss  To infinitive
To infinitive, okay. So, look at this sentence. Tell me what is the main verb in this sentence?

S  Come
Tam  Come, okay. And they promise... to infinitive, so…? We will use..?
S  To come
Tam  Ah, they promise to come back again. So everyone, “we will come back again” and they promise to come back again. What kind of this sentence? What kind is this sentence then? This is reported speech with…?

S  To infinitive
Tam  With to infinitive. Very good! So tell me some verbs that are followed by to infinitive. We have “promise”. What else? Nam?
S  Decide.
Tam  Decide. What else, class?
Ss  Need. Want….
Tam  So you look at this sentence again and tell me the form. What is the form? We have “They”. What do you call “They”?
Ss  Chú tên (Trans: subject)
Tam  Subject. Promise?
Ss  Verb.
Tam  And this is…
Ss  To verb
Tam  To verb. Now this is the form of reported with… gerund or to infinitive?
Ss  To infinitive.
Tam  Ah, to infinitive.
As shown in this excerpt, the grammar knowledge that Tam wanted her students to learn was taught explicitly. She first wrote the sentence on the board and asked her students to rewrite the sentence starting with the words, “They promise”. Through the sentence transformation, Tam progressively prompted her students to identify the appropriate verb form to follow “promise” in the sentence and asked them to list other verbs requiring similar verb form as the verb “promise”. This deductive approach using examples was consistent with Tam’s comment in her pre-observation interview. She explained that, due to the high content demands of one period, coupled with students’ lack of motivation to learn, she had stopped using dialogues for grammar instruction as was her practice in her first year of teaching. Instead, she turned to using examples for more explicit elicitation. In the stimulated recall interview following her grammar lesson, Tam said:

This is from my first year experience otherwise; I would provide a dialogue here as I used to do. In this situation, I would provide a dialogue. If a dialogue was given here, it would be more complicated and time consuming to lead the students in...Each of them [examples and dialogues] has pros and cons. If I move to this one [using examples], it will save me much time but it does not link with reality. Whereas, if we provide a dialogue, we can use that communicative situation to teach speaking and also the grammar structure, style and intonation in speaking. Currently, students also need to improve their speaking but the disadvantage of using dialogue is that we cannot save time, it is very time consuming. This one [using example] is actually concise but it is not close to students. It is not considered as meaningful and relevant in real life contexts. (NT-Tam-SRI-Grammar lesson-11A)

This quote demonstrates Tam’s awareness of the potential gains and limitations regarding the use of dialogues and examples for teaching grammar. On the one hand, she saw the opportunities for communicativeness and real-life language exposure for the students through the use of dialogues. On the other hand, using examples could save much of her class time, but as she noted, examples were not a good medium to establish meaningful and communicative language learning. Explicit grammar instruction was common throughout the teachers’ practices, and the teachers’ explanations for this were similar to those provided by Tam: to save time and to ensure that the students understood the grammar form sufficiently to use it in further practice.

In the classroom observations of the Tam and Mai, there was very limited discussion with their students of the underlying meaning of the grammar structures. Instead, they spent time explaining the examples and asking their students to identify the expected language forms. In Minh’s grammar lessons, however, there was more evidence of the teacher’s discussion of
function. The extract below is an illustration of how Minh taught her students the function of the auxiliary verb “could”:

**Extract #10**

Minh: I have an example for you. Three sentences. Ok number 1. He could run fast five years ago. Run what does it mean?

Ss: Chạy (Trans: Run)

Minh: Fast?

Ss: Nhanh (Trans: Fast)

Minh: Vậy could? (Trans: so how about could?) What does it mean?

S: Anh ấy có thể chạy nhanh cách đây 5 năm (Trans: He could run fast five years ago)

Minh: Ok. Cách đây 5 năm thì anh ấy có thể chạy nhanh. Vây cái này nó chỉ cái gì? (Trans: He could run fast five years ago. So what does it imply?)

Ss: Tốc độ (Trans: Speed)

Minh: Gần gần đó, could này là chỉ về cái gì? Khả năng phải không?

Khả năng này nó có cụ thể trong trường hợp nào không? (Trans: Quite close to it. What does Could imply to? Is it an ability? Is it an ability in a specific situation?)

Ss: Không (Trans: No)

Minh: Không phải không! Nó không cụ thể thì nó là chung chung. Vậy could chỉ một khả năng chung chung hệ! Câu thứ hai hệ. (Trans: No, isn’t it? Because it is not specific, it is general. So “Could” is used to mention a general ability! Now the second sentence)

Could you open the window, please? Open?

Ss: Mở (Trans: Open)

Minh: Windows?

Ss: Cửa sổ (Trans: Windows)

Minh: So, Hung please!

S: Bạn có thể mở được cửa sổ phải không? (Trans: You could open the windows, couldn’t you?)

Minh: Bạn có thể mở cửa sổ được không? Trong trường hợp này could nó có chỉ khả năng không may em? (Trans: Could you open the windows, please? In this situation, does Could mention an ability?)

Ss: Không (Trans: No)

Minh: Không vậy nó chỉ cái gì? Ví dụ em ngồi chỗ cửa sổ, rồi bạn nhờ em mở cửa sổ thì có lúc này là nó chỉ cái gì? (Trans: No. So what does it mention? For example if you sit by the windows and your friend asks you to open the windows then what does Could mean here?)

Ss: Yêu cầu (Trans: A request)

Minh: Một cái lời yêu cầu, đề nghị! (Trans: A request, suggestion!) Ok very good!
In this example, Minh tries to explain the usage of “could”, which has different functions, for example to express a general ability or a request, when it is used in various situations. This practice was similarly observed in Anh’s and Long’s class. Observational data, however, showed that, after the presentation stage, all of the participating teachers followed a similar practice by asking their students to apply the grammar forms they had just learnt to complete controlled exercises (see Section 7.2). These exercises generally asked the students to use the correct forms of the verbs to complete the sentences or make sentence transformations.

During the practice stage, the students were often asked to work with their peers; however, because these activities were mechanical in nature, the focus of their discussion was only about how to give the correct answers for these exercises instead of negotiating for intended meaning. Upon completing the exercises, the ways the students were asked to provide their answers in the grammar lesson were generally similar to the language skills lessons, in which they were, for the most part, required to write the answers on the board. Noticeably, during the practice stage, there were no activities involving the students in using the grammar for meaningful and communicative interaction with their peers.

In the following quote, Tam explains her decision to ask the students to write answers on the board in terms of ensuring their comprehension of the grammar forms:

> My goal is to make sure again if they really understand the lesson. In addition, when they write the answers on the board, they will get familiar with writing English sentences on the board and the knowledge will remain longer in their mind because they have written the answers in the notebook. (NT-Tam-SRI-Language Focus-11A)

Tam’s explanations provide further evidence of how the teachers valued the importance of their students’ understanding of the forms and expected them to be able to use the forms correctly for the drilling exercises. This explanation is consistent with the priority given by both the students and the teachers to developing accurate grammar knowledge to pass the examinations; a priority which means less attention to grammar for language production or meaningful communication.

When the grammar lessons moved to the point where the teachers were supposed to introduce communicative activities using the grammar structures to their students, this part of the lesson appears to have been modified to have a greater emphasis on form, despite the teachers’ intention to make them more communicative. For example, by the end of her lesson, Mai had her students play a game to review the conditional sentences in reported speech. To play this
game, Mai provided her students the direct speech sentences and, for each of them, she asked the students to either transform the original sentences into reported speech or choose the best options from the four given answers. Although Mai said that it was a production activity, what the students did in this game was similar to their previous practice drills except that they were divided into teams and given points for correct answers to motivate their participation. In another example, despite his priority on the form and drilling exercises as evident in most of his classroom practices and explanations, there was a brief moment in the grammar lesson where Long encouraged his students to use the structure to express their intended meaning. With little time left by the end of the lesson, Long asked his students to make their own sentences with “will” and “being going to”. However, no students volunteered to respond and Long had to designate a student to answer and assist him to complete his sentence. Overall, due to time limits and the teachers’ perceptions of students’ needs, the final production activities were rarely included in lessons; instead, the students were often asked to do more practice drills.

The teachers also appeared to have different perspectives on integrating grammar instruction with other language skills. For example, Mai tended to support blending other language skills into the grammar lessons. She said that the students were involved in listening, speaking or writing when they listened, responded or performed writing sentence transformations. Nevertheless, despite the students’ participation in these learning processes, classroom observations suggested that these learning activities targeted grammar knowledge rather than providing opportunities for meaningful, authentic and communicative exchanges. Long, in contrast, despite integrating grammar into language skills lessons throughout the teacher-student discussions, did not support the idea of merging language skills into grammar lessons, as he was concerned that this would interfere with the students’ focus on grammar structures:

> We can integrate grammar into listening and speaking as students listen to teachers and answer. If they can answer in English, it will be good… However, it is best that we should not integrate listening and speaking into grammar because they would cause distraction or make it more difficult for students. Because this is not a listening or speaking lesson, we only need to teach the grammar point so that they could recognize it easily. (NT-Long-SRI-Language Focus-10A5)

In general, with their continual emphasis on form accuracy, the teachers appeared to teach grammar lessons detached from other communicative language skills.

Overall, the teachers’ classroom practices were consistent with their expressed preference for grammar accuracy and using practice drills to meet their students’ needs. Thus, despite the
teachers’ rejection of the form-focussed instruction in their early school days, to some extent, their classroom practices and their explanations for these were similar to their description of the ways they learnt grammar. The teachers’ classroom practices and explanations were designed to assist their students’ understanding and application of grammar through, for the most part, mechanical exercises. While the students’ involvement in controlled practice helped to consolidate their grammar knowledge, it did not provide opportunities for language skills improvement, due to limited communicative and authentic activities using grammar form. Although the teachers were aware of production activities to apply the grammar structure into more real-life contexts, they rarely included them, due to time constraints, the high load of teaching content, and their students’ low levels of capacity and interest in learning. In addition, working on production activities was regarded as less beneficial or important than presenting the forms and providing exercises to the students. While observations suggest that the teachers’ omission of the production stage was justified, their decision also removed opportunities for the students to enhance language proficiencies based on newly presented grammar.

7.5 Summary

This chapter has presented a detailed analysis of the classroom activities and the teachers’ rationales for their teaching performance, as a way of identifying the teachers’ cognitions in relation to teaching English. This analysis revealed a strong relationship between their cognitions and teaching practices. In particular, the teachers’ assumed knowledge of the students and their knowledge and beliefs about the pedagogies they employed and content they presented in their classroom were highly interconnected. The resources they drew on for this decision-making and their explanations of their decisions provided the means to identify their PCK. Their PCK was most apparent in the selection of activities for their lessons, their use of L1 and L2 during classroom instruction, and the predominant focus on grammatical form during grammar instruction. An analysis of these pedagogical decisions has shown the teachers’ substantial emphasis on form, rather than meaning negotiation as advocated in CLT literature. For example, as analysed in the activity selections, their PCK comprised mostly controlled exercises which, on one hand, required little effort from the students to accomplish, but on the other hand were not useful opportunities to extend the students’ current language proficiencies or communicative competence. In addition, an examination into the teachers’ use of L1 and L2 also revealed that, apart from the teachers’ considerable
proportion of L2 used in the games, the remaining parts of the lessons involved a high degree of L1 use by the teachers. As a result, there was also a limited use of L2 by the students. Due to these classroom decisions, the students had minimum exposure to meaningful, authentic and communicative interaction, despite the teachers’ reported desire and occasional attempts to bring meaningful and communicative exchanges to the students. The imbalance between form and meaning focus in the classroom indicates the teachers’ dilemma in looking for appropriate approaches, which can both address their students’ low learning motivation and language abilities and, in the meantime, enhance their language to a higher level.
Chapter 8
Discussion and conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This study was conducted to address two important issues. Firstly, as has been raised in Chapter 1, despite the government’s intentions to improve the English language communicative competence of Vietnamese learners, there has been limited progress in the area of learners’ language proficiencies. In other words, there is a disconnect between the language policy expectations and the reality of language learner proficiencies. Among a number of possible reasons for Vietnamese learners’ limited language proficiency, research suggests that what happens in language classrooms is important. Classroom practices are in turn shaped by teachers’ cognitions, which are influenced by multiple contextual factors (Borg, 2015). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of contextual factors on the cognitions and practices of Vietnamese EFL teachers in the classrooms.

Despite the influential role of language teacher cognition on improving learners’ language development (Helen, 2003; Shinde & Karekatti, 2012) and the significant growth of research into this important area in EFL Asian teaching contexts, a majority of studies tend to focus on experienced teachers and pre-service teachers. Little attention is given to understanding the cognitions and practices of EFL novice teachers in these settings. The present study, therefore, addresses this gap by focusing on the cognitions and practices of EFL teachers in the first five years of their practice as beginning teachers. Knowledge about the beliefs and practices of EFL novice teachers is necessary to inform policy and practice in teacher education and teacher professional learning. It has been argued that the first formative years of teaching are particularly important for novice teachers to “test their beliefs and ideas, expand their teaching strategies, acquire practical knowledge, and formulate their professional identity” (Kang & Cheng, 2014, p. 170).

To address the gap in research on EFL novice teachers, both in Asian contexts and the Vietnamese setting specifically, the study described in this thesis investigated the contextual factors - personal, situational and sociocultural factors - that influence the cognitions and classroom practices of EFL novice teachers in the context of Vietnam. Specifically, it posed four research questions, the answers to which will now be addressed in this chapter:
Main research question

*How do the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts in which the novice teachers live and teach influence their cognitions and teaching of English in Vietnamese classrooms?*

Sub-research questions

1. *What theories and practices in relation to English teaching and learning are used in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam?*

2. *What beliefs and knowledge (cognitions) about teaching and learning English are held by the novice teachers in the study and how are these evident in their teaching?*

3. *How are the theories and practices espoused in their teacher education evident in their classroom teaching?*

To address these questions, a qualitative study was conducted at both an urban and a district school in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This involved in-depth data collection drawing on multiple sources of information including curriculum texts, interviews with the EFL teacher educators, school vice-principals and the novice teachers, and video-recorded observations of the teachers’ lessons and subsequent stimulated recall interviews.

Two conceptual frameworks, Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model and Shulman’s (1986, 1987) teacher knowledge categories, were employed as useful guides for the investigation of the teachers’ cognitions and practices. In particular, Borg’s (2015) model played an essential role which enabled this study to identify the contextual factors influencing the teachers’ cognitions. Many scholars (e.g. Borg, 2015; Jamalzadeh & Shahsavar, 2015; Zhang & Liu, 2014) have argued that contextual factors play an important role in shaping teachers’ cognitions and practices. To that effect, Zhang and Liu (2014, p. 188) suggest that, “in order to ensure the successful translation of innovative curriculum into teaching practice, teachers’ beliefs and the context that shapes teachers’ beliefs must be clearly understood”.

Following Borg’s (2015) model, the study described in this thesis investigated the impact of contextual factors on the participating teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning, through attention to their teachers’ biographies in relation to language learning and teaching, classroom practices and stimulated recall interviews.
While contextual factors in Borg’s model are highlighted as important in understanding language teacher cognition and serve as a useful template to explore how the novice teachers’ cognitions have been formed and shaped by various factors, what is not specifically included in the model is the elaboration of these factors in specific institutional and sociocultural contexts. The present study helps to extend our understanding of Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model by drawing attention to how these contextual factors influence teachers cognitions and, hence, their practice in an EFL setting. In addition, the study drew on Shulman’s (1986, 1987) teacher knowledge categories to demonstrate how contextual factors had an important impact on the teachers’ subject matter content knowledge (SMCK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and how their knowledge of learners was identified as a key factor informing the teachers’ practices. This chapter is organized in a way that both addresses the research questions of the study and highlights the influential role of contextual factors on the teachers’ cognitions and practices in the specific context of Vietnam. Following the introductory section, Section 8.2 provides a discussion on the particular kinds of teaching principles as well as the pedagogy promoted in the curriculum, textbooks, teachers’ manual and teacher education program, and the possible impact that these factors might have on the teachers’ cognitions and practices. Tying together the contextual background with the teachers’ beliefs and practices, Section 8.3 explores the impact of the participating teachers’ school-based learning and professional coursework, as well as the sociocultural and situational contexts, in relation to their assumption about the students and the professional development within their teaching contexts, on their cognitions and practices. The remaining parts of the chapter comprise the implications (Section 8.4), contributions (Section 8.5), limitations of the study (Section 8.6), and future research (Section 8.7).

8.2 The context of teaching English in Vietnamese schools

8.2.1 English language education in Vietnam

In EFL teaching, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has been traditionally employed as the primary teaching method, especially in Asian contexts (Chang & Goswami, 2011). This traditional method substantially focuses on language form, that is, an emphasis on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary, translation of texts and written exercises (Brown, 2007). However, across Asian countries there has been a major shift towards a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, because of the increasing need for oral
communication in the context of international cooperation, travel, and technology (Chang & Goswami, 2011). This innovative approach suggests a focus on learners’ engagement in meaningful and authentic communication to help learners to use the language in real contexts outside the classroom (Brown, 2007; Littlewood, 2007).

As is the case in other Asian countries, Vietnamese government policies (Decision_1400/QD-TTg, 2008; MOET, 2008) have also shifted towards a communicative approach to language teaching in order to better prepare Vietnamese students with the communicative language skills they need to enter the workforce in a globalised world. Within the context of high school English education, the language curriculum and textbooks are expected to translate the expectations of the policy makers for use in classroom contexts. These documents are viewed as teaching guidelines and resources for teachers, and even compulsory in the case of the textbooks (MOET, 2006, 2008). Thus, they are likely to have a substantial impact on what teachers believe and how they perform in the classroom. Overall, the analysis of these documents, as presented in Chapter 5, demonstrates how these documents were designed to pursue many features of CLT. In the case of the curriculum, results from the analysis of this study are consistent with those of Viet (2014) and Nguyen (2007), who made similar conclusions about the preference for CLT in the Vietnamese language curriculum. Specifically, these documents reveal a close association with a number of CLT features, such as, promoting a learner-centred approach with meaningful communication, encouraging the use of authentic, contextualised language materials and the target language in the classroom, and cultivating learners’ interest and motivation in learning the language. Serving as a de facto curriculum, the textbooks (MOET, 2006) were designed as teaching resources to align with the guidelines and expectations of the curriculum. In general, my analysis and that of others (e.g. Nguyen, 2007) of the textbooks used in the schools suggest that they were written to address certain features of CLT, such as promoting a learner-centred approach and focusing on communicative language skills. For example, the inclusion of four Language Skills lessons and a Language Focus lesson in each unit in the textbook suggests equal attention to all of the language skills instead of a focus on the knowledge about the form of the language (e.g. vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar). In addition, a considerable proportion of the communicative activities encourage guided and free practice with students working cooperatively in pairs and groups. Different genres and real-life situations were also included to a certain extent so that students could engage in meaningful communication.
Nevertheless, despite its commitment to these features of CLT, there is limited discussion in the curriculum or in the accompanying teacher’s manual on how teachers might implement the features related to CLT in the classroom. In particular, and particularly relevant to the findings of this study, the curriculum provides no suggestions for how teachers might work with students of different backgrounds, abilities and interests. The curriculum documents advise teachers to encourage students’ motivation and interest in learning but there are no specific guidelines on how to support them to do this. Teachers are expected to use authentic and contextualised learning materials but the curriculum does not provide resources or support to help teachers identify and/or design materials for learning. Similar to the curriculum, despite significant efforts to keep up with a communicative teaching approach, the textbooks also struggle to adequately address some essential features of CLT. For example, although the textbooks included many communicative activities in the language skills lessons (i.e. Reading, Listening, Speaking, Writing), these activities were frequently not sufficiently contextualised or linked to authentic situations, which is problematic, as such links are an important catalyst for students’ motivation to learn the language. While these activities tended to promote interaction among students, they did not do this in a way that students would find relevant to their lives; thus, these activities were only able to partially support the curriculum’s goal to develop their learners’ language skills competence. While there were few authentic and contextualised situations in the activities in the language skills lessons, there were very few communicative activities in the Language Focus lessons. The activities in these lessons consisted largely of controlled drills with few communicative activities to extend students’ opportunities to use the form for communication such as role plays, interviews, reports and discussions. These findings support previous studies (e.g. Nguyen, 2007; Viet, 2013) and suggest that there are insufficient authentic and situational activities in the textbooks, if CLT is the goal of language teaching.

While the limitations of the curriculum and textbooks might present difficulties in the implementation of CLT, the Vietnamese system of external examinations imposes a far greater obstacle to applying CLT in the classroom. Similar to previous studies (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013), this study found that written-based examinations were used, especially in high-stakes graduation examinations. This places considerable pressure on the ways teachers teach and students learn language. As a result, as indicated in this and other studies (Canh & Barnard, 2009), teachers tended to pay little attention to language skills not included in the written exams, such as listening and speaking skills.
In brief, in translating the expectations of the language policies to language learners in Vietnam, the guiding documents for teachers - the curriculum and textbooks - selected CLT as the principal approach for English language classrooms. The activities in the textbooks were progressively designed from easy to more difficult levels as informed by CLT. Despite the aforementioned limitations, these documents offered a teaching guide that the teachers generally adhered to but, as discussed below, modified in different ways to meet the perceived needs of their students.

8.2.2 Professional coursework

Like Viet’s (2013) study of EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices in the Vietnamese context, the promotion of CLT in the teacher education program was also observed in the present study. In alignment with English language education policy and curriculum in Vietnam, as well as a wide acceptance of CLT as an ideal practice in the current EFL teaching, the university-based teacher education program also followed the government language policies by encouraging pre-service teachers to apply the elements of CLT in the classroom. The salient features of CLT promoted in the teacher education included the introduction of games, encouragement of the use of the L2 and authentic learning materials, and promotion of meaningful communication in the form of cooperative and collaborative learning.

Despite the support for CLT in the teacher education program, as pre-service teachers, the novice teachers were taught PPP (Presentation - Practice - Production) as the preferred way of sequencing and organizing their lessons. This is similar to Viet’s (2013) findings which determined that the PPP model was also presented to the teacher participants in his study during their teacher education program. For the teacher educators in my study, contextual factors, including written-based examinations, students’ low language proficiencies and a high load of teaching content with time constraints, were likely to restrict their promotion of a stronger version of CLT. In response to these obstacles, they proposed PPP as an alternative way of teaching to address both the expectation of language policy and curriculum (e.g. promoting communicative language skills) and the reality (e.g. written-based examinations, students’ abilities) in the classrooms. According to the teacher educators, when following this method, teachers could present the language forms (i.e. vocabulary and grammar) and provide practice drills so that students could become familiar with the use of the language items. They assumed that the first two stages (Presentation and Practice) of this method might better suit learners’ language abilities and help them prepare for written-based exams. In
addition, the teacher educators commented that the warm-up stage (i.e. games) and production stage of this method allowed teachers to provide students with more communicative activities for language development as expected in the language policies.

Especially in regard to its inclusion of a production stage, the PPP method is similar to CLT, as both approaches aim to present opportunities for students to use language communicatively in a free context. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the PPP method that the teacher educators introduced to their pre-service teachers and the CLT approach that was promoted by the curriculum and textbook. One important variation between them was their focus. The PPP method pays more attention to discrete language items and utilises substantial controlled activities to help students acquire the language items before introducing communicative activities towards the end of the lesson. By contrast, although the CLT approach also introduces language items, they are to be presented in authentic contexts and to be used in a variety of communicative situations throughout the lesson. In other words, the PPP method places considerable emphasis on form, while CLT prioritises a focus on contextualised language use and meaning negotiation within a variety of contexts.

The teacher educators’ decision to promote the PPP method coupled with advocating certain features of CLT that might fit within the PPP framework served as a compromise. The focus on form provides a pedagogical tool to enable learners to learn the material they need to succeed in examinations, while the adaptation of selected features of CLT provides a means of upholding language policies and supporting students to use language, at least to a limited extent, more communicatively. Trying to meet two somewhat conflicting goals (enabling students to use language communicatively while simultaneously succeeding in form-focused exams) was particularly difficult, especially given the additional contextual factors the novice teachers faced such as low performing and reluctant students. Although the teacher educators recognized the challenges of the classroom context, there appeared to be little attention devoted to providing the teachers with ways of dealing with these barriers to learning.

8.3 Impact of context on novice teachers’ cognitions and practices

This section provides a discussion about the impact of contextual factors on the cognitions and practices of the novice teachers. As was the case with other studies using Borg’s framework to examine contextual factors (Debreli, 2012; Fajardo, 2013; Li & Walsh, 2011; Phipps & Borg, 2009), this study found a considerable impact of personal (i.e. family
background and school-based learning), situational (i.e. school and classroom context) and sociocultural (i.e. the economic and political context) factors affecting novice teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning and how students performed in the classroom. While other studies have focussed on how contextual factors (i.e. classroom factors, teacher education) influence teachers’ cognitions, the study described in this thesis specifically examined not only the influence of these factors but also other factors such as the teachers’ personal lives, their school-based learning experiences, the school context, and the sociocultural (i.e. economic and political) context in which the teachers lived and taught, in shaping their cognitions and practices. This study extends our understanding of the literature on language teacher cognition and contributes to Borg’s (2015) model by providing a detailed description of how a particular EFL context closely tied to its socio-cultural environment had a significant impact on the teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning. Insights into the influence of these contextual factors on the teachers’ cognitions and practices, as informed by the biographical interviews and classroom observations followed by stimulated recall interviews with the teachers, are provided below.

8.3.1 The influence of school-based language learning

All of the teachers participating in the study grew up in low income or middle class families in the rural districts of the Mekong Delta, a region where most people earn their living in agricultural rather than in industry or service sectors (Garschagen et al., 2012). This study suggests that, despite growing up in a similar geographic context, the differences in family backgrounds among the teachers tended to influence their early years of learning English. Some teachers such as Tam and Minh, who appeared to benefit from better economic family backgrounds, received greater opportunities in the form of finances for extra English classes and reference books and exemption from household chores, thus enabling them to prioritise their language education. By contrast, the other teachers, especially Anh and Long, did not seem to have such privileged conditions. For example, Long, who received the least support from his family in terms of both financial and mentoring assistance and observed many of his siblings drop out from school, had to make greater efforts to continue his education compared to the other teachers. Like Long, the pathway to further education would have been challenging for Anh if she had not been granted financial support from her school principal. Despite her family’s economic hardship, Anh’s father, who was a retired teacher of French, was very supportive of her studies and influential in her choice of English as a teaching profession after her high school learning. Tam’s parents and aunts were also teachers, in this
case, of chemistry, geography and English, which was likely to have contributed to her
decision to become an English teacher.

All of the teachers lived and studied in a less advantaged region of Vietnam where English
was rarely spoken outside the classroom, especially in their rural hometown. In addition, they
had limited access to other learning resources such as a dedicated language centre compared
to students in urban areas. Nevertheless, all of the teachers performed well in learning
English and progressively cultivated their love of learning English.

As students of English in schools in the 1990s, their description of English lessons, not
surprisingly, suggests that they were taught using GTM rather than a communicative-based
approach (Canh, 2001; Giao & Hoa, 2004; Ho & The Binh, 2014). As Canh (2001) and Ho
and The Binh (2014) argue, the lack of the target language exposure outside the classroom
and the pressure of high-stakes written-based examinations have contributed significantly to
maintaining traditional approaches to language teaching which emphasise grammatical rules,
memorisation of vocabulary and controlled exercises. Other important challenges to the
implementation of a communicative-based approach, as Canh (2001) suggests, were teachers’
low English proficiency, large-size classes, and insufficient resources for language learning.
These difficulties perhaps lead to their teachers’ greater confidence in using GTM. Even
Tam, who studied at the English class for gifted students, reported receiving only limited
opportunities to develop communicative skills. Thus, the way English was taught in the
teachers’ earlier schooling offered them very limited exposure to a communicative teaching
approach and thus few opportunities to use language communicatively.

8.3.2 The influence of professional coursework

As was the case in other studies (Debreli, 2012; Gan, 2013), in terms of language
development, there was a considerable contrast between the experiences of language learning
in secondary and high school with those at university. At university, their opportunities for
language learning included communicative activities such as presentations, reports, role
plays, and interviews. Thus, their experience of language learning at university, which both
enhanced their language skills as well as their knowledge of teaching English, led to positive
attitudes about language teaching and learning and subsequently confirmed their desire to
become English teachers.
As in the case of the teachers in the studies by Özmen (2012) and Burri (2015), their professional coursework had a significant impact on the novice teachers’ cognition development of language teaching. They contrasted their more recent experiences of using language authentically and communicatively with the memorisation and mastery of vocabulary and grammar exercises in their previous language learning experiences. In this way, their teacher education had a great impact on their cognitions about language teaching and learning. As most of the teachers said in their interviews, by the end of their teacher education, they had looked forward to employing CLT to enable their students to learn English communicatively, as they had experienced themselves during their university coursework. As explained above, their teaching method courses were built on the PPP method, which aimed to help learners acquire both language form and also language meaning through communicative games and activities. By the end of their professional coursework, the teachers valued what they had learnt from the teacher education program and were generally committed to employing PPP as a preferred form of EFL teaching in the classroom. In their interviews, they described how they drew on their PCK learnt from the teacher education program such as sequencing their lessons following the PPP format and introducing communicative activities into the classroom through the use of language games, production activities and the target language.

8.3.3 The influence of the school and classroom contexts

Despite their enthusiasm for and commitment to CLT at the end of their teacher education, when they began teaching, the novice teachers had to face classroom realities where their initial cognitions about language and language teaching were tested and challenged. The following paragraphs provide further evidence how the teachers cognitions were re-shaped by the dynamic and complex teaching environment and how this was reflected in their classroom practice.

The influence of knowledge of learners

The first and foremost constraint, from the teachers’ perspective, was their students, who they perceived as having low language abilities and as being reluctant to learn English. As a result, their teaching was shaped by their assessment of their students’ needs and abilities. From the start of their first year of teaching, the teachers experienced a great deal of difficulty in working with their students. As several of the teachers said, they were interested in communicating with their students in English but they failed to keep that practice going soon
after a few initial lessons in their careers as teachers. When they observed their students’ struggle to understand their instructions in English, they modified the L2 and L1 ratio use in the classroom, employing more Vietnamese as a result.

These findings align with previous studies (Erkmen, 2014; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009) that attribute to Borg’s (2015) model to understand teachers’ cognitions. Results of these studies as well as the study described in this thesis suggest that teachers may plan to implement what they believe in teaching into the classroom but then encounter classroom constraints that challenge their previous cognitions and preferred practices. The teachers in this study talked about wanting to execute their cognitions about teaching and learning in the classroom; however, the classroom realities - their perceptions of their students’ learning needs and abilities - had a reverse effect on their practices and consequently shaped their cognitions on how to teach in subsequent lessons.

Changing cognitions and adaptations to practice

As indicated above, although the teachers placed significant value on supporting their students’ communicative language skills, especially with listening and speaking skills, and made efforts to incorporate a CLT approach, they modified their original innovative ideas about teaching in response to their perceptions of their students’ learning abilities and motivation. In other words, their cognitions about the value of CLT did not remain the same. While the teachers still believed that CLT was the ideal approach, their practices and responses from the stimulated recall interviews suggest that this approach needed to be adapted for the kinds of students they had in their classrooms. As observed in the classroom, the teachers employed features of CLT learnt in their teacher education such as the use of games, use of the target language and cooperative learning. They also provided support before engaging their students in more communicative language exposure; however, these activities generally provided limited opportunities for the students to produce the language in communicative and authentic situations. In this sense, the situational context of the classroom had an important impact on the teachers’ cognitions that led to the gap between what they did in practice and what is expected in CLT.

As is a common feature in the literature on L1 and L2 use in CLT (Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Canh, 2011; Scott & Fuente, 2008), one of the key adaptations made to CLT principles by the teachers in this study was the much greater use of the first language at the expense of the target language. The teachers said that they were hesitant in employing English, especially
for explaining grammar points or giving instructions to their students, because of the grammar complexity and their students’ low English abilities. To assist their students’ understanding, the teachers in the present study said that they chose to combine L1 and L2, or solely L1, to explain difficult parts of the lessons. Data from classroom observations showed that, apart from a sizable proportion of L2 use during game activities, the teachers switched to L1 in other parts of the lessons and allowed students to use L1 in pair or group discussions, due to the priority placed on ensuring student understanding and subsequent language competence development. Consequently, communication between the teachers and students and among the students involved a considerable employment of Vietnamese and a smaller proportion of English language.

In addition, their explanations for their choices of activities in the stimulated recall interviews indicated that the teachers’ selected activities were more controlled rather than communicative. Depending on the activity difficulty, they would adjust activities to match their perceptions of their students’ language abilities. As a result, despite their awareness of the production stage as comprising more communicative activities, the teachers suggested that, for them, the practice stage was a more important component in the lesson. Despite the teachers’ reported beliefs that cooperative learning activities in pairs and groups were important for language communication, in practice, group learning usually involved the students doing controlled exercises.

Similar to teachers in Viet’s (2013, 2014) and Tran’s (2015) study, the teachers in this study made numerous variations to the textbook activities to provide what they perceived to be the necessary support for their students’ learning interest and abilities. They adapted the activities in ways that limited communicative opportunities. The teachers often skipped the activities in the production stage provided in the textbooks or had their students practice them in a superficial way. The teachers’ inclusion of less communicative activities was similarly observed in the grammar lessons, in which they spent a considerable amount of time explaining a grammar point and directing their students to do grammar drills. There were few opportunities for communicative and authentic activities using this structure. A few instances were observed where the teachers attempted to establish communicative and meaningful communication: for example, Tam’s selection of Vietnam’s Teachers’ Day to engage the students (see Section 7.2) or Long’s encouragement of the students to make their own sentences (see Section 7.4). However, these examples still provided students with few opportunities to use language communicatively and meaningfully. While working on these
mechanical exercises might stretch the students’ memorisation of the grammar structure and vocabulary and assist their preparation for the exams, an exclusive focus on these types of controlled practice limited the students’ opportunities to utilise the grammar in meaningful and communicative ways for their language skill development. The teachers’ strategies were very similar to those in the “teaching style framework” proposed by Mariani (1997). In this context, Mariani argues that, if teachers offer high support but low challenging activities, students would be less likely to have opportunities to learn new knowledge and skills.

The influence of the examination system

As numerous studies in the Asian context have demonstrated, the pressure of national testing regimes (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Jihyeon, 2009; Nishino, 2008; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2014) has restricted the teaching of language communicatively. In the case of the present study, the teachers’ efforts in implementing CLT in the classroom, in addition to being influenced by their learners’ language needs and abilities, were also impeded by the dominance of traditional form-focused examinations. As discussed earlier in Section 8.2.1, although government language policies encourage the use of CLT in the classroom, criteria used to assess students’ language abilities still place considerable emphasis on language form rather than meaning. As such, it is understandable and practical that the teachers, despite their commitment to CLT, had to prioritise their teaching of language form to prepare their students for the exams. Not surprisingly, their students were also influenced by the form-focused examinations and preferred to be taught about grammar and vocabulary instead of communicative language skills such as listening and speaking.

The influence of professional support

The novice teachers described only limited support from their colleagues to help them implement CLT in the classroom. Like the beginning teachers in Shin’s (2012) study, an important priority was surviving in their new teaching environments. This meant that they tended to conform to the common practice of a more conservative, teacher-centred approach in their school contexts. As they reported, their teaching was frequently observed by other colleagues, including more experienced teachers, who would later give them advice on teaching. This advice, while helpful, often focused on how to present grammar and vocabulary succinctly to assist students in the tests and exams rather than on how to design suitable communicative activities to extend the language abilities of their current learners. Although the teachers in this study did not explicitly mention the pressures from other
teachers, it appeared that they felt a need to align their teaching with the suggestions and/or practices of their colleagues. When asked to compare their teaching with their school colleagues, these teachers said that they shared comparatively similar teaching practices. This suggests that the teachers’ colleagues had a powerful influence on shaping their cognitions and practices. Their more experienced colleagues’ mostly conservative teaching ideas pulled them back from what they had initially imagined themselves to achieve when they left their teacher education program.

The examples that have been illustrated throughout the study suggest that there was a considerable emphasis on linguistic competence in all of the teachers’ practices. Other types of communicative competences, as parts of the teachers’ SMCK, were rarely introduced in the classrooms. In terms of SMCK, I would argue that all of the teachers in this study had fairly strong SMCK learnt during their teacher education and professional development workshops. The ways in which the teachers were able to articulate the principles of CLT, for example, the use of L2 and meaningful and communicative communication suggests that they possessed not only linguistic competence but also discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competences. However, the teachers appeared to communicate a great deal of linguistic-oriented SMCK instead of the other competences to their students. Most of the classroom instructions were related to linguistic competence (i.e. vocabulary and grammar). This was likely due to a complex intersection between their PCK and knowledge of learners. What seemed to be missing in the teachers’ PCK was how to teach English to reluctant students using CLT. In other words, the teachers may have solid SMCK but insufficient PCK to enable them to teach English communicatively to their reluctant students. The teachers’ perceptions about students’ limited capacity to learn English might also have influenced their choices of communicative activities in addressing their students’ abilities.

8.3.4 Conclusion

This study has discussed the formation of cognitions of the participating teachers, from their early schooling through to the recent professional coursework and the situated and sociocultural contexts where they lived and taught. This study has shown that the professional coursework played an important role in transforming the teachers’ earlier cognitions about language teaching and learning. The teachers in this study had positive attitudes about the professional coursework in relation to supporting their language skills enhancement and communicative teaching ideas, and expressed a commitment to CLT in their teaching as
imparted in the teacher education program. Despite their newness to the teaching profession and working within the school system with limited support, these teachers demonstrated their creativity in making instructional decisions. Their decisions were reflected through their sequencing of lessons and selection of activities (e.g. use of games, retention, modification and addition of activities) to support their students regardless of whether these activities were more controlled or communicative. Nevertheless, due to numerous factors in their teaching contexts, including their assessment of the students’ learning needs and abilities, pressures of examinations and support from their colleagues, the possibility for implementing CLT in their classroom settings appeared to be limited. While the teachers tried to apply what they had learnt in the teacher education program, it appeared that, for the most part, they could only present the language form and ask students to do the practice exercises. This proved to be similar to the Presentation and Practice stage presented in the teacher education program. There were relatively few occasions where the teachers felt they could extend the lessons with communicative activities as encouraged in their teacher education. The teachers’ emphasis on language form when teaching was thus derived from a solid and constant interaction between their cognitions and the aforementioned factors. This dynamic connection has made them move away from what they believed they would do based on the knowledge gained through the teacher education program, and adapt a teaching practice that they considered more appropriate to their present classroom environment and learner needs. In other words, due to the impact of these factors, the teachers saw it as unrealistic to employ many of the innovative ideas of CLT in their teaching contexts.

The juxtaposition between the teachers’ beliefs and their actual teaching performances revealed that they were juggling many influential and immediate contextual factors. Data from the study have shown that, for the most part, the teachers struggled to look for appropriate ways of teaching that could meet the expectations of different stakeholders, namely language policy, teacher education, students, colleagues and exams. On the one hand, the teachers tried to act upon what was expected in the curriculum, textbooks and teacher education in keeping with CLT (e.g. using games and the L2). On the other hand, they experienced considerable difficulty in implementing other features of CLT in the classroom, due to classroom constraints such as pressures from their students, colleagues and examinations. In response to this dilemma, through their various choices in terms of game utilisation, activity selection, grammar instruction, and the use of L1 and L2, the participating teachers tried to find a pedagogical compromise between teaching expectations and what they
perceived to be realistic for their students. The compromise in teaching allowed the teachers to involve not only some elements of CLT to provide some communicative language learning for their students but also other components of form-focused teaching. These were put in place to support their students’ learning needs and abilities and to help prepare them for examinations. Nevertheless, due to the more immediate and pressing constraints in their teaching contexts, these compromises and modifications tended to gravitate more towards form-focused rather than communicative practice. They did not implement many communicative activities mainly because of their assessment of the students’ abilities. The emphasis on linguistic competence development may likely be a contributing factor to the students’ lack of interest in learning English, because they could not see the practical value of learning English in their future lives.

While making endeavours to teach in less favourable conditions, the participating teachers appeared to gain little support to govern the contextual constraints, especially in how to work with their students and their low motivation and language learning abilities. The teacher education program encouraged the use of CLT but took little account of the contexts where teachers had to work, with students of diverse abilities and interests; there seemed to be little support for the translation of CLT principles into specific (and potentially challenging) classroom situations. Thus, when encountering real teaching environments, they found it difficult to apply what they believed previously to be important from the teacher education program into their classrooms. To survive, they had to adapt their teaching to handle the imbalance between the language policies and the reality of examinations, insufficient authentic learning materials, and lack of relevant support from school colleagues for CLT. Therefore, it is understandable for the teachers not to adopt a CLT approach as advocated by government language policies and encouraged by their teacher education program.

8.4 Implications of the study

The following sections suggest implications for theory, language policy, teacher education programs, schools and teachers.

8.4.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributed to Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model by extending our understanding about the model. The empirical research described in this thesis has demonstrated that the contextual factors, as identified in Borg’s (2015) model, had an
important impact on the cognitions and practices of the participating EFL novice teachers. However, this study extends the model by demonstrating the impact of sociocultural context on both the personal and situational factors which shaped the cognitions and practices of the novice teachers; for example, the persistence of government investments in high-stakes written-based examinations and limited employment opportunities requiring English, particularly in the district area, which influenced student and parent perceptions of the relevance of becoming proficient in the language. In short, the sociocultural context in Vietnam had a substantial influence on the novice teachers’ learning experiences in their schooling, professional coursework, and current classroom teaching, which, in turn, shaped their cognitions and teaching practices. Understanding the teachers’ formation of beliefs due to the influence of these factors suggests that considerable attention to the sociocultural context needs to be considered in order to understand and support teachers, if policy goals are to be achieved.

8.4.2 Policy implications

The study has shown the significant impact that personal, situational and sociocultural factors have in shaping teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning, and their subsequent influence on their students’ learning. To improve English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, obstacles produced from these sociocultural and situational factors need to be addressed. In other words, if the Vietnamese government policy to encourage English proficiency through utilising a communicative language approach is to be realised, a number of actions need to be implemented.

First and foremost, in this study and many others (Canh, 2011; Kavanagh, 2012; Lee, 2017; Li, 1998; Shin, 2012; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Zhu & Shu, 2017), the high stakes written-based examinations have been identified as one of the biggest constraints on teachers’ efforts to adopt a CLT approach in the classroom, and on the students’ motivation to learn English. As Shin (2012), Zhang and Liu (2014) and the results of the present study suggest, if the government wants to see a stronger focus on CLT in the classroom, changes to the current examinations are necessary. Specifically, considerable attention needs to be given to exam design so that examinations are not only able to assess students’ linguistic competence (e.g. grammar and vocabulary) but also to provide opportunities for the development of other language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to be assessed in a communicative and authentic manner. Changes to exam
formats to align with the expectations of language policies could have an important impact on how teachers teach and students learn English. In addition, since teachers and students often prepare for what is expected to be tested in the exams, the inclusion of other key components of communicative competence such as discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences is important to develop students’ language proficiency. If the exams measure students’ communicative competence through all of the language skills, these elements are more likely to become a priority for both teachers and students.

As this study demonstrated, English language textbooks function as a de facto curriculum and therefore also play an important role in shaping the teachers’ practices in the classroom. While the textbooks placed a considerable emphasis on linguistic knowledge, the other types of communicative competences, namely discourse knowledge, sociocultural and strategic competence, were far less evident. In addition, as indicated in the Chapter 5, although the textbook activities encouraged student interaction, they are not often set in contextualised and meaningful situations. As Ahn (1998) argues, if textbooks do not provide authentic materials, they could have an important impact on the decline in learners’ motivation. If the textbook learning materials used by the teachers in the present study are to comply with the language policies and curriculum, they need to be an appealing and practical resource for language teaching and learning. As the government plans to rewrite the current textbooks for all subjects from primary to high school education and proposes to apply the new English high school textbook series in 2021 (Anh, 2017), this is an ideal time to start making these changes.

During this time of re-development, to better prepare novice and experienced teachers to develop more expertise in CLT, teachers need to be supported in utilising the current textbooks in more communicative and authentic ways. Throughout the study, the participating teachers demonstrated themselves to be creative and independent in their use of textbook materials. They made numerous decisions (e.g. retaining, modifying, omitting, adding activities) to match their knowledge of their students; however, as has been argued above, the resulting activities were often neither communicative nor authentic. One of the explanations for this phenomenon could be the teachers’ lack of knowledge and/or encouragement to transform the textbook activities into more communicative or real-world ones. If this is the case, novice teachers would benefit from more professional support and guidance in designing more communicative and real-life language activities that are appropriate to their students’ present abilities and enable the students to extend their language
proficiencies further. As Baker (2016) suggests, teachers need to provide students with guided and free activities that are meaningful and relevant to them. For example, if students are asked to talk with their friends about something they love to do/collect in their free time, Baker proposes that students can be requested to bring photos or samples of their collection and share with their partners and later introduce their friends’ collections to the class.

In addition to necessary changes made to examinations and textbooks, if the government invests in teachers’ professional development that provides practical and effective training in using CLT across specific contexts, this would enable teachers to explore new ideas and potentially put these ideas into practice. While the novice teachers described increased government funding for professional language training in the form of teaching workshops organized by DOET, these did not appear to support teachers in their delivery of communicative and authentic lessons to a students with different capacities and motivations. I suggest that, if CLT and communicative outcomes are the goals, the professional development needs not only to provide opportunities to interact with innovative and practical ideas of teaching but also to allow teachers to present their specific classroom constraints and seek for strategies to handle these difficulties whilst following CLT.

8.4.3 Implications for teaching reluctant students

The study has revealed that the participating teachers made pedagogical choices based on their perception that their students had low language proficiencies and only limited interest in learning English. As Wery and Thomson (2013) argue, such teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning and the expectations they hold for students have considerable influence: when teaching unmotivated students, teachers need to believe that their students can learn. In this study, the teachers tended to believe that their students were not able to accomplish challenging and communicative activities due to their reluctance to learn and their limited language abilities; thus, they rarely assigned these types of activities to their students. Therefore, to improve students’ language competence and learning motivation, teachers need to change how they perceive their students. As aptly noted by Stipek (1988, p. 209), “To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn”. By adopting beliefs that their students can learn, teachers are more likely to provide an encouraging and challenging learning environment for their students. Learning activities, if appropriately designed with challenging and realistic expectations for students, can make learning pleasurable (Harter, 1978) and enable students to feel competent and increase their intrinsic
motivation (Assor & Kaplan, 2001). In the specific case of reluctant students, Wery and Thomson (2013, p. 106) claim that they “thrive on accomplishing appropriately challenging tasks and being held to high expectations”.

In addition, it would be useful to help students see the value of learning English in their lives and that being competent in English can help transform their lives. For example, it may be useful to inform students about the different uses of English in various contexts outside of the primarily academic, exam-based context that they currently experience. There are numerous situations where local people use English with foreigners, especially for business purposes. For example, the adults and children in Sapa, a mountainous district in Lao Cai, a province in the north of Vietnam, despite their limited formal education, are able to communicate fluently in English with foreign tourists because many of them earn their living from working as local tour guides and vendors. Another example that can help students see how English is used in a real-life context is in Ben Thanh market in Ho Chi Minh City, where many of the vendors are able to speak English and some other languages with customers as an important way to facilitate their business. Students could also see a greater use of English through home-based tourism developed in many parts of Vietnam, including the Mekong Delta. To grow their business, the local people are involved in learning English to communicate with international visitors. These examples demonstrate that it is practical and beneficial for the students to learn and be able to use English to implement various types of business with people internationally. Being fluent in English and competent with Internet technology would also be beneficial for those who are entrepreneurially minded. They can develop their own websites and sell services and goods to an international market. To encourage students to learn English, teachers could also communicate with them about the potential economic development of the Mekong Delta due to its favourable conditions in relation to geographical location, natural and human resources, and tourism (Garschagen et al., 2012; Government, 2017).

8.4.4 Implications for teacher education

Data from the study imply that the teacher education program had significant impact on the novice teachers’ language improvement and cognitions about language teaching and learning. However, due to the classroom constraints, especially the teachers’ assumed knowledge about their learners’ language motivation and abilities, many of the communicative ideas espoused in the teacher education were not often present in the classrooms. When faced with
the realities of teaching in contrast with the micro-teaching practice done with their peers at
the university, the teachers in this study found it challenging to apply communicative
language teaching into their current classroom contexts and often had to turn classroom
activities that were originally more communicatively-focused into more controlled ones.

If CLT is the main approach to be used in the classrooms, it is important to acknowledge and
address these issues in teacher education programs. One important factor that teacher
education programs could take into account is understanding and addressing pre-service
teachers’ beliefs, since teachers’ beliefs are not static but dynamic (Borg, 2015) and thus
possible to change (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Following Nation and Macalister’s (2010)
and Peacock’s (2001) suggestion, to introduce change to teachers, it is important to gain
understanding of and address teachers’ existing beliefs during the teacher education program.
I would suggest that, as a first step, there need to be opportunities where pre-service teachers’
implicit beliefs about language teaching and learning, including their school-based language
learning, are voiced, reflected upon and compared with current theories in language teaching
and learning. While this is likely to help teacher educators to better understand their pre-
service teachers and their existing beliefs, it is also an opportunity for pre-service teachers to
express their thoughts and align them with current teaching theories.

More importantly, if the objective of teaching is to develop learners’ communicative abilities,
it is essential that teacher education programs assist pre-service teachers in addressing the
local contextual issues, especially how to work with reluctant and low language proficiency
students, in pursuit of CLT. Shin (2012) has suggested that, in order to better prepare teachers
for the realities of teaching, teacher education programs need to take into account the
contextual factors that teachers may encounter and present realistic teaching alternatives.
Following his suggestion, in this vein, it would be useful to establish a collaborative link
between teacher educators and school teachers. This cooperation would allow teacher
educators to visit teachers’ classrooms and work closely with them in resolving restrictions to
CLT. This may include taking students’ low language learning proficiencies and motivation,
pressure of examinations and reproduction of textbook activities, and transforming these into
more communicative and authentic learning opportunities. While these hands-on working
experiences could have a vital impact on in-service teachers’ practice, they would equally
provide teacher educators with a repertoire of knowledge and skills in handling teaching
issues related to specific local contexts. In return, informed by a wide range of knowledge
and understanding of how to teach communicatively in different situations and with students
of diverse abilities, teacher educators could share such knowledge and skills with their pre-service teachers to help them prepare for their future teaching. Furthermore, if the teacher educators would like to see how pre-service teachers implement CLT in the classrooms, ongoing professional discussions between teacher educators and pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum or first years of teaching could provide opportunities for novice teachers to identify contemporary challenges in language teaching and work with experienced educators to address them.

8.4.5 Implications for schools and teachers

The study has shown that the novice teachers initially tried to follow CLT practices, but there seemed to be little support once they were situated in their own classrooms. They indicated that the support they gained from their colleagues in the form of classroom observations and after-classroom observation discussion inclined toward traditional teaching rather than communicative teaching. Likewise, the professional development in the form of teaching demonstrations organized by DOET appeared to target high performing students and thus had limited relevance to how the teachers worked with their low performing students. As the novice teachers indicated in their interviews, they were interested in using innovative teaching ideas; however, as revealed in the study, the teachers found numerous restrictions to following CLT. When other senior teachers followed a more traditional way of teaching, it became difficult for these novice teachers to have a different teaching approach if they wanted to fit in the new teaching environment. Their experienced colleagues’ practice and mentoring in dealing with issues, such as working with diverse students and examination pressures, had a strong influence on how they taught in their own class.

If CLT is the goal, then the community of practice at the school is one important site for change. According to this, as suggested by Chang and Goswami (2011), the school administrators and the head of the English department could encourage both novice and senior teachers to prioritise CLT as preferred teaching approach. In the case of novice teachers, they particularly need support during the first transition year into the new teaching environment including support to apply innovative and authentic teaching ideas in their classrooms. Importantly, teachers’ interactions with their professional colleagues in the social practices of teaching and learning are an important resource that generates profound changes to teachers’ beliefs (Chappell, 2017; Chappell & Benson, 2013). In this way, the successes of professional development in other studies (Álvarez & Sánchez, 2005; Giraldo, 2014) suggest
that it is possible to create a learning exchange platform that allows novice as well as experienced teachers to initiate and negotiate innovative teaching ideas that are applicable to their teaching context.

8. 5 Contributions of the study

This study makes a number of key contributions to the field of language teacher cognition. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is a scant attention given to language teacher cognition in EFL contexts (Borg, 2009; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017; Tajeddin & Aryaeian, 2017); thus, the present empirical study has contributed to our understanding of the cognitions and practices of EFL Asian teachers, especially novice teachers. Secondly, this study extends Borg’s (2015) language teacher cognition model by identifying the influence of sociocultural factors on personal and situational factors, which successively have an impact on the cognitions and practices of novice teachers. Thirdly, the triangulation of multiple sources of data employed in this study helps to provide corroborating and reliable evidence in relation to the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices. Especially, the utilization of biographical data in this study has provided an ample opportunity to look into the teachers’ life stories and how personal, situational and sociocultural factors shaped their cognitions and practices. Finally, through pinpointing sociocultural factors, this study demonstrates the inconsistencies between language policy expectations and how these expectations have been translated into the teacher education program, the novice teachers’ practices, and professional learning.

8. 6 Limitations of the study

Although the present study has shed light on some important insights in relation to understanding the Vietnamese high school novice teachers’ cognitions and classroom practices, it has some inevitable limitations. Firstly, as argued by Baker (2011b), it is challenging to fully explore and understand the beliefs and teaching practices of teachers. This is perhaps due, as Borg (2015) suggests, to teachers possessing sophisticated and even fluctuating cognitions and practices. As posited by Baker (2011b), this complexity is difficult to examine in that no single methodology is able to explore their cognitions; and even when using different sets of data collection (e.g. observations, semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall interviews, etc.), our understanding is still restricted to what teachers share about their cognitions. Nonetheless, the triangulation of multiple data sources used in this
study helps to reduce this complexity by providing more perspectives from the data to achieve a fuller understanding about the teachers’ cognitions and practices than one single method can provide (Baker, 2014). This study has thus employed multiple research instruments including curriculum texts, semi-structured interviews with the teacher educators, the vice-principals and participating teachers, and their classroom observations, followed by teachers’ discussions about their teaching, in an attempt to obtain insights into the teachers’ cognitions and practices. However, as Baker (2011b) suggests, although these research procedures enable us to understand the teachers’ minds in relation to language teaching and learning, we can only make interpretations based on what the teachers articulate into words.

Secondly, similar to many studies in second language teacher cognition involving qualitative research (Baker, 2014; Erkmen, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013, 2014), this study explored the cognitions and teaching behaviours of a small group of teachers with a modest number of observed lessons in a specific context, in this case, the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Thus, results from this study are not necessarily representative of or generalizable to other areas of Vietnam or even other EFL contexts. However, unlike the methodologies of many other studies (Baker, 2014; Erkmen, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013, 2014) which only looked into teachers’ current cognitions and practices at the time the research was conducted, the present study, drawing on Borg’s (2015) model of language teacher cognition, utilised biographical interviews to investigate how the teachers’ schooling, professional learning as well as other sociocultural and situational factors shaped their values, beliefs and practices about language teaching and learning. Since the type of research that looks into teachers’ biographies appears to be limited in the field of language teacher cognition, in terms of research methods, this empirical study makes an important contribution to the literature. Furthermore, due to the pressing need for further research on teacher cognitions in the EFL contexts (Borg, 2009), and especially on novice teachers, which appears to have had scant attention, the implementation of this research has helped to narrow this gap and present a more inclusive picture of beginning teachers’ cognitions and practices in an EFL context.

8.7 Future research

Despite growing attention to research on language teacher cognition, limited attention is paid to research on novice teachers in EFL contexts. This empirical study was conducted in response to this call. While this presents an initial work that utilises the notion of teachers’

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biographies and the language teacher cognitions model in an EFL context, as mentioned earlier, results of the study may not be generalizable to other contexts. This study is situated in the local context of the Mekong Delta, and thus other studies need to be done in other contexts to probe whether similar results would be found in these settings as well. It would be useful to have multiple studies implemented in other geographic and institutional contexts in Vietnam, for example, in the North and Central parts of the country, as well as other Asian contexts, to produce multiple data depicting a better picture of beginning teachers’ cognitions and practices in EFL contexts. Furthermore, this study looked at teachers’ beliefs and practices about language teaching and learning in a broad sense rather than with a focus on specific language skills. It may be useful if future studies explore teachers’ cognitions and practices for particular language skills such as Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing, and at different levels of education including secondary school, high school and tertiary levels.

In addition, this study captured and described teachers’ beliefs and practices at a specific period of time; thus, in order to observe changes teachers make over time as driven by their beliefs, a longitudinal study is warranted. Finally, the aim of this study was to explore the beliefs and practices of teachers, but it did not investigate students’ perceptions about language teaching and learning as well as the classroom activities delivered by their teachers. Teachers may believe that their knowledge about their students informs their teaching practices; however, their cognitions and practices are not necessarily always compatible with what students actually think and want. As Horwitz (1985, 1988) argues, insights into learners’ beliefs are essential, as they help teachers to better understand learners’ preferences for learning approaches and strategies and suggest appropriate teaching instructions to their students. As students also play a significant role in successful language teaching and learning, future studies should involve an examination of students’ perceptions to compare and contrast these with their respective teachers’ cognitions and practices. Insights into the similarities and differences between both learners’ and teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning can provide useful implications for teachers and scholars in designing L2 lesson and curriculum development (Dongho, 2017; Horwitz, 1988).
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Appendix A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

RESEARCH TITLE: EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

This is an invitation to participate in PhD research conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong. The purposes of the research are to investigate the cognitions and practices in relation to English teaching and learning of high school novice teachers and identify how various factors influence these cognitions and practices. This project will provide teacher educators with a better understanding of how novice teachers’ cognitions impact their instructional practices, in order to improve their own practices as educators and therefore enhance the teaching and learning quality.

If you are willing to participate in the project, you will be asked to allow the researcher to access your lesson plans, English textbooks, worksheets, tests, and teaching reports. The researcher would also like to observe four lessons of your classroom teaching. Then, you will be invited to watch parts of those video-taped lessons and recall your thoughts during those parts in two interviews; each interview is likely to last approximately one hour. Typical questions are: What were you thinking at that point? Could you recall your thoughts why you were doing this? Would you always organize your lessons around other skills like that?

In addition, you will be interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the project about your cognitions about English teaching and learning; each interview lasts approximately 40 minutes. Some questions can be: Can you tell me about your own English classes at high school? What kind of method was used there? What approach do you like to take in your own classroom? Does this vary with different classes?

You are free to refuse to participate and even if you agree to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of your decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection. Refusal or withdrawing will not in any way impact on your teaching or personal life.

All information will be confidential. Observed lessons will be video-taped; interviews will be audio-recorded. The data will be coded and transcribed and no identifying information will be used in any written report. Videos will not be used for any public viewings (e.g. conferences). Audio and video records will be kept locked in the researcher’s office or password protected on researcher Ngo Tien Nguyen’s computer. The data collected from your participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications.
For further information please contact Ngo Tien Nguyen or any of the other researchers listed below

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<tr>
<th>Ngo Tien Nguyen, MA</th>
<th>Dr Michelle Eady</th>
<th>Dr Amanda Baker</th>
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<td>(Research student)</td>
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This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
Appendix B: CONSENT FORM FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

**RESEARCH TITLE:** EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

**RESEARCHERS:**

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<th>Faculty of Social Sciences</th>
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<td>Dr Amanda Baker</td>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:abaker@uow.edu.au">abaker@uow.edu.au</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have been given information about the above research inquiry and been provided with the opportunity to discuss this project with Ngo Tien Nguyen who is conducting this research as part of a Doctorate of Education degree at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

By ticking the following boxes I would like to indicate my agreement to be a participant in the following tasks of the project:

- □ To provide copies of my lesson plans, English textbooks, worksheets, tests, and teaching reports for the research.
- □ Four lessons of my classroom teaching observed and video-taped.
- □ Two audio-recorded interviews in which I will watch parts of those video-taped lessons and recall my thoughts during those parts, each lasting approximately one hour.
- □ Two audio-recorded interviews at the beginning and at the end of the project respectively about my cognitions about language teaching and learning - each interview lasts approx. 40 mins.

I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality.

I have been advised of the potential burdens associated with this research and have had an opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of my decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection.
My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my teaching and/or personal life.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Ngo Tien Nguyen by mobile phone or via his email address (tnn503@uowmail.edu.au), or any researcher listed in the Information Sheet. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Research Office, University of Wollongong on (61) 2 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research entitled “Investigating Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers’ Cognitions and Practices about Language Teaching and Learning” as it has been described to me in the information sheet. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

..............................................  Date ....../....../......

Name (please print)

..............................................
Appendix C: EMAIL SCRIPT TO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Dear Principal ABC,

My name is Ngo Tien Nguyen, an English lecturer at An Giang University. At the moment, I am doing my PhD study at the University of Wollongong, Australia. My research topic is to investigate the novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning. This project will provide teacher educators with a better understanding of how novice teachers’ cognitions impact their instructional practices in order to improve their own practices as educators and therefore enhance the teaching and learning quality. There will be no risks in participating this project while it may be beneficial to their professional development.

My study has been approved by the DOET and I have approached the novice teachers through the administrator of the DOET. The novice teachers at your school have expressed an interest in participating in my study. During the study, the novice teachers will be invited to allow me to access their lesson plans, English textbooks, worksheets, tests, and teaching reports. Each novice teacher will also be invited for two interviews at the beginning and at the end of the project respectively about the teacher’s cognitions about language teaching and learning; each interview lasts approximately 40 minutes. Additionally, I would like to observe and video tape four lessons of their classroom teaching and follow up with two interviews in which the teacher will watch parts of those video-taped lessons and recall his or her thoughts during those parts, each lasts approximately one hour.

If you are willing to allow me to conduct the research in your school, could you please sign the attached letter of approval and return to me? If you have any questions or would like to discuss the research further, please don’t hesitate to call me on (+84) 0918.808.912 or email me at this address. I am very happy to provide you with more detailed information about the study. Many thanks for your support.

Kind regards,

Ngo
Appendix D: LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to confirm that Mr Ngo Tien Nguyen has been given permission to conduct the research project titled *Investigating Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers’ Cognitions and Practices about Language Teaching and Learning* at ... High School.

I give Mr Ngo Tien Nguyen permission to conduct his research at our school from October 2014 to June 2015. I understand that methods of data collection will be document collection (including policy documents related to EFL teaching in Vietnam, school programs, English textbooks, teachers’ plans, assessment tests, teaching reports), interviews with the vice-principal, teachers and classroom observations. Regarding the interview and classroom observation, the procedures anticipated for each teacher are:

- Four lessons of their classroom teaching will be observed and video-taped.
- Two recorded interviews in which the teacher will watch parts of those video-taped lessons and recall their thoughts during those parts, each lasts approximately one hour.
- Two interviews at the beginning and at the end of the project respectively about the teacher’s cognitions about language teaching and learning; each interview lasts approximately 40 minutes.
- One recorded interview with the vice principal about the novice teachers and funding and resources of the school.

All information will be confidential and the names of all participants will be pseudonyms. Audio and video records will be kept locked in the researcher’s office or password protected on researcher Ngo Tien Nguyen’s computer. The teachers will be invited to participate in this project on the basis of their willingness, and they can withdraw from the project providing that the researchers are informed of their decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection.

I am aware that this project must be reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If I have any concerns, I can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. For further information I can contact Ngo Tien Nguyen at tnn503@uowmail.edu.au, Dr Michelle Eady at meady@uow.edu.au, or Dr Amanda Baker at abaker@uow.edu.au, or Prof. Jan Wright at jwright@uow.edu.au.

Yours respectfully,

Signature

Date………

Principal ABC
Appendix E: LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM DOET

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to confirm that Mr Ngo Tien Nguyen has been given permission to conduct the research project titled *Investigating Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers’ Cognitions and Practices about Language Teaching and Learning* at the high schools in XXX Province. I am aware that he will conduct his research at the high schools from October 2014 to June 2015. During this project, 4-6 teachers will be participants at their willingness.

I understand that methods of data collection will be document collection (including school program, English textbooks, teachers’ plans, assessment tests, teaching reports), interviews with teachers and classroom observations. Regarding the interview and classroom observation, the procedures anticipated for each teacher are:

- Four lessons of their classroom teaching will be observed and video-taped.
- Two audio-recorded interviews in which the teacher will watch parts of those videotaped lessons and recall their thoughts during those parts, each lasts approximately one hour.
- Two audio-recorded interviews at the beginning and at the end of the project respectively about the teacher’s cognitions about language teaching and learning; each interview lasts approximately 40 minutes.

All information will be confidential and the names of all participants will be pseudonyms. Audio and video records will be kept locked in the researcher’s office or password protected on researcher Ngo Tien Nguyen’s computer. The teachers will be invited to participate in this project on the basis of their willingness, and they can withdraw from the project providing that the researchers are informed of their decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection.

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Yours respectfully,

Signed

Date………………..

Name (please print)
Appendix F: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR SCHOOL VICE-PRINCIPALS

RESEARCH TITLE: EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

This is an invitation to participate in PhD research conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong. The purposes of the research are to investigate the cognitions and practices in relation to English teaching and learning of high school novice teachers and identify how various factors influence these cognitions and practices. This project will provide teacher educators with a better understanding of how novice teachers’ cognitions impact their instructional practices, in order to improve their own practices as educators and therefore enhance the teaching and learning quality.

You are invited because you are the vice-principal of the school where the study is conducted. If you are willing to participate in the project, you will be asked to allow the researcher to have a short interview regarding the novice teachers, the language teaching and learning and resources of the school.

You are free to refuse to participate and even if you agree to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of your decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection. Refusal or withdrawing will not in any way affect your work and/or personal life.

All information will be confidential. Interviews will be audio-recorded. The data will be coded and transcribed and no identifying information will be used in any written report. Audio records will be kept locked in the researcher’s office or password protected on the researcher Ngo Tien Nguyen’s computer. The data collected from your participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications.

For further information please contact Ngo Tien Nguyen or any of the other researchers listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ngo Tien Nguyen, MA (Research student)</th>
<th>Dr Michelle Eady</th>
<th>Dr Amanda Baker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Social Science</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile: <a href="mailto:tnn503@uowmail.edu.au">tnn503@uowmail.edu.au</a></td>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:meady@uow.edu.au">meady@uow.edu.au</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:abaker@uow.edu.au">abaker@uow.edu.au</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioral Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
Appendix G: CONSENT FORM FOR SCHOOL VICE-PRINCIPALS

RESEARCH TITLE: EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

RESEARCHERS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Email Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngo Tien Nguyen</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
<td><a href="mailto:tnn503@uowmail.edu.au">tnn503@uowmail.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Michelle Eady</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
<td><a href="mailto:meady@uow.edu.au">meady@uow.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Amanda Baker</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
<td><a href="mailto:abaker@uow.edu.au">abaker@uow.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have been given information about the above research inquiry and been provided with the opportunity to discuss this project with Ngo Tien Nguyen who is conducting this research as part of a PhD degree at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

By ticking the following boxes I would like to indicate my agreement to be a participant in the following tasks of the project:

- [ ] An audio-recorded interview about the novice teachers, the language teaching and learning and resources of the school

I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed and that every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality.

I have been advised of the potential burdens associated with this research and have had an opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of my decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my teaching and/or personal life.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Ngo Tien Nguyen by mobile phone or via his email address (tnn503@uowmail.edu.au), or any researcher listed in the Information Sheet. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Research Office, University of Wollongong on (61) 2 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.
By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research entitled “Investigating Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers’ Cognitions and Practices about Language Teaching and Learning” as it has been described to me in the information sheet. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

Date ……/……/……

…………………..

Name (please print)

…………………..
Appendix H: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

**RESEARCH TITLE:** EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

This is an invitation to participate in PhD research conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong. The purposes of the research are to investigate the cognitions and practices in relation to English teaching and learning of high school novice teachers and identify how various factors influence these cognitions and practices. This project will provide teacher educators with a better understanding of how novice teachers’ cognitions impact their instructional practices, in order to improve their own practices as educators and therefore enhance the teaching and learning quality.

You are invited because you are an instructor of the English teaching methodology courses in the teacher education program. If you are willing to participate in the project, you will be asked to allow the researcher to access the methodology syllabuses (i.e. the subject outlines) and policy documents related to EFL teaching in Vietnam that you might use in your teaching. You will also be invited for an interview about the English teaching methodology courses you are in charge of, in particular about the theories and practices included in these courses.

You are free to refuse to participate and even if you agree to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of your decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection. Refusal or withdrawing will not in any way affect your teaching and/or personal life.

All information will be confidential. Interviews will be audio-recorded. The data will be coded and transcribed and no identifying information will be used in any written report. Audio records will be kept locked in the researcher’s office or password protected on the researcher Ngo Tien Nguyen’s computer. The data collected from your participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications.

For further information please contact Ngo Tien Nguyen or any of the other researchers listed below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ngo Tien Nguyen, MA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Research student)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty of Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile: <a href="mailto:tnn503@uowmail.edu.au">tnn503@uowmail.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Dr Michelle Eady</th>
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This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

256
Appendix I: CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

**RESEARCH TITLE:** EFL novice teachers’ cognitions and practices about language teaching and learning

**RESEARCHERS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngo Tien Nguyen</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
<td><a href="mailto:tnn503@uowmail.edu.au">tnn503@uowmail.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
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<td>Dr Michelle Eady</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
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<td>Dr Amanda Baker</td>
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</tr>
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<td>University of Wollongong</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

I have been given information about the above research inquiry and been provided with the opportunity to discuss this project with Ngo Tien Nguyen who is conducting this research as part of a PhD degree at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

By ticking the following boxes I would like to indicate my agreement to be a participant in the following tasks of the project:

- □ To provide copies of my methodology syllabuses and policy documents related to EFL teaching in Vietnam which I might use in my teaching.
- □ An audio-recorded interview about the English methodology courses I am in charge of.

I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed and that every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality.

I have been advised of the potential burdens associated with this research and have had an opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research providing that the researchers are informed of my decision no longer than one month after the completion of data collection. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my teaching and/or personal life.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Ngo Tien Nguyen by mobile phone or via his email address (tnn503@uowmail.edu.au), or any researcher listed in the Information Sheet. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Research Office, University of Wollongong on (61) 2 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research entitled “Investigating Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers’ Cognitions and Practices about Language Teaching and Learning” as it has been described to me in the information sheet. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for the preparation of a report and possible journal publications and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed: ___________________________ Date: __________/_____/______

…………………………………………

Name (please print): __________________________
Appendix J: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

1. How long have you been teaching English?
2. How many teaching methodology courses are there in the teacher education program for pre-service teachers?
3. What teaching methodology courses have you taught to pre-service teachers?
4. What are the objectives of each course?
5. What are the contents of each course?
   Prompts: theories and principles of language teaching methods; lesson planning
6. How do you teach these contents to your pre-service teachers?
7. What is the goal of a grammar lesson?
8. How do you teach grammar in a communicative way?
9. Which method(s) do you expect your pre-service teachers to use when they are high school teachers? Why?
10. In your opinion, what are the goals in teaching English to high school learners? What kinds of methods should be used to achieve the goals?
11. Do you think newly graduated pre-service teachers can apply the methods they have learnt at university?
12. According to you, what skills are mainly emphasized at high schools?
13. In your opinion, how should language (English and Vietnamese) be used in a high school class?
14. Do you have any suggestions for the methodology courses? The teacher education program? The English teaching at high school?

Thank you very much for your support!
Appendix K: BIOGRAPHICAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW
QUESTIONS FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

1. Can you tell me when did you begin to learn English?
2. Could you tell me how you learned English? (e.g. at primary school, secondary school, high school, university). How did your teachers teach you English during that time?
3. If you can recall your teachers at that time, which teachers would be unforgettable (positive and/or negative) to you? Why?
4. Do you remember an unforgettable lesson (positive and/or negative) that you had before?
5. What qualities would an ideal English teacher possess?
6. Besides teachers, what do you think helped you learn English the most?
7. Did your family support your English learning? Why (not)?
8. Did you think English was important? Why (not)?
9. Did you like learning English? Why (not)?
10. Overall, how do you evaluate your language learning experiences?
11. Can you tell me the objectives and contents of the methodology courses that you learnt in the pre-service teacher education?
12. What kinds of teaching methods did your teachers introduce and encourage you to use?
13. Can you tell me about the objectives of teaching English at high school?
14. Can you describe a typical lesson? Why do you structure it that way?
15. What skills do you feel comfortable and confident teaching? Why?
16. Is English considered important in the neighbourhood where you teach? Why? Why not?
17. Do your students’ parents support their children’s English learning? Why? Why not?
18. Can you describe your students (age, needs, abilities, learning styles, family background).
   a. Do you have any difficulties in working with your students? How do you deal with the difficulties?
   b. Do you think your students are capable of learning English? Why (not)?
19. What resources do you use for your teaching?
   Prompts: textbooks; other supplementary materials; internet resources, projectors.
20. Do you collaborate with other colleagues in teaching? Does this collaboration impact your teaching?
21. Have you had any professional training development since you began teaching?
   If yes, what was it about? Are you able to apply what you learnt from the training into your teaching? Why (not)?

Thank you very much for your support!
Appendix L: STIMULATED RECALL INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Prior to the stimulated recall interviews:
- I collected the notes from classroom observation and watched the video recorded lessons. During this process, I selected the video extracts that I would like the teachers to provide further explanation and detail.

During the stimulated recall interviews:
- At the stimulated recall interviews, the teachers were invited to watch the video of the lessons and to make comments on any part of the lessons that they wanted to.
- In addition, I informed the teachers that I would pause the video at some particular parts of the lessons that were recorded and ask them to provide rationales for those particular teaching behaviors.

Proposed questions for stimulated recall interviews:
- What were you thinking at that point?
- What were you thinking when you were doing this?
- Could you recall your thoughts why you were doing this?
- Would you always organize your lessons around other skills like that?

Thank you very much for your support!
## Appendix M: TIMELINES OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS AND STIMULATED RECALL INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH THE NOVICE TEACHERS

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<thead>
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<th>Tam</th>
<th>Mai</th>
<th>Anh</th>
<th>Minh</th>
<th>Long</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-interview</td>
<td>Nov. 7</td>
<td>Nov. 7</td>
<td>March 19</td>
<td>March 16 and 23</td>
<td>March 18</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Obs. 1</strong></td>
<td>11A1 Unit 5. Illiteracy Language focus</td>
<td>Nov. 11</td>
<td>11A5 Unit 7. World Population Reading</td>
<td>Nov. 12</td>
<td>10A6 Unit 13. Films and Cinema Writing March 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SRI 1</strong></td>
<td>Nov. 12</td>
<td>Nov. 13</td>
<td>April 3</td>
<td>April 2</td>
<td>April 5</td>
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<td><strong>SRI. 2</strong></td>
<td>Nov. 12</td>
<td>Nov. 18 and 19</td>
<td>April 3</td>
<td>April 2</td>
<td>April 5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Obs. 3</strong></td>
<td>10A4 Unit 7. The Mass Media. Listening Nov. 24</td>
<td>11A4 Unit 7. World Population Reading Nov. 14</td>
<td>10A8 Unit 14. The World Cup Reading April 1</td>
<td>11A8 Unit 15. Space Conquest Language focus April 14</td>
<td>10A5 Unit 14. The World Cup Writing April 7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SRI. 3</strong></td>
<td>Jan. 15</td>
<td>Jan. 17</td>
<td>April 10</td>
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<td>April 8</td>
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<td><strong>Obs. 4</strong></td>
<td>10A4 Unit 7. The Mass Media. Speaking Nov. 24</td>
<td>11A4 Unit 7. World Population Listening Nov. 15</td>
<td>10A8 Unit 14. The World Cup Speaking April 1</td>
<td>11A8 Unit 16. The Wonders of the World Reading April 22</td>
<td>10A5 Unit 14. The World Cup Language focus April 7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SRI. 4</strong></td>
<td>Jan. 15</td>
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<td>April 23</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SRI. 5</strong></td>
<td>Nov. 26</td>
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<td>May 16</td>
<td>April 23</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Obs. 6</strong></td>
<td>11A1 Unit 8. Celebrations Speaking Nov. 25</td>
<td>11A4 Unit 8. Celebrations Speaking Dec. 5</td>
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<td><strong>SRI. 6</strong></td>
<td>Nov. 26</td>
<td>Dec. 23</td>
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<td><strong>Obs. 7</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unit 7. The Mass Media. Speaking</strong></td>
<td>Dec. 5</td>
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<td><strong>SRI. 7</strong></td>
<td>Dec. 24</td>
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<td><strong>Obs. 8</strong></td>
<td>10A3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unit 8. The Story of My Village. Reading</strong></td>
<td>Dec. 5</td>
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*Note:*

Pre-obs. Interview: Pre-observation interview

Obs: Observation

SRI: Stimulated recall interview
Appendix N: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL VICE-PRINCIPALS

1. Could you introduce about yourself and your responsibilities?
2. Can you describe about your school?
3. Can you talk about the socio-economic backgrounds of the students at your school?
4. Do the students’ socio-economic backgrounds influence their English learning?
5. Are your students interested in learning English?
6. Do students’ parents value their children’s English learning?
7. How would you describe the English novice teachers at your school?
8. What challenges do the English novice teachers at your school have to face?
9. What support do you think novice teachers can have to overcome the challenges?
10. What extra-curricular activities does your school offer students to support their English learning?
11. What resources and teaching facilities would you like to request for your school?
12. What are your expectations about teaching English at high schools?

Thank you very much for your support!