AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) IN TWO VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

In Higher Education (HE) in Vietnam, a number of recent changes have occurred in the area of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education to improve quality to facilitate the country’s socioeconomic development and regional and global participation. Current assessment practices do not appear to support students’ English Language Learning (ELL). Yet research indicates that assessment has the potential to support learning but varies according to the sociocultural context in which it takes place. Limited research has been carried out on how EFL assessment practices support for ELL in Vietnamese HE. This study, therefore, examined current EFL assessment practices at one public and one non-public university in Vietnam.

The research focused on exploring how assessment within the Vietnamese sociocultural context can support the learning of EFL and on identifying facilitative and inhibitive factors. Adopting a case study approach and employing ethnographic tools, data were analysed from classroom observations and interviews with six teachers and their two Executive Officers, as well as 36 students. Additional data were relevant policy and curriculum documents, test papers and students’ writing with feedback from peers and teachers.

Findings indicate the potential of assessment to engage students in learning, to enhance their understanding of learning objectives and to facilitate their reflections on learning. However, the potential is utilised to a limited degree in current assessment practices at the two universities due to the influences of various contextual factors. Particularly dominant influences were the cultural values of face-saving concerns and respect for teachers, teachers’ limited knowledge of language assessment, washback effects of high-stakes tests, the use of international English standardised test results to certify the achievement of students’ ELL and quantify outcomes of EFL education in the public university, and the use of student feedback to evaluate teachers’ practices in the non-public university. This study contributes to research on Assessment for Learning at tertiary level and EFL education within the Vietnamese and Asian sociocultural contexts.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AfL</td>
<td>Assessment for Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGPA</td>
<td>Accumulated Grade Point Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEFR</td>
<td>Common European Framework of Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>English Language Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELT</td>
<td>English Language Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESP</td>
<td>English for Special Purposes</td>
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<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>General English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
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<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERA</td>
<td>Higher Education Reform Agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>IELTS</td>
<td>International English Language Testing System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOET</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOEIC</td>
<td>Test of English for International Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZPD</td>
<td>Zone of Proximal Development</td>
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:
Date: 27th May 2015
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the present research inquiry into the current assessment practices of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Higher Education (HE) in Vietnam. It starts with an introduction to global interest in the potential of assessment to support the learning of EFL in HE and the dearth of research about this issue in Vietnamese HE. This situation generated the motivation for the study and is described in Section 1.1. The following section (Section 1.2) provides the background, contextual information that provides the rationale for the study. The respective sections are HE reform in Vietnam (Section 1.2.1), English language teaching in HE (Section 1.2.2), and the assessment of English in HE (Section 1.2.3). The objectives of the study and the research questions are presented in section 1.3. Section 1.4 outlines the research design. The significance of the study is discussed in section 1.5. The last section (Section 1.6) maps out the structure of this study.

1.1 RATIONALE

It has been recognised that assessment has the potential to support learning (Assessment Reform Group [ARG], 2002b; Black & Wiliam, 1998b), although the ways it supports learning may vary according to the educational context in which it takes place (Berry, 2011a; Broadfoot & Black, 2004). While there is a dearth of information about how current assessment practices support the learning of EFL in Higher Education in Vietnam, elsewhere in the world, the past few decades have seen a growing interest in Assessment for Learning (AfL) of EFL in HE. In this thesis, AfL is understood as any activity undertaken by teachers and students which provides information about students’ learning and enables students to undertake necessary action to achieve the learning objectives. The growing interest in AfL derives from increasing recognition of the limitations of traditional testing in providing sufficient information about how to improve student learning (Baturay & Daloğlu, 2010), and in facilitating life-long learning capabilities (ARG, 2002b; Cheng, 2005; Deng & Carless, 2010; Hamp-Lyons, 2007). With great emphasis placed on the transparency of assessment criteria, constructive feedback and students’ involvement in the assessment process, AfL of EFL is aimed at improving students’ learning through assessment. It typically includes portfolio assessment,
peer-assessment, and self-assessment. In strong testing cultures (Carless, 2011; Hamp-Lyons, 2007), AfL strategies such as moderation and teacher-student conferencing are often used to diagnose students’ needs from the test results and to adjust teaching and learning to help preparation for the tests.

Positive outcomes have been recorded as a result of the implementation of AfL. Research studies on EFL education at tertiary level in Iran, Turkey, China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan have found that the introduction of AfL has led to significant improvements in students’ EFL learning outcomes, learning strategies and learning motivation (Bayram, 2006; Huang, 2011; Lo, 2010; Nezakatgoo, 2011; White, 2009). Research results also indicate the potential of AfL to facilitate students’ life-long learning capabilities (Lo, 2010; White, 2009) which is of great importance to HE graduates to meet the requirements of this century’s dynamic working environment (Dochy & McDowell, 1997; Kimberly, 1999; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2009). Thus, AfL is highly recommended to maximise the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of EFL in HE contexts.

In HE in Vietnam, current assessment practices of EFL seem to place too little emphasis on assisting students to learn (Le, 2014b; Vu, 2008), which is believed to exert negative influences on the quality of EFL education. However, limited research has been carried out to examine the issues and to explore how assessment might facilitate the teaching and learning of EFL at the tertiary level. Having a number of years of experience in teaching EFL in HE in Vietnam, I am concerned about current assessment practices of EFL and have become aware of the potential support of assessment practices for the learning of EFL at the tertiary level. Thus, these issues are of prime interest to this study. Because of the direct correlation between assessment and teaching and learning (Biggs, 2007), it is anticipated that a deep understanding of current assessment practices will help identify ways of improving the teaching and learning of EFL in Vietnamese universities.

1.2 BACKGROUND

1.2.1 Higher education reform in Vietnam

In recent decades, Higher Education in Vietnam has been transformed fundamentally to meet the demands of national socioeconomic development (Fry, 2009; Hayden & Lam, 2010; Ngo, 2006; Nguyen, 2011; Wasley, 2007). Two reforms that have contributed to Vietnam’s fast-growing economy have been the introduction of the
doimoi (economic renovation) policy in 1986 which steered the country toward a socialist-oriented market economy, and the country’s membership of regional and international organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); and World Trade Organization (WTO) (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Nguyen, 2011; Tran, Vu, & Sloper, 1995). The consequences have been increased calls for a large qualified workforce (Harman & Nguyen, 2010) with professional expertise as well as social and communicative competence in foreign languages (Wright, 2002), in particular English language. However, the HE system in Vietnam, which is small in scale and poor in education quality (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2005a; Nguyen, 2011; Pham, 2010) has failed to develop the human resource capacity needed (Harman & Nguyen, 2010). As a result, HE has been required to increase in scale and in educational quality to pursue the national goals of modernisation, industrialisation and global integration (Pham, 2010).

In response to this demand, in the following decade, the Vietnamese HE system expanded rapidly and massively from 103 HE institutions with 162,000 students in 1992-1993 (Hayden & Lam, 2010) to 230 HE institutions with 1,300,000 students in 2004-2005 (MOET, 2012b). The system has also become more diverse with more types of higher education created. In 1993, nearly all HE institutions were small, specialised and teaching-focused. However, by 2003-2004, there were interdisciplinary universities, specialized universities, and vocational colleges. Higher Education institutions, particularly interdisciplinary universities, were encouraged to become more research oriented (MOET, 2005c). In addition, to mobilise diverse sources of investment for the provision of HE instead of relying solely on the state budget, since 1993 public HE institutions have been allowed to collect tuition fees within a regulated framework (Fry, 2009) and a greater proportion of HE has been allowed to be taken up by the private sector. In Vietnam, the private sector is officially referred to as the non-public sector and the distinguishing characteristic between the public and non-public sector is that the latter receives no direct funding from the state (Hayden & Dao, 2010). Over the period from 1993 to 2004, the non-public sector expanded considerably from one non-public HE institution in 1993 to 29 institutions in the school year 2004-2005, accounting for approximately 13 per cent of all HE students (World Bank, 2008).
In 2005, the Vietnamese Government approved the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) (Government, 2005) with 32 specific objectives for “substantial and comprehensive” reform of the HE system by 2020. The objectives of importance to this study relate to the scale, governance, curriculum restructuring, and international integration of the HE system. With regard to scale, the HE system continues to expand with the aim of providing for 45 percent of the relevant age group by 2020. The non-public sector continues to develop. The goal is to have the non-public sector represent 40 per cent of HE system by 2020 (Government, 2005). There is particular encouragement for the establishment of HE institutions within large business corporations to strengthen the link between HE and the social and economic needs and to draw on alternative funds for HE provision. As a result, the system grew rapidly to consist of 421 institutions with 2,181,902 students in 2012-2013 (MOET, 2012b). The number of non-public institutions also increased dramatically from 29 institutions 2004-2005 in to 83 institutions in 2012-2013 with some institutions received direct funding from business corporations such as FPT University and PetroVietnam University.

In terms of governance, there has been a shift from state control to state supervision of HE (Pham, 2012). Less ministerial control, and more autonomy and accountability are given to public HE institutions, making them responsible for their own education quality, research, human resource management and budget planning (Hayden & Lam, 2010). Significantly, the government has reduced subsidy for HE and allows public HE institutions to carry out income-generating activities such as providing educational and research services, transferring technology and carrying out production and business activities (Government, 2005). Accompanying the greater autonomy for the public HE institutions and the development of the non-public sector, a system of quality assurance and accreditation control for HE has been established (MOET, 2007c). HE institutions, particularly non-public HE institutions, are required to assure their teaching and learning conditions in terms of infrastructure, quantity and quality of teaching staff. The educational objectives and educational outcomes are also required to be disclosed for free competition among HE institutions for funding and students (Pham, 2012) and for community-based monitoring and evaluation (Khanh & Hayden, 2010). As a result of the requirement
for the disclosure of educational outcomes, HE institutions have paid greater attention to both students’ learning outcomes and the assessment of student learning.

Restructuring curricula has been one of the most important aims of HE reform in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011). It has been recognised that the out-dated, inflexible and overly theoretical curricula used in HE (Harman & Nguyen, 2010; Nguyen, 2011) do not pay enough attention to the social aspects of learning and do not meet the needs of society (Harman & Nguyen, 2010; Lam, 2005). Therefore, the development of curricula as stipulated in the HERA emphasises a close link between learning and the nation’s social and economic needs; the provision of practical generic skills (such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, autonomous learning); and the provision of specialised knowledge (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Pham, 2010). To increase the flexibility of HE curricula, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), in 2007, decided to implement credit learning, which allows students’ educational attainment to be administered in terms of learning units instead of annual learning programs as in the former system (MOET, 2006b, 2007a). The two most distinctive features of the credit learning system are that students are given more time to study by themselves and are certified as completing higher education when they have accumulated an adequate number of learning credits (MOET, 2007a). With the new system, students have fewer class hours and more freedom in choosing subjects, time and quantity of learning credits for themselves. Also, students can study more than one major discipline at the same time and can get credits for general units in the second discipline they are studying (MOET, 2007a). In addition, to ensure the achievement of curriculum objectives, improvement in university teaching methodologies has also been proposed. The focus of the reform is the provision of knowledge about learning (learning how to learn); the promotion of students’ desire for learning; lifelong learning and practical applications; and the utilisation of information and communication technologies (Harman & Nguyen, 2010; MOET, 2005a; Pham, 2010).

In order to facilitate the integration of Vietnamese HE into the international HE system and to increase the English language ability of the labour force, the reform also promotes the use of English language as the medium of instruction at Vietnamese universities (Government, 2005). It is proposed that in the years leading up to 2015, English medium courses will be offered to approximately 20 percent of
university students in certain subjects and disciplines (Le, 2012). The promotion of English medium courses at higher education institutions is found not only in Vietnam but also in other Asian countries (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Major concerns identified relate to teachers’ and students’ English proficiency (Le, 2012) and educational effectiveness (Byun et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2007).

To facilitate the provision of English-medium courses, public universities in Vietnam are allowed to offer so-called advanced Bachelor degree programs in which effective teaching and learning conditions are assured, the time allocated for EFL education is increased considerably, and the major subjects are taught in English. The universities decide their own tuition fees for these advanced courses, which can be substantially higher than the fee charged in regular courses (Dung, 2011). Criteria for selecting students for these ‘high-quality’ courses mainly include students’ academic results and their willingness to pay the higher fee. The operation of this new educational program at public universities has become an issue of considerable public concern regarding its potential to disadvantage the poor in the public education system (Hoang, 2011), since the higher tuition fee can be a barrier inhibiting their access to high-quality courses. There are also considerable concerns over the effectiveness of the program (Dung, 2011). Therefore, in a recent regulation on the provision of advanced educational programs (MOET, 2014), HE institutions are required to specify and publicise the outcomes of the programs, which must be higher than those of regular programs. In particular, graduates from advanced programs are required to achieve, at a minimum, a B2 level of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (equal to 5.5 to 6.5 IELTS).

Despite the efforts made by the government and institutions, problems remain in the HE system in Vietnam (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Nguyen, 2011). University graduates, “poorly prepared in terms of their range of skills and capacities” (Hayden & Lam, 2007, p. 74), cannot deal readily with practical workplace problems (Nguyen, 2011; Tran & Swierczek, 2009). An imbalance in the labour force between HE supply and the demand for national socioeconomic development has also been identified (Hanh, 2014; Hayden & Lam, 2007). In response to the situation, new policies have been issued to address emerging problems and facilitate the realisation of the reform objectives. The reform, particularly the promotion of the above reform
objectives, has exerted profound influence on English language education at Vietnamese universities, which will be discussed in the following section.

1.2.2 English language teaching and learning in Higher Education in Vietnam

The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been prioritised in HE reform (Government, 2005). Considered as the key to Vietnamese socioeconomic development and regional and global participation (Do, 2006; Le, 2001; Wright, 2002), English has become the most important foreign language in teaching and learning in HE in Vietnam (Hoang, 2009; Ton & Pham, 2010). In 2008, the government approved the national project to improve the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages, especially English, at all educational levels in the period 2008-2020 (Government, 2008). At tertiary level, the project is the development and realisation of the HE reform policy on foreign language education. The overall objective is to develop students’ English language ability so that they can use the language to communicate, study, and work in a multilingual and multi-cultural environment (Government, 2008).

In order to realise the objective, notable changes have been witnessed in EFL education in Vietnamese HE. In particular, the time allocated for EFL education has increased significantly. The focus of EFL curriculum and the selection of teaching materials have shifted to developing students’ communicative skills (Nunan, 2003). As a consequence, EFL teachers are encouraged to adopt Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to develop students’ communicative competence in English (Bock, 2000; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Mai & Iwashita, 2012). For students, recognising the importance of English as the key to their access to further education and better employment (Hoang, 2009; Khoa, 2008; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Le, 2001; Tran, 2013) motivates more students are investing in studying English. The main objectives of English language learning for those students are to “to find a good job” and “to explore the world outside” (Tran, 2013, p. 141).

The outcomes of the effort made to improve the effectiveness of EFL education in Vietnamese HE, however, have not met the nation’s, institutions’ and students’ expectations. The objective of developing students’ English competence in using English for communication and professional purposes has not been realised (Le, 2013). According to the world English Proficiency Index developed by Education
First, the general English proficiency level of Vietnamese adults is still relatively low despite a significant improvement from 39th ranking in 2007 among 63 countries in the Asian region to 33rd in 2014 (Education First, 2014). Limited ability in using English language for communication and professional purposes is still one of the biggest disadvantages of Vietnamese workers (Thuy Trang, 2013). A study on the effectiveness of EFL programs in HE institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the two largest educational centres in Vietnam, showed that after more than 10 years of studying English both in schools and in university, many students still could not use English for personal and professional purposes (Vu, 2008). In a personal communication at a meeting to direct the execution of the national foreign language education project for 2020, the Deputy Minister of Education, Mr Nguyen Vinh Hien also emphasised that students still had limited English competency despite the enormous effort that had been directed at enhancing teaching (Ha, 2011). Regarding students’ perspectives, a study carried out by Tran (2013) reported that the participating students found their English language learning experience at university “ineffective” and “disappointing” (p.141).

Various reasons have been cited for this situation (Bock, 2000; Khoa, 2008; Le, 2013; Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Nguyen, 2007; T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009; Tran & Williamson, 2009; Tran, 2013). The reasons can be classified into five main categories. The first category relates to teachers’ insufficient training in English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy and limited English proficiency. The second category relates to working conditions such as poor learning resources and teachers’ low salary. The third category relates to assessment and curriculum. Specifically, the English language exams place an inadequate emphasis on communicative competence, and there is inconsistency in the English language curriculum at different educational levels. The fourth category relates to many students’ low level of English language proficiency when starting tertiary education. This is due to the students’ lack of investment in learning English at schools and the school EFL curriculum which focuses primarily on language knowledge. The last category relates to the EFL context, with the lack of an environment which facilitates communication in English and the influence of traditional teaching methodology characterised by teacher-centeredness and course book-based knowledge-transmission.
A number of recommendations have been proposed to increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of EFL in HE. These include conducting research on students’ learning needs to develop appropriate curriculum, materials and teaching methods for EFL education in the Vietnamese HE context, reallocating resources for EFL education, designing comprehensive EFL education programs consistent with international standards, supporting teachers to improve their English proficiency and pedagogy, and improving the procedures and methods of testing and certifying students’ English ability (Do, 2006; Le, 2013; Nguyen, 2007; Vu, 2008). The Government has endorsed many of the proposed recommendations and developed practical actions to improve the effectiveness of EFL education. In particular, a considerable number of EFL teachers at Vietnamese universities have been sent overseas to study and conduct research on appropriate ELT methodologies and approaches that could be employed in the Vietnamese HE context, and the researcher of this study is one of those. As revealed in the literature on EFL education at tertiary level in Vietnam, considerable attention has been paid to improving EFL teachers’ pedagogy to develop students’ communicative competence (Khoa, 2008; T.M.H. Nguyen, 2008; Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010), to tailor their teaching to meet the students’ needs (Dang, 2006b; Duong, 2013; Duong, 2005, 2007), and to foster students’ autonomy and problem solving skills (Dang, 2010; T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009).

Although the suggested improvements are in the process of being carried out, considerable challenges in the present assessment practices of EFL in HE have been identified by various scholars (Dang, 2010; Hoang, 2009; Le, 2001; Vu, 2008), which will be elaborated in the following section.

1.2.3 The assessment of English language learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

Like other subjects in the tertiary curriculum, the assessment of English Language Learning (ELL) is stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in terms of assessment components and the representation of assessment results. According to the regulations on tertiary education following a learning credit system (MOET, 2007a), the assessment of English language as a theoretical subject consists of recording lesson attendance; assessment of participation in learning activities designed by teachers; and assessment of learning achievement which is carried out
periodically during and at the end of the semester. The result of each type of assessment is represented by a mark on a ten-point scale. The marks, with different weightings, are used to calculate the Grade Point Average (GPA); for example, the end of the term assessment of students’ learning achievement accounts for the largest part of GPA (more than 50 per cent). The GPA, which is firstly calculated using the ten-point scale, is transferred into a five-letter scale. The student’s GPA is used to determine whether the student is allowed to continue with the course of study or must repeat the unit because of poor performance. The GPA in English contributes to determining the student’s Accumulated Grade Point Average (AGPA) of the semester. Thus, the results of the subject English language can contribute to determining if the student is offered a scholarship in the next semester, his/her final grade of tertiary study and the class of degree the student receives at graduation that is Honour or ordinary degree. Given the importance of English language grades, achieving high grades becomes the main goal of most students (Le, 2001). Therefore, although EFL assessment results are made up of different components representing different aspects of students’ ELL, assessment seems to focus on giving a summative judgement of students’ learning and is used primarily for purposes of administration, certification and student selection rather than for the support of learning.

Another way in which assessment of EFL operates summatively is through the HE institutions’ use of standardised language proficiency tests in response to the recent promulgation of regulations on accreditation of educational quality at tertiary level (MOET, 2007c). In attempting to make the objectives of their EFL education program measurable for quality accreditation and to market themselves in an increasingly competitive environment, HE institutions often use international standardised tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to assess students’ English ability before graduating. The results of these tests are also used by organisations to screen and select students for occupational and further educational opportunities. As a result, the teaching materials and other English tests used by the teachers during EFL courses tend to replicate international standardised tests and focus attention on measuring English proficiency.

Problems have been identified with locally-designed EFL tests in Vietnamese HE. Assessment predominantly takes the form of discrete-point English testing (Le,
which is often designed and delivered to students by English teachers at the HE institutions. The tests, however, “do not conform to any common standards” and the results are used mainly for monitoring and grading students (Vu, 2008, p. 4). While the objectives of the EFL programs are to foster students’ capability in their use of English as a means of communication in academic and occupational environments (Government, 2008), English tests are primarily concerned with measuring students’ lexical and grammatical knowledge (Hoang, 2009) with little use of test tasks that resemble real-life language use (Le, 2014b). Thus, there seems to be a lack of consistency in EFL assessment criteria in HE and also a lack of alignment between assessment practices and the objectives of EFL education at tertiary level, which indicates possible threats to the validity of assessment results (Crooks, Kane, & Cohen, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 2009). In order to address this problem, in 2008 the MOET decided to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to revise the planning, teaching, learning and assessment of EFL for the period from 2008 to 2020 (Government, 2008). The adoption of CEFR appears to aim at assisting the design and practice of EFL assessment to shift from a unique concentration on accurate forms, to a broader functional notion of communicative competence as reflected in the ‘Can-do’ statements of the framework (Hall, 2014). The adoption also aims to facilitate the consistent use of EFL assessment standards among HE institutions since graduate students are required to achieve, at a minimum, a B1 level in CEFR (equal to 4.0 to 5.0 IELTS) at graduation.

Despite the newly-issued regulation on the employment of CEFR in EFL assessment in Vietnam, recent research on EFL education at tertiary level has consistently pointed to the negative washback effect of English tests which focus on linguistic competence rather than communicative competence (Hoang, 2009; Le, 2013; Le, 2014a; Mai & Iwashita, 2012). Teachers are reported to ‘teach to the test’ to assist students to obtain high scores, spending a considerable amount of teaching time on test-taking strategies and drilling students on multiple choice grammar items (Le, 2014a). Similarly, students are found to prefer explicit grammar teaching and an emphasis on grammatical accuracy, which is believed to relate to the discrete-point testing methods (Mai & Iwashita, 2012). Students were also reported to “cling to the way the test required” (Le, 2014b, p. 231) and tend to undervalue communicative activities in class (Khoa, 2008).
Limited research has been carried out on existing practices of EFL classroom assessment at Vietnamese universities. Results of a recent study, carried out by Le (2014b) on classroom assessment practices carried out by six mid-career teachers at three universities in Vietnam, via a nine-item questionnaire and a two-hour classroom observation, showed that all the teachers asked questions to check students’ comprehension, and only two out of six teachers organised students to work in pairs/groups, and gave feedback on students’ homework. However, the teachers did not employ such assessment techniques as self- and peer-assessment, portfolios, encouraging students to initiate questions, or organising students to carry out discussions on topics related to the lesson. Although the study was small scale in terms of the amount of the data collected, the findings of the study suggest that little attention is placed on formative assessment in the Vietnamese HE context.

Given insights from assessment practices which are predominantly summative for students’ management, certification, selection and institutional accountability (Stobart, 2008) and assessment reforms in countries internationally (Berry, 2011a), it is unclear whether the recent actions of the MOET to drive the assessment practice of EFL in HE can increase the effectiveness of EFL education as expected, or what can be done to improve existing EFL assessment to better support students’ learning. This study is a response to these concerns, and aims to explore the ways in which assessment practices can facilitate improvements in ELL in the Vietnamese HE context.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to investigate current assessment practices in EFL education at two Vietnamese universities. The objectives are to explore how these assessment practices support the learning of EFL in these universities; to identify the factors facilitating and impeding the potential of assessment for learning, and to identify implications for improving ELL in these two universities.

To achieve these objectives, the overarching question posed by this study is:

What are the current assessment practices in support of the learning of English language at the two Vietnamese universities?

The sub-questions that derive from this main question are:
In what ways and to what extent are students involved in the EFL assessment process?

• In what ways do teachers’ feedback practices align with AfL principles?

• How are EFL assessment data used by teachers and students?

Since the process of assessment itself as well as its educational value are culturally and socially constructed (Gipps, 1999), the study adopts a sociocultural perspective to understand current EFL assessment practices and explore the support they might have for the learning of EFL at the two Vietnamese universities.

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009) and investigates the assessment practices of six EFL teachers in two Vietnamese universities. Qualitative case study methodology is used in order to obtain a detailed and holistic understanding of the current EFL assessment practices within the particular contexts of the two universities. Data were collected via interviews with teachers, with students and with the Executive Officers who are responsible for EFL education and assessment at the universities, observations with audio and video recordings of interactions between teachers and students and among students in the class, and analysis of relevant written documents and other relevant artefacts. Data were thematically analysed at two levels: within each university and across the two universities to explore the support of assessment for ELL.

Taking into consideration the current situation of the HE system, with a large proportion taken up by the public sector and the rapid development of non-public sector, the research sites were selected to include one public and one non-public university to investigate the influences of institutional contexts on EFL assessment practices. The participating teachers were also purposefully selected to involve both early career and mid-career teachers who delivered EFL courses with differing teaching and learning conditions, such as teaching time, class size and students’ levels of English language proficiency. The aim was to identify key factors influencing EFL assessment practices, revealing the connections among the factors and their influences on the potential of assessment for ELL. Details of the research design are presented in Chapter 3.
1.5 **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of this study relates to the topic, the methodology and the potential implications of the findings. Firstly, the potential of assessment for learning has become an important topic in the educational domain in general (Broadfoot, 2007; DeLuca, Luu, Sun, & Klinger, 2012; Torrance, 1996), and in the field of EFL education in particular. It has now been recognised that AfL is practised differently in different educational contexts (Berry & Adamson, 2011; Carless, 2011). With the foremost objective to improve the quality and efficiency of EFL education to serve and facilitate the country’s programs in relation to industrialisation, modernisation, and global integration (Government, 2008), it is necessary to identify and develop the potential of assessment for ELL in HE. Moreover, while there is a body of experimental research on implementing certain forms of AfL of EFL in HE for the purposes of promoting English Language learning (Baturay & Daloglu, 2010; Bayram, 2006; Huang, 2011; Lo, 2010; Matsuno, 2009; Nezakatgoo, 2011), there have been very few studies exploring current assessment practices within the sociocultural conditions that characterise Vietnamese HE.

Secondly, the research adopts qualitative case study methodology to explore the current assessment practices of EFL in two Vietnamese universities. Given the fact that there have been a few studies on EFL assessment practices and most of those studies used survey questionnaires (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004; Inbar-Lorie & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2009) or interviews (Cumming, 2001; Xue & Liu, 2009) as the only method of data collection, the adoption of a qualitative case study design using observations, interviews and document analysis is of great significance in terms of research methodology. Qualitative case study methodology allows the researcher to conduct in-depth exploration, from multiple perspectives, of the complexity and uniqueness of the assessment practices in real-life contexts (Simons, 2009). More importantly, the investigation of two cases, according to Yin (2003) allows comparative analysis, enabling further discussion of the support that current assessment practices gives to ELL in the context of Vietnamese HE. Thus, the findings of this study on current EFL assessment practices and their potential for the learning of EFL should contribute to improving the quality of EFL education in the two universities.
The findings of this study have important implications for research on AfL and practice of EFL education. First, the study contributes to new understandings about the potential of assessment to support the learning of EFL in general. Second, the findings have implications for policy and practice of English language teaching, learning and assessment in these two Vietnamese universities. The findings also have implications for other universities and other levels of EFL education in Vietnam, as well as in other countries with similar educational contexts.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This document consists of seven chapters. The present chapter, Chapter 1: Introduction, provides the rationale for this study, contextualises the proposed research, states the objectives to be achieved, describes the research design, and discusses the significance of the study. Chapter 2: Literature Review first presents the theoretical framework, which informs the layout of the literature review and the research design. Then a critical review and synthesis of relevant literature sketches the researcher’s understandings of assessment, its potential for learning, and the ways that this potential is enacted in practice. The core cultural values and the assessment context which influence the teaching, learning and assessment of EFL in Vietnamese higher education are presented, followed by a discussion of the tensions and challenges to carrying out assessment for learning in Vietnamese HE. It is within these tensions that the need for the research study is identified. Chapter 3: Research Design begins with the sociocultural perspectives that inform the adoption of the research design. This is followed by a theorisation of the qualitative case study design including considerations of case boundaries and the participants to be involved. Specific methods will be explained as will the tools for generating data, and aspects of validity and reliability. The chapter will also detail methods of analysis and the ethical clearance process of the study. Chapters 4 and 5 document the results of the two case studies. Assessment practices carried out by the participating teachers and their students at the two universities are analysed to explore the potential support of assessment for English language and factors influencing the enactment of AfL in the universities. Chapter 6 makes comparative analysis across the two single cases and discusses the research results in relation to the research questions. The concluding Chapter 7 draws on the findings of previous
analysis and discussion to elaborate upon the implications for policy and practice of EFL education in the Vietnamese HE context, and for research on AfL.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on sociocultural perspectives on second language assessment, and teaching and learning. It begins with the theoretical framework (Section 2.1), which introduces the sociocultural perspective adopted to examine the research problem. Section 2.2 presents the origin, development and practice of Assessment for Learning (AfL). Section 2.3 contextualises the research focus in its particular learning culture and assessment context in Vietnam. Section 2.4 presents the tensions and challenges to the development of AfL of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Higher Education (HE) in Vietnam, identifying the gap in the literature review that this study aims to bridge. Lastly, Section 2.5 summarises the literature review.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A sociocultural perspective is employed as the theoretical framework for this study. Sociocultural understandings that link the mind and learning with social conditions are based largely on the insights of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), later developed and expanded upon by theorists such as Lave and Wenger (1991), Wertsch (1991), Rogoff (1995, 2003), Bruner (1996), and Wenger (1998). The central concept of sociocultural theories is the dialectic relationship between human social activity and mental activity (Lantolf, 2000) in which social activity acts as the driving force and prerequisite to mental activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1991; Wertsch, Rio, & Alvarez, 1995a). Fundamental propositions of sociocultural theories which set the theoretical ground for this study include learning as a mediated process and learning as a situated social activity (Lantolf, 2000, 2007). These propositions will now be explicated with their implications for this study.

2.1.1 Learning is a mediated process

From a sociocultural perspective, learning takes place as a result of an individual’s participation in particular communities of practice which are situated in specific cultural and social contexts (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991). During the participating process, the individual interacts with other community members and uses physical tools (such as books, computers) and symbolic tools
(such as language and number) (Lantolf, 2000). It is through these interactions and experiences that the individual gradually internalises the purposes of those activities and the means by which they are achieved (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). The internalisation, as a result, changes the way the individual participates in the activities, making it socially and culturally appropriate (James, 2006; Rogoff, 2003; Wells, 1999). Thus, learning is mediated first by others (through inter-mental processes) and then by the individual him/herself (through intra-mental processes). Although the individual is the agent or the active constructor of his/her own learning, it is the ‘others’ who create opportunities for him/her to learn and develop. In the formal context of HE ‘others’ can be the teacher or peer students.

The role of ‘others’ in the individual’s learning is particularly highlighted in Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the distance or the cognitive gap between what someone can do alone and what they can do in collaboration with a more competent other (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), it is “only when the child is interacting with people in his [or her] environment and in cooperation with his [or her] peers” that “a variety of internal developmental processes are able to operate” (p. 90 – added words are italicised) and “once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement” (p. 90). Thus, the ZPD is “an attribute of each learning event and not an attribute of the child” (Corden, 2000, p. 8). An essential feature of learning is that it creates a new ZPD and the size of the ZPD created depends largely on the quality of the interaction with others (Corden, 2000).

In formal education, the teacher’s instruction plays an important role in determining the quality of a student’s interaction with others. The term instruction is used here in regard to the design and execution of the learning activities by the teacher (Lantolf, 2000). From a sociocultural perspective, to be effective, instruction must be in advance of a student’s development and be oriented toward what they are not yet able to do (Gibbons, 2003; Lantolf, 2000, 2007; Wells, 1999). As such, instruction can be interpreted as scaffolding or “relevant and timely” assistance (Wood, 1988, p. 80) given to a student to trigger his/her potential development. Like scaffolding around a building site, the assistance is gradually removed as the student demonstrates increased competence and finally independence (Corden, 2000). For example, when designing language lessons, the teacher can structure and organise
students’ language learning activities from controlled to free language practice. In the controlled practice, students are required to follow detailed instruction to carry out conversation in the target language with their partners. In this free-practice stage, the students make their own choices of what to talk about with their partners and make language choices to accomplish their communicative goals. The nature of the task set by the teacher will ensure that the particular target language is used during the interaction. Thus, the teacher scaffolds students towards becoming independent users of language and hands over learning responsibility to the students themselves. The students decide what to ask the teacher or peers to help them convey their ideas in the target language (Corden, 2000).

At the micro level, scaffolded assistance, as specified by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), can serve the following functions:

- recruiting interest in or focusing attention to the task
- simplifying the task to match with learners’ levels
- maintain the pursuit of the learning objectives
- highlighting critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the expected performances
- controlling emotional overreaction during problem solving
- demonstrating or modelling the expected learning outcomes.

An example of micro-scaffolding by teachers can be demonstrated via their practice of questioning and responding to students’ responses during the language lesson. By asking questions about a learning issue, a teacher can assist students to focus on the learning issue. The teacher can also adjust the questions to facilitate students’ comprehension of the questions and encourage their involvement in responding to the questions to demonstrate their current understanding. By recasting students’ responses or giving corrective feedback on students’ answers, the teacher can also inform the students about the critical features of their language performances, and highlight the distance between their performances and the expected outcomes.

Scaffolded assistance can also be rendered in students’ dialogic interactions with peers while they are collaborating to complete shared language learning tasks (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Myles & Mitchell, 2014; Wells, 1999). While participating in the pair or group discussion on phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic
aspects of the language performance, students generate and assess alternatives, correct each other’s language errors, and also use the first language as a tool to mediate their interactions (Myles & Mitchell, 2014). Such discussion with peers assists the less competent student to become aware of specific aspects of the language performance, demonstrate their understanding and seek help from his/her more competent peers to develop their learning further.

The development as a result of scaffolded assistance, as pointed out by Lantolf and Thorne (2007), can be observed at two distinct levels. First is at the level of overt independent performance where students demonstrate their internalisation of the knowledge co-constructed with the teacher or peers. For example, development occurs if a student can recall or use some of the words or grammar points which were discussed previously. Second is at the level of mediated interactions via the frequency and quality of assistance needed by the student in order to perform appropriately in the target language. For example, development takes place if on one occasion a student needs an explicit and detailed explanation or demonstration to produce a specific feature of the target language, whereas on a later occasion he/she may need only an implicit reminder to produce the feature.

The concept of mediated learning involving a student’s agency and ZPD has important implications for this study. The concept of ZPD and the related pedagogical construct of scaffolding indicate that in order to facilitate a student’s learning, the teacher and the peers need to gain knowledge of the student’s understanding (Murphy, 2008). It is based on this understanding that the design of instruction or mediation can appropriately be used to promote learning (Black, 2010). As such, assessment needs to be integrated in teaching and learning and in the interactions between teachers and students and among students in the class (Lantolf, 2007). Specifically, assessment needs to yield sufficient information about students’ learning which includes “what students know, how they know it and how they feel about that aspect of their experience” (Murphy, 2008, p. 31). In order to scaffold students’ learning, the design of learning activities in the class needs to be informed or guided by the information gained, in part, from assessment. Students also need to participate in the designated learning activities to demonstrate their existing understanding and to collaborate with their teacher and peers to develop it further.
With the aim of exploring the support of current assessment practices to students’ ELL, this study examines how assessment can be integrated into the teaching and learning cycle to provide opportunities for the teacher to find out what the students actually know. This raises questions about how learning objectives, teaching and assessment are aligned and how the assessment results are used in the teaching and learning of English. It also examines how student activities are facilitated to involve students in the assessment process.

The concept of mediated learning implies that a student’s interactions with others in the class and the nature of the interactions play a crucial role in initiating, scaffolding and fostering students’ EFL development. Therefore, this study investigates the helpfulness of the spoken and written communication among students, and between students and the teacher in explicating students’ understanding and promoting their ELL. Particular attention is paid to what feedback the students receive from their teacher and peers and how helpful it is in facilitating the students’ progress to achieve their objectives of using English for communicative and professional purposes.

The concept of a student’s ‘agency’ reveals that students individually construct meaning out of the learning opportunities offered (Moore, 2003; Murphy, 2008). Thus, they need to develop “conscious mastery” over their own learning (Black, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wiliam, 2011). The potential support of assessment can be found in the opportunity that assessment practices create to engage students’ attention and to enable them to reflect, express, exchange and validate their own understandings (Black, 2013; Murphy, 2008) to become “active learners” who can control their own learning (Brookhart, 2011; William & Thompson, 2008). Therefore, the transparency of the learning objectives and the assessment criteria, and the students’ involvement in assessment, including selecting assessment content and mode, demonstrating their own understanding and executing self- and peer-assessment, are also taken into consideration in this study.

The concept of mediated learning closely aligns with the concept of situated learning which highlights the important role that the sociocultural and historical context plays in understanding learning. In the following section, the concept of situated learning will be elaborated.
2.1.2 Learning is a situated social activity

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is situated, social and interactive in nature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1991) and is derived from an individual’s interactions in social activities (Lantolf, 2000, 2007; Rogoff, 1995) which take place in a particular sociocultural context. The interactions are not limited to those between participants. More importantly, these interactions include those between learners and the social cultural context of learning, and historically held ideology and cultural values about learning (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). The interactions not only change the learners but also “contribute to changes in the sociocultural communities across generations” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 37). Thus, learning “must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural-historical context” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50).

Moreover, from a sociocultural perspective, learning is seen as more than just accumulation of skills and knowledge (Cummins & Davison, 2007). It involves the construction and negotiation of identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which then shapes the individual’s decisions and behaviours in participating in present and future activities (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). That is, since identity is constructed and negotiable rather than a fixed sense of belonging within a social community, an individual is seen as actively making choices to construct and/or preserve his/her identity. The outcome of learning, thus, is the individual’s participation in a community of practice in ways that (s)he personally considers as socially appropriate (Wells, 1999). In this study, the primary emphasis relates to students’ participation in classroom activities and their interactions with their teacher and peers in the context of ELL.

The concept of social learning carries significant implications for this study. Since assessment results and the ways the results are used profoundly influence the construction and negotiation of students’ identity (ARG, 2002b; Butler, 1988; Newton, 2007; Stobart, 2008), this study explores how assessment practices can facilitate the students moving from legitimate peripheral participation to more central participation as a type of apprenticeship in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Specifically, the study examines closely the teachers’ oral and written feedback, their sharing of learning objectives and assessment criteria, their practices of involving students in the learning and assessment process, and the
classroom environment, since these factors largely affect how students define their role as a learner and act accordingly (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Dornyei, 2007; Gibbons, 2007; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Willis, 2011).

This study foregrounds the important role that the sociocultural context plays in understanding learning and pays close attention to the social and cultural contexts of Vietnamese HE, where the HE reform and the promotion of EFL education involves changing students’ and teachers’ expectations and practices. The sociocultural factors impacting on assessment and the teaching and learning of EFL are discussed in detail in Sections 1.2 and 2.3. They include: HE reform in Vietnam; the development of English as an international language; the government’s determination to develop students’ English language proficiency; the history of teaching and learning of EFL at tertiary level; teachers’ pedagogical effectiveness; the wide range in students’ English levels; cultural values; and the dominant testing culture in HE in Vietnam. These factors are examined to gain a deeper understanding of current EFL assessment practices. This understanding enhances the improvement of EFL and the development of assessment for English language learning in the Vietnamese HE context.

2.1.3 Reasons for selecting a sociocultural perspective

Sociocultural theories are chosen as the conceptual framework for this study for the following reasons. First, despite an increased interest in sociocultural theory worldwide, few studies from a sociocultural perspective have been conducted on EFL assessment practices in Vietnamese universities. The employment of a sociocultural perspective to investigate EFL assessment practices is important to provide further insight and explanation of the context of EFL education in Vietnam and its impact on the support of assessment for ELL. Secondly, the sociocultural perspective allows the researcher to integrate analyses at different levels “from macro levels of culture to the micro levels of social interaction and individual thinking and speech” (Panofsky, 2003, p. 19). The study not only examines students’ interactions with their teacher and peers in the classroom context to explore how these interactions support ELL, but also investigates the impacts of the institutional and sociocultural context on the interactions and their support for ELL. Finally, with the emphasis on the importance of the sociocultural context in learning and knowledge construction (Gipps, 1999; Kaufman, 2004; Moore, 2003), the researcher
can generate a comprehensive picture of current EFL assessment and learning practices in the Vietnamese HE context, which will contribute to improve the effectiveness of EFL education.

2.2 ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Assessment for Learning (AfL) refers to assessment for the purpose of promoting learning, as opposed to assessment for other purposes such as recording and reporting students’ learning outcomes. It has recently been acknowledged that assessment has a great potential to increase students’ learning (Black, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). However, the educational values of assessment do not seem to be well understood and fully-exploited in many educational contexts (Berry & Adamson, 2011; Broadfoot, 2009). This section will explicate the potential of assessment for learning by presenting the origin of AfL; the definition of AfL; the distinctions and relationship between assessment for learning and assessment of learning, and the main areas of practice of AfL.

2.2.1 Origin of Assessment for Learning

Assessment for Learning (AfL) derives from the effort to improve students’ learning achievement. The idea of AfL originates from early experiments in the individualisation of learning through the work of Bloom (1984). The most influential research which resulted in an increasing interest in AfL is the meta-analysis carried out by Black and Wiliam (1998a). These researchers indicated in a review of their work that with effective use of feedback, assessment could raise standards of students’ performance in learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). Together with such convincing evidence, suggestions of how to improve the assessment practices to enhance students’ learning were also provided by these authors. Those included paying greater attention to students’ self-esteem, promoting self-assessment, and integrating assessment into teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). Although the research and its findings have been critiqued by Bennett (2011), the ideas and suggested practices of AfL have been widely welcomed and implemented (Berry, 2011a; OECD, 2005; Taras, 2008). The reasons for such strong support for AfL include the recent development in learning theories which view an individual’s intellect not as a fixed entity but a developing ability which is modifiable by education (Gordon, 2008), the strong demand to improve educational quality to assist national socioeconomic development (Dochy & McDowell, 1997), and the
increasing recognition of the limitations of current assessment practices in reflecting and supporting desired learning (ARG, 2002b; Au, 2007; Cheng, 2005; Hamp-Lyons, 2007). However, it has been acknowledged that problems can occur when ideas are transferred from one context to another, due to sociocultural factors (Holliday, 1994; Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005b; Pham & Gillies, 2010) and AfL is no exception (Carless, 2011; Pham & Renshaw, 2014). From a sociocultural perspective, both assessment and learning are social activities which are culturally constructed and located (Gipps, 1999). Therefore, the way learning is supported by assessment varies according to the different sociocultural contexts in which it takes place. The following section will discuss these issues in relation to AfL.

**Assessment for Learning and Formative Assessment**

*Assessment for learning* is often referred to as *formative assessment*. The term “formative” has been traced by Stiggins (2005) to the writing of Scriven (1967) with reference to curriculum improvement. It is also related to the work of Bloom (1969) about the improvement of teaching. The popularity of the term grew after it was used in the review of Black and Wiliam (1998a). Formative assessment was defined by Black & Wiliam (1998b, p. 140) as follows:

> We use the general term assessment to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers - and by their students in assessing themselves - that provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs.

However, the term “formative assessment” was open to different interpretations that it does not reflect the “genuinely formative use” of assessment (Harlen & James, 1997, p. 366). The term was often misunderstood as “assessment [which] is carried out frequently and is planned at the same time as teaching” (Broadfoot et al., 1999, p. 7), with little emphasis on involving students in the assessment process or on using assessment results to promote learning. Therefore, the term “assessment for learning” was adopted to foreground the purpose of assessment to support learning (Harlen, 2006; Stiggins, 2005; Wiliam, 2011). However, the replacement of the term did not mean that the ideals of assessment for learning were consistently understood. The two terms, in fact, continued to be used interchangeably (Black, 2010; Newton, 2007; Wiliam, 2011; William & Thompson, 2008). In this study, the two terms are also used interchangeably, but the term
assessment for learning is predominantly employed to indicate the main focus on exploring the support of assessment for ELL in the particular context of Vietnamese HE. The meaning of the term will now be discussed.

2.2.2 Definition of Assessment for Learning

The earliest use of the term ‘Assessment for Learning’ dates back to the 1980s (Wiliam, 2011). However, in 2002 the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) coined the first definition of AfL that emphasised the purpose of facilitating learning:

“Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (ARG, 2002a, p. 2). Ten principles of assessment for learning were also provided to support the definition. These principles state that AfL:

1. is part of effective planning
2. focuses on how students learn
3. is central to classroom practice
4. is a key to professional skill
5. is sensitive and constructive
6. fosters motivation
7. promotes understanding of goals and criteria
8. helps learners know how to improve
9. develops the capacity for self-assessment
10. recognises all educational achievement.

(ARG, 2002a, p. 2)

However, under the influences and conditions of different socio-political or sociocultural contexts (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), assessment for learning has been interpreted differently by different people. In some cases these interpretations do not reflect the potential of assessment to facilitate learning (Klenowski, 2009; Sadler, 2007; Stiggins, 2005). For example, it is sometimes understood as demanding teachers to “test their students frequently to assess the levels they attain on prescribed national scales in order to fix their failings and target the next level” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 263). In some contexts, it has been interpreted as requiring “meticulous specification of goals and assessment criteria” (Sadler,
2007, p. 387) such that the teaching becomes focused on criteria compliance. In such scenarios, AfL has been narrowly understood as “summative tests used in formative ways” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 327). Or as Torrance suggests “assessment as learning” (Torrance, 2007, p. 281) where students’ learning becomes more dependent on their teachers and assessors with the primary learning goal of passing a test or raising test scores, rather than “real and sustained learning” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 263).

To enable a shared understanding of assessment for learning, the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning in 2009 adopted the following definition which has been cited by Klenowski:

Assessment for learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning.

(Klenowski, 2009, p. 264)

This second-generation definition of AfL, which was a development of the earlier Assessment Reform Group definition, highlighted that AfL is integral to effective teaching and learning. This definition brings to the fore that it is not only teachers but also students who are involved in assessment. The practices of assessment involve not only formal tests but also other methods to collect evidence of students’ learning, and to not only target the improvement of students’ test performances but also to facilitate their lifelong learning. Three kinds of action are involved in AfL: (1) collecting evidence of a student’s learning; (2) interpreting the evidence to find out the next action for the student to take, and (3) assisting the student to carry out the action to progress to the next development stage. However, these actions are carried out not only by the teachers but more importantly by the students themselves with the assistance of their teacher and their peers. That is, “students play the central role in communicating evidence of their learning to one another and to their teachers” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 237). As a result of their communication, they can find out what to do to progress towards the expected goals (Black, 2013; Brookhart, 2011). Thus, through their collaboration and engagement in the learning and/or assessing processes - which can include using assessment criteria and standards, the analysis of the qualities in the work samples, and the teacher’s and peers’ feedback to reflect on their own learning to improve it - students can take control of their own learning. The achievement they get from their effort to learn can motivate them to continue trying to achieve more (Stiggins, 2005; Willis, 2011). The resulting promotion of students’
learning skills and learning autonomy can foster their lifelong learning ability (Black, McCormick, James, & Pedder, 2006; Crooks, 1988), which also leads to improvement in students’ performance (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004).

2.2.3 Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning

The differences and the relationship between Assessment for Learning (or formative assessment) and Assessment of Learning (or summative assessment) relate to their purposes and their uses (Newton, 2007). In terms of the relationship between Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL), it has been found that in Asian educational contexts where AoL predominates (Berry, 2011b; Kennedy, Chan, Fok, & Yu, 2008) it can fulfil a formative function (Deng & Carless, 2010; Harlen & James, 1997; Newton, 2007; Taras, 2008). The following section will present the distinction between the two terms and will then discuss the relationship between them.

2.2.3.1 Differences between assessment for learning and assessment of learning

The distinctions between AfL and AoL or between formative assessment and summative assessment originally related to the time (during the process or at the end) and function (to develop learning or to judge one’s learning) aspects of assessment (Scriven, 1967). Summative assessment was defined as “used at the end of a term, course, or program for purposes of grading, certification, evaluation of progress, or research on the effectiveness of a curriculum, course of study, or educational plan”, whereas formative assessment was defined as “evaluation in the process of curriculum construction, teaching and learning for the purpose of improving any of these processes” (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971, p. 117).

Since the 1990s, the distinctions between formative and summative assessment have been primarily concerned with the use of assessment information (Newton, 2007). Wiliam and Black (1996) distinguished between formative and summative functions of assessment by considering their meanings and consequences. Formative assessment prioritises “construct-referenced interpretations” or the inference of assessment evidence to identify the gap between students’ actual and desired levels of performance and to suggest actions to be undertaken to close the gap (Wiliam & Black, 1996, p. 537). Meanwhile, summative assessment prioritises “consistency of
meanings” of assessment results across contexts and individuals for the purpose of grading, certification, evaluation of learning progress or effectiveness of a curriculum (Wiliam & Black, 1996, p. 537) as well as “accountability to the public” (Black, 1997, p. 35). The differences are explicitly stated by Harlen (2006, p. 109) that “what lies at the heart of the distinction between formative and summative assessment is not the timing and frequency, but the use of evidence, who uses it, how and for what purposes”.

The differences in the formative and summative use of assessment data imply that they are different forms or types of assessment. The intended use of assessment information affects the decision about not only “what and how to collect evidence” but also “how to interpret it and how to communicate it to intended users” (Harlen, 2005, p. 207). Some authors including Goldstein (1993), Teasdale and Leung (2000), and Pellegrino et al. (2001) tend to regard the two assessment functions as a dichotomy that cannot be reconciled. For example Teasdale and Leung (2000) consider formative and summative assessment as “incommensurate discourse” conflicting at every facet: theoretical underpinnings, purposes, approaches and procedures. Thus, they conclude that the assessment data should not be misused or cross-used. While it is undeniable that assessment data should be used in the way for which it was intentionally designed and executed, the reality is “assessment always performs functions other than the ones teachers and examiners normally think about and take account of” (Boud, 2000, p. 160), and teachers and examiners often have no power over how the assessment data will be used. In this thesis, formative assessment and summative assessment are not seen as two distinct types of assessment but as two ways (among many ways) of utilising assessment: formative when assessment is used as a way to promote learning, and summative when it is used as a way to record and report learning (Broadfoot, 2007; Harlen, 2005; Harlen, 2006; Newton, 2007). As such, the differences between summative and formative assessment might be described as a “dimension” or a continuum rather than a “dichotomy” or separation (Harlen, 2006, p. 114).

2.2.3 Relationship between assessment for learning and assessment of learning

The relationship between the two purposes of assessment has been given considerable attention by researchers and practitioners. The concern originated from
the work of Crooks (1988) and Black and Wiliam (1998a) in that there was an over-emphasis on the grading function and an under-emphasis on promoting the learning function of assessment. After the publication of a review carried out by Black and Wiliam (1998a), studies including those by Nyquist (2003); Wiliam, et al. (2004) and Shute (2008) were conducted which confirmed the claim made by Black and Wiliam (1998b) that implementing formative assessment could raise students’ achievement standards. Such findings were later critiqued by Bennett (2011, p. 5) as deriving from “untraceable, flawed, dated or unpublished sources”. This critique raised the need to examine AfL in a range of contexts and led to a growing interest in formative assessment among educational researchers, practitioners and Executive Officers (Berry, 2011a; DeLuca, et al., 2012). Meanwhile, studies on the impact of standardised testing (ARG, 2002b; Au, 2007; Cheng, 2005; Hamp-Lyons, 2007; Solórzano, 2008) tend to establish a negative view of summative assessment in the form of examination due to the negative washback effects it can exert on learning. Thus, while a great deal of attention has been given to implementing formative assessment, there seems to have been a general neglect of implementing summative assessment (Kennedy, et al., 2008).

Since assessment is critically important to education both for reporting and for facilitating learning, the prioritising of one purpose over another has been replaced by the synergy of the two purposes: that is, utilising the same evidence for both purposes, particularly using formative assessment information for summative purposes and that of summative assessment for formative purposes (Bachman, 2010; Biggs, 2007; Carless, 2011; Harlen, 2005; Harlen, 2006; Harlen & James, 1997; Kennedy, et al., 2008; Stobart, 2008; Wiliam, 2001). The potential benefits involve effective judgement about students’ progress and level of attainment; better performance in summative assessments and increased student interest in learning (Harlen, 2006). However, the limitations in the reliability of evidence from formative assessment for summative purposes and the lack of adequate information from summative evidence for formative purposes require additional information to be provided for each purpose. The implication is that teachers need to develop strategies to select and use assessment information to make assessment ‘fit for purpose’ (Gipps, 2012; Harlen, 2006). The influences of the sociocultural context have given rise to
tensions that have been identified in teachers’ efforts to combine the two purposes of assessment (Carless, 2011; Deng & Carless, 2010). These tensions call for more research on the uses of assessment in a range of contexts to understand how AfL can be practised, particularly in an AoL dominant situation as in Vietnam.

2.2.4. Enhancing effective learning through assessment

From Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective, learning arises from an individual’s interactions with others (Lantolf, 2000, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). Thus, in order to promote learning, assessment must provide students with learning opportunities which are social and interactive in nature. In the following section, discussion on how assessment can promote learning will be presented. The section starts with a summary of effective learning principles followed by an explanation of how assessment can be employed to promote learning.

2.2.4.1. Principles of effective learning

An individual’s learning results in changes in his/her cognitive ability and attitude towards learning (Lantolf, 2000, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). Effective learning, as pointed out by Black (2010), is considered in terms of cognitive, affective and motivational aspects. Principles of effective learning in cognitive terms are summarised by Black (2010, p. 360) as:

- Starting from a learner’s existing understanding
- Involving the learner actively in the learning process
- Developing the learner’s understanding of the aims and criteria for effective learning
- Promoting social learning, i.e. learning through discussion.

The affective and motivational aspects of effective learning are demonstrated when students “believe that they can improve by their own effort and are willing to take on new challenges and to learn from failure” (Black, 2010, p. 360). These principles of effective learning are carefully considered in this study to explore the support of current assessment practices for ELL in the Vietnamese HE context.

2.2.4.2. Areas of practice of assessment for learning

In alignment with the principles of effective learning, the practices of AfL have been identified as focusing on the following four areas:
• Questioning
• Feedback
• Peer- and self-assessment
• Formative use of summative tests.

(Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003a; Black & Wiliam, 2012)

These areas will be explained in the following subsections to illustrate the integration of AfL in teaching and learning and the potential of assessment to support ELL. These are the focal areas in this study.

**Questioning**

Since students play an important role in the practice of AfL, questioning practice refers to not only questions that teachers ask students but also to the questions initiated by students to their teacher or peers during lessons. Regarding questioning practice carried out by teachers, it has been realised that closed questions, which aim only at checking knowledge, make a limited contribution to students’ learning (Fisher, 2013). In order to promote learning, questions must probe students’ understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2013) or “elicit from students some significant indicator of their understanding and then enable the teacher or other students to respond by trying to correct or develop that understanding” (Black, 2010, p. 361). Rather than accepting an answer, the teacher needs to focus on what students say to create an opportunity for sustained discussion (Black, et al., 2003a; Heritage, 2013), which helps the teacher to extend their understanding of the students’ learning (Black & Wiliam, 2012).

Together with the task of framing their questions to explore students’ understanding, another important aspect of questioning practice to promote student learning is facilitating students’ participation in responding to teachers’ questions (Heritage, 2013). Increasing the teacher’s ‘wait time’ after asking questions contributes to effective questioning since longer wait time can enable students to think, to discuss with peers and to produce appropriate responses (Fisher, 2013; Harlen, 2007; Rowe, 1974). Besides, a supportive classroom climate, in which students’ responses are encouraged and attended, and the focus on accuracy and the so-called ‘right’ answer is removed, can make students feel confident about expressing their ideas (Black, 2010). In addition, teachers’ practices of distributing
questions around the class to both silent and responsive students, providing supplementary clues when necessary, writing down key questions for further thinking, and pitching questions at appropriate level are also possible strategies to facilitate students’ participation in responding to the questions (Fisher, 2013). The purpose is to involve students in communicating evidence of their own learning (Stiggins, 2005) so that teachers and more capable peers can gain knowledge of their understanding to scaffold their development. Student involvement not only helps gather evidence of learning but also focuses their attention, gets them to think, and restructures their knowledge to build new and more powerful ideas (Black & Wiliam, 2012; Fisher, 2013).

In EFL education, the language used by teachers in their questioning practice in class can also affect the effectiveness of the practice. Research on ELT methodology emphasises the need to maximise students’ exposure to and engagement in meaningful interactions in the target language to facilitate the development of their ability to communicate in English (Ellis, 2005; Littlewood, 2011). As a result, EFL teachers are encouraged to ask questions of students and respond to their responses in English and even to use English as the medium of instruction (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013; Nguyen & Ho, 2012). In EFL classes, teachers’ practice of asking questions in English has the potential to not only help activate or evoke students’ learning schemata, but also model the use of English and enable students to use English to communicate their own ideas. However, as the use of English as the medium of instruction can exert a counterproductive influence on students’ comprehension of teachers’ instruction (Byun, et al., 2011; Chang, 2010; Le, 2012), teachers need to pay careful attention to their use of English in question and/or teaching practice. Since students’ first language play an important role in facilitating comprehension in language lessons (Ghorbani, 2011; Kieu, 2010; Nguyen & Ho, 2012; Storch & Aldosari, 2010), it is necessary for teachers to make judicious use of students’ first language to assure the effectiveness of their questioning practice.

In terms of students’ questions, it has been found that evidence of student learning can be derived from the questions initiated by students (McGrew, 2005; Ohta & Nakaone, 2004). Importantly, student-initiated questions can create
interactional spaces with a high potential for learning to occur since the questions are asked when students are unable to solve a problem themselves (Ohta, 2001). The act of asking questions of the teacher and peers demonstrates the student’s learning agency (Lantolf, 2000) as he/she actively seeks help to promote his/her own learning. Research shows that a teacher’s practice of responding to students’ questions by asking another question is not productive in providing students with the assistance they need (Markee, 1995, 2000). Giving direct answers is more likely to encourage them to ask further questions when they need (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004). In the language classroom, as pointed out by McGrew (2005), students’ questions can provide diagnostic information about their current learning, reflect their learning goals, and demonstrate their language use if their questions are in the target language. To promote learning, it is necessary that such evidence about students’ learning is gathered and used by teachers to inform their teaching. Questioning strategies which have the potential to support ELL are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Questioning strategies to promote ELL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question type</td>
<td>Asking open questions to probe students’ understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’</td>
<td>• Giving sufficient wait time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation</td>
<td>• Creating supportive environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Distributing questions to both silent and responsive students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’</td>
<td>Elaborating on students’ responses to extend understanding of student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responses</td>
<td>learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>• Asking questions and responding in English to maximise students’ exposure to English and to engage them in meaningful interactions in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Making judicious use of students’ first language to facilitate their comprehension of the questions to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’</td>
<td>• Encouraging students to ask questions when they need help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questions</td>
<td>• Using student initiated questions to diagnose students’ learning needs to inform teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment for learning though effective questioning can be practised in daily classroom interactions by teachers and students. However, the employment of questioning strategies to promote students’ ELL might be challenged by the influences of the educational culture of English language education at tertiary level in Vietnam (further discussion on this issue will be presented later in section 2.3.1).
**Feedback**

Formative feedback is defined as “information communicated to the student that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning” (Shute, 2008, p. 154). Specifically, in order to support learning, both oral and written feedback given to students needs to assist students to gain an understanding of their learning goal, interpret their achievement in relation to the learning goal, and undertake the next action to progress towards their learning goal (Black, et al., 2003a; Stiggins, 2005). To have formative power, feedback needs to be combined with a review of prior knowledge and “intertwined” with instruction rather than solely inform students about “correctness” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). In particular, students need to understand the meaning of the feedback given to them and act on the feedback to improve their learning (Havnes, Smith, Dysthe, & Ludvigsen, 2012; Sadler, 2010). Since feedback on students’ work plays an important role in shaping their attitudes to learning (Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010; Stiggins, 2005; Strijbos, Narciss, & Dunnebier, 2010; Wiliam, 2011), comments must be carefully formulated to provide students with ideas, motivation and confidence for improving their work (Black, et al., 2003a). As significant differences are identified between teachers’ and students’ perceptions of feedback and its support for learning, it is suggested that “assessment dialogues” (Carless, 2007) between teachers and students are carried out to reduce misconceptions and help students to understand feedback and use it effectively to promote their learning.

Feedback is regarded as a primary element in formative assessment. The practice has been identified to have the potential to empower students to become self-regulated learners (Carless, 2006). However, research on the implementation of feedback in the HE context points to considerable influences of students’ attitude and ability to decode concepts and criteria used in feedback (Sadler, 2010), teachers’ beliefs and expertise, the nature of the subject and the institutional context (Havnes, et al., 2012) on the practice and its effectiveness. In Vietnam, limited research has been conducted on feedback practice. However, based on the finding of the study carried out by Le (2014b) that four out of six participating EFL teachers did not give feedback on student learning, it is assumed the potential of assessment for learning via feedback practice might not be fully realised in EFL education in the Vietnamese HE context.
Peer- and self-assessment

Self-assessment by students is necessary to develop mastery and responsibility for their own study (Black, 2010; Black, et al., 2003a; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011), which not only increases students’ learning achievement but also promotes their ability to continue learning (Black, et al., 2006; Crooks, 1988; Wiliam, et al., 2004). To do this students have to understand the objectives of the work involved and the criteria by which the work will be assessed. Thus, it requires transparency of learning objectives and teachers’ sharing of assessment criteria (ARG, 2002b; Black & Wiliam, 2012). An analysis of models of practice can help students realise specific learning goals by steering their effort and their work towards these (Sadler, 2010). Learning tasks which involve students assessing one another’s work can develop the students’ skills of applying assessment criteria and checking the attainment of the learning goals (Gielen, et al., 2010). Students are also given opportunities to “see their work through the eyes of their peers” (Black, 2010, p. 362), which gives them useful information for their self-assessment (Gielen, et al., 2010).

Peer-assessment can be used not only as a complement for self-assessment but also as a powerful tool to enhance collaborative learning (Black, 2010; Black, et al., 2003a) which is of great importance in student development (Blatchford, Baines, Rubie-Davies, Bassett, & Chowne, 2006). Due to unique “insights into learning” of peers (Wiliam, 2011, p. 12) and their “equal-status” as classmates (Topping, 2009, p. 21), peer-assessment encourages students’ effort to demonstrate and validate their understanding (Murphy, 2008), and facilitates peer feedback which can confirm, correct or expand on peers’ understanding (Topping, 2009). Such interactions and negotiation among students can facilitate their learning, constructing an understanding together and enhancing the identification, analyses and correction of their earlier errors and misconceptions (Strijbos, et al., 2010; Topping, 2009). In addition, since there are more students than teachers in most classrooms, peer-assessment provides students with plentiful opportunities to interact and receive immediate and individualised feedback on their learning to promote it. To achieve these facilitative effects on learning, peer-assessment needs to be organised and prepared carefully. Specifically, students need to be educated about the benefits of peer-assessment and how to provide constructive feedback (Topping, 2009). The learning objectives and the assessment criteria also need to be made clear (Black,
Moreover, classroom teachers must have the ability and skills to manage class discussions and group work to maintain a supportive classroom climate that drives the students’ discussion towards improvement of learning (Dornyei, 2007).

Limited research has been conducted on the practice of self- and peer-assessment by students in the research context of EFL education in Vietnamese universities. However, as reported by Le (2014b), no EFL teachers in his study conducted practices such as self-assessment, portfolio, or using ‘can-do’ statements. The survey conducted by Pham (2014b) indicates that peer-assessment might not be favoured by Vietnamese students; students did not seriously incorporate peers’ written feedback to revise their essays since they were doubtful about the correctness of the feedback; and students expressed strong disagreement with the scores given by their peers. The lack of information about how peer-assessment was carried out in Pham’s (2014b) study, and the limited observation time, only two hours, in Le’s (2014b) study, might limit the implications of these studies. However, the results suggest limited use of explicit peer- and self-assessment in EFL education in the Vietnamese HE context.

Given the interrelationship between students’ collaborative learning and their practice of peer- and self-assessment (Black, 2010; Black, et al., 2003a; Pham & Gillies, 2010), it is assumed that these forms of assessment can be implicitly carried out while students work in pairs and groups. It is implicit in the sense that self- and peer-assessment can occur while students collaborate to complete the shared tasks, although it is not structured or organised by the teachers or students are not really aware that they are assessing themselves or their peers. Previous research on EFL education in the Vietnamese context has identified that students and teachers value pair and group work activities and the activities are commonly carried out in English language classrooms (Le, 2006; Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2012; Pham & Renshaw, 2014). Thus, pair and group work practices are also carefully examined in this study.

Formative use of summative tests

The increased interest in improving formative assessment does not mean that summative assessment is no longer necessary (Biggs, 2007; Black, 2010; Harlen, 2006; Wiliam, 2001). Instead, to develop the potential of assessment for learning, attention should be paid to utilising summative tests (the most common form of
summative assessment) for formative purposes (Black, 2010; Carless, 2011; Wininger, 2005). Student learning can be enhanced through the use of “formative strategies” to assist students to prepare for summative tests and by using test results as a means of identifying students’ learning needs to inform subsequent teaching and learning (Black, et al., 2003, p 53).

Examples of such formative strategies include informing students of assessment criteria and assisting them to develop marking schemes in line with the criteria (Black, 2010), highlighting areas which need extensive revision (Harlen, 2005), and encouraging students to set questions and mark answers (Foos, Mora, & Tkacz, 1994; King, 1992). Summative evidence can be used for formative purposes, for example, by asking students to self- and peer-analyse their test responses to examine and rework incorrect answers (Carter, 1997; Wininger, 2005), or by teachers’ reviewing test papers to identify a specific group of students for additional coaching or knowledge areas which need further instruction (Carless, 2011). Thus, by sharing assessment criteria, by shifting some of the responsibility for learning and grading to students, and by enabling students to identify the main targets for their work, summative tests can facilitate students’ learning yet still serve the purposes of recording and reporting learning.

In Confucian-Heritage settings, such as in countries of China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam where the tenets of Confucianism are influential, summative tests are widely used in educational assessment (Carless, 2011). Thus, the formative use of summative tests presents great potential for the development of assessment for learning (Kennedy, et al., 2008; Stobart, 2008). However, effective use of summative tests to promote learning requires the tests to be aligned with learning objectives with the analysis and use of test results to adjust teaching and learning. Such issues have not been addressed, from a sociocultural perspective, in the assessment and teaching of English in Vietnam HE (refer to Section 1.2.3 for further discussion of these issues).

In summary, this section has reviewed research on the origin, development and practice of assessment for learning purposes. First, ideas of assessment for learning originated from research on the impact of feedback on classroom learning (Wiliam, 2011). Second, the practice of assessment for learning has faced considerable challenges due to the variety of interpretations of how the ideas can be put into
practice in various socio-political and cultural contexts (Black, et al., 2003a; Klenowski, 2009). Other challenges have been the lack of clarity and understanding about the relationship between the two main purposes of assessment, that is, for learning and of learning (Bennett, 2011; Newton, 2007).

As established in the review of literature above, the focal areas of the practice of assessment for learning have been questioning, feedback through marking, peer- and self-assessment by students, and the formative use of summative tests. However, as illustrated by various studies such as James (2011) in the United Kingdom, Flaitz (2011) in United States of America, and Berry (2011b) in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, it has been established that the practice of assessment for learning is significantly influenced by the educational context in which it takes place. In the following section, the cultural values and assessment context in Vietnam will be presented in order to explore further the potential of assessment for learning in the teaching and learning of EFL in Vietnamese HE.

2.3 EDUCATIONAL CULTURE AND ASSESSMENT CONTEXT IN VIETNAM

The sociocultural context of a country plays an important part in understanding current educational practices and determining the successful adoption of any non-indigenous educational methods (Alabdelwahab, 2002; Pham & Gillies, 2010; Rogoff, 2003; Sutherland, 1996). As AfL was not developed in Vietnam but in a Western context, in order to investigate current assessment practices to explore their potential for ELL, it is necessary to take into careful consideration the sociocultural and educational context of Vietnam. The following sections will elaborate on the main cultural values and the assessment context which can profoundly influence the teaching, learning and assessment of English language in Higher Education in Vietnam.

2.3.1 Vietnamese cultural values

Vietnamese culture has been shaped and influenced by living conditions based on water-rice agriculture and different ideologies including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Communism (Nguyen, 1995; Tran, 2006). The country’s international integration and globalisation has also exerted considerable force on Vietnamese culture (Tran, 2006). The core cultural values which are of great significance for
English language education at universities in Vietnam include respect for harmony, respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher, self-respect or face saving and appreciation of effort (Ashwill & Diep, 2004; Kransch & Sullivan, 1996; Le, 2004; Lewis & McCook, 2002; T. H. Nguyen, 2002; Pham & Fry, 2004; Phan, 2010). The values, their origins and influences on EFL education will be discussed next.

2.3.1.1. Respect for harmony

Vietnamese people always attempt to maintain harmony in their social interactions and relationships with other community members (Pham, 2000). This cultural value originated from the Vietnamese economy - based on water rice agriculture. As this type of economy depends on nature, Vietnamese people have had to cooperate with one another to protect their crops. Moreover, they need to pay special attention to many related factors that may impact their crop yields. Such features of the economy have contributed to Vietnam’s social organisation, leading to community spirit, sensitivity, and flexibility in social interaction (Tran, 2006). In particular, Vietnamese people are fully aware of the fact that they are members of a community and they have the responsibility to preserve harmony in the community even at the cost of their personal feelings (P. M. Nguyen, 2008; Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005a; T. H. Nguyen, 2002).

The respect for harmony is clearly reflected in Vietnam’s ideologies of religion, morality, politics and education. The major religion in Vietnam is Buddhism which encourages people to maintain a congenial atmosphere in the community (Nguyen, 1995; Pham, 2000). Such sayings as “One time self-denial means nine times goodness” (*Mot dieu nhin la chin dieu lanh*), “God will get to know all of your behaviours” (*Troï phat co mat*), “good people will be well-treated by others” (*O hien gap lanh*) are frequently used by Vietnamese people to advise and encourage others to make sacrifices for the sake of group or community harmony (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2006). In addition, Vietnam’s political ideology of Communism calls for national unity and a collectivist spirit (Doan, 2005; Nguyen, 2004) which stresses the importance of the group over individual needs (Dore, 1997b; Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede, et al., 2010). With such a collectivist spirit, “learning is often seen as onetime process, reserved for young people, who have to learn how to do things to participate in society” (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 119) and the purpose of an individual’s learning is to maximise his/her contribution to the
prosperity of the society (Dore, 1997b; Nguyen, 2004), which is contrary to the more individualistic focus in Western nations. Vietnamese Education Law (1998, 2005) stipulates that the aim of Vietnam’s education is to train the citizen to be “a patriot who knows how to live and work for the harmony and benefit of the community” (Doan, 2005, p. 455).

Vietnamese respect for harmony has positive effects on students’ learning of English language in HE. The English class is considered a “family” where students “build on each other’s responses” in “collaborative ways” (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996, p. 203). Students are expected to learn from their peers since it is traditionally believed that “it is easier to learn from friends than from teachers” (*hoc thay khong tay hoc ban*) (Vietnamese proverb). Moreover, students often have a strong relationship with their classmates and “the assumption of life-long relationships and obligations brings with it an expectation of cooperation and coordination in class” (Sullivan, 1996, p. 34). Students also seem to have a high preference for group learning (Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, et al., 2012; Park, 2000; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) which enhances collaborative learning among students. Thus, in order to develop the potential of assessment for learning, students’ collaborative learning should be fully exploited to encourage students to validate their own understanding and learn from one another (T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009).

Students’ respect for harmony sometimes negatively influences their learning of English (Dang, 2006a; P. M. Nguyen, 2008). Students are hesitant to initiate personal comments on others’ performance and, when they do, they monitor themselves carefully so as not to trigger conflict within the group (Nguyen, et al., 2005a; Nguyen, et al., 2006). Due to this attitude students tend to avoid challenging or confronting one another and try to adhere to others’ comments by hiding their real opinions (T. H. Nguyen, 2002). Students also tend to group with those who have the same background, interest or level of English proficiency (Dang, 2006a), and the competition and comparison among those groups sometimes results in students showing hostile attitudes towards other groups (P. M. Nguyen, 2008). Such avoidance behaviours and hostile attitudes may hinder students from giving constructive feedback to their peers. In addition, when students of different English levels are required to work together, most of the work tends to be done by the best students in the group (Nguyen, et al., 2005b). Those students with lower English
proficiency may reduce their contribution to the group work to a minimum, believing that would be better for the outcome of the group work. From a sociocultural perspective, students’ minimum participation in social interactions in pair and group work activities limits their opportunities to learn and to develop.

With regard to assessment for learning, Vietnamese students’ cultural respect for harmony may have a potential to support learning through the implementation of collaborative learning, peer- and self-assessment in pair and group settings. However, in order to exploit the potential, classroom teachers need to prepare students for pair and group work activities, direct student discussion towards the goal of improving their own and peers’ performances, and arrange pairs and groups to ensure and maximise individual students’ learning opportunities.

2.3.1.2. Respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher

Respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher is one of the core values in Vietnamese culture. This respect originally came from the Vietnamese traditional veneration of learning (Pham & Fry, 2004; Tran, 2006). The tradition was developed further by the Chinese ideology of Confucianism which pays great respect to the teacher and knowledge (Hofstede, et al., 2010) and which was a legacy of the Chinese rule of Vietnam for nearly a thousand years (Nguyen, 1995; Pham & Fry, 2004; Tran, 2006; Woodside, 1988). The Confucian ideal also emphasises memorisation, encourages little self-reflection, separates academic study from reality and aims at achieving social stability through observance of a rigid system of hierarchy (Doan, 2005; Hofstede, et al., 2010; Lewis & McCook, 2002; McCook, 1998; Nguyen, 1995). As a result, curricular content for schools consists of academic knowledge, which can be quite reproductive and uncritical, and social knowledge which demonstrates social orders and behaviour standards. The teacher is seen as having responsibility to guide the students not only in academic matters but also in moral behaviour (Doan, 2005; Jamieson, 1993; Nguyen, 1989).

Respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher has been strongly reinforced by Vietnamese government policies. After achieving independence from French invasion, Vietnam’s newly established government started the campaign to eradicate illiteracy, considering people’s lack of formal knowledge as one kind of enemy (Dang, 2005; Pham, 1995). Articles 10 and 12 in Education Law (1998, 2005) stipulate that “learning is the right and obligation of every citizen” and “to develop
education and to build a learning society are the responsibilities of the State and of the whole population”. The decision on professional conduct for teaching staff issued by MOET (2008) also stipulates that “teaching is a noble career which is socially respected and honoured”. This cultural value is overwhelmingly dominant in Vietnamese society.

Vietnamese respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher is well reflected in many aspects of life. Vietnamese parents all around the country tend to try their best to create favourable conditions for their children to study and further their learning. The common belief of collectivist cultures (Carless, 2011; Hofstede, et al., 2010) is that their child’s knowledge and learning will help him/her gain success and social status, which benefits not only the child but also the family and community (Nguyen, 1974; Nguyen, 2004). Furthermore, it is believed that an educated person understands moral principles and lives accordingly. With such beliefs, teachers are highly respected not only by students but also by their parents and the whole society (Nguyen, et al., 2005b). They are regarded as students’ knowledge providers and behaviour educators. As often seen in collectivist culture (Hofstede, et al., 2010), teachers are also expected to play a determining and significant role in their students’ achievement. There are such proverbs as “without a teacher, you cannot have any success” (khong thay do may lam nen) and “a teacher can treat your stupidity and a skilful workman can deal with your clumsiness” (dot kia thi phai cay thay, vung kia cay tho thi may lam nen). The annual celebration of Vietnamese Teachers’ Day on November 20th, together with these proverbs, illustrates the common belief in Vietnamese society regarding the contribution of teachers to individuals’ success and national prosperity.

Vietnamese respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher greatly influences the practices of English education at universities. English learning is generally understood as a process of accumulating knowledge of the English language (Hoang, 2009; Le, 2014a). English language teaching is largely course book-based and teacher-centred (Le, 2013; T. H. Nguyen, 2002; Sullivan, 2000). The teacher is regarded as an authority of knowledge, whose job is to impart or transmit their knowledge to students (Le, 2001; Lewis & McCook, 2002; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009; Tran & Williamson, 2009). Students seem to be passive in learning, relying on the teacher for both their learning motivation and content
Students seem to focus on learning and memorising English vocabulary and grammatical structures (T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) rather than developing their ability to express their own ideas in English. Moreover, there is a ‘large’ power distance between the teacher and the student in the classroom, often seen in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 67). Students normally are not expected to interrupt the teacher, challenge, confront or even ask for clarification (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; T. H. Nguyen, 2002; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002). Teachers often make plans and take absolute control over all learning activities carried out in the lesson. Normally there are one way conversations between the teacher and individual students or between the teacher and the whole class in which the initiative is held by the teacher (Le, 2001; T. H. Nguyen, 2002). Thus, teachers do not feel comfortable ceding control of learning activities to students (T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009). Meanwhile, students may not feel comfortable with conveying their own understanding and explicating the kind of help they need in learning.

The above culture-rooted features of the English language classroom may limit the potential of assessment for learning via the practice of teachers’ feedback. This is because Vietnamese HE students are not likely to initiate questions of their teachers to fully understand their feedback or to validate their own learning. Therefore, the teacher may not have opportunities to understand the students well enough for effective teaching or to give constructive feedback. Students’ overreliance on their teacher also may discourage students from carrying out self- and peer- assessment. Thus, the potential of assessment for learning of EFL is heavily dependent upon classroom teachers. Through their design of classroom activities, their questioning and feedback practices, teachers need to encourage students’ involvement in their own learning and/or assessment of English language to improve their learning and help them become aware of their expected roles as active learners.

2.3.1.3. Face saving

Vietnamese people are greatly concerned about issues of ‘face’. Face refers to “the positive image, interpretation, or social attributes that one claims for oneself or perceives others to have accorded one” (Yeh & Huang, 1996, p. 651). Like many other Asian people, Vietnamese are likely to try their best to fulfil the expectations of self and the perceived expectations that others have for them, otherwise they lose
face (Ashwill & Diep, 2004; T. H. Nguyen, 2002). Due to the collectivist spirit, losing face affects not only the person but also his/her family and community (Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede, et al., 2010). There is an expression in Vietnamese that “better to die than to lose face” (tha chet chu khong chiu de mat mat). In fact, face saving is regarded as a way of maintaining self-respect and harmony in interpersonal relations (Ashwill & Diep, 2004). People are careful in selecting what to say and to do, to protect their image and avoid hurting others’ feelings.

The effects of the cultural value of face-saving can be identified in the way students learn English language at universities. Students are unwilling to give their opinion in class if it is not the same as their peers (Bock, 2000; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002). Even when some students know the answer to the teacher’s question, they are reluctant to articulate it because they may be mocked by their friends because of being too active in the class (Dang, 2006a). Also, they often try to perform learning tasks ‘flawlessly’ and feel uncomfortable receiving negative feedback in public (Ashwill & Diep, 2004, p. 120). Moreover, they seem to lose their interest in learning when they receive a low mark in an exam or when they are left behind by their classmates since it is considered a face-losing misfortune (Le, 2001; Phan, 2010; Tran & Baldauf Jr, 2007).

In relation to the practice of assessment for learning, students’ face saving concerns and their impact on EFL learning require teachers to be careful when questioning students, giving feedback and organising students’ self- and peer-assessment. Opportunities such as discussing with peers and presenting a group response can encourage students’ effort in answering the teacher’s questions. Moreover, feedback which focuses on helping students realise what to do to achieve their learning objectives may help students focus on learning rather than on protecting their “face”. Importantly, at all times, class attention needs to be drawn towards finding ways to support and improve students’ learning so that students do not have to be worried about losing face when participating in learning and/or assessment activities.

2.3.1.4. Appreciation of effort

Vietnamese people greatly appreciate individual effort, believing that hard work results in success. This cultural value also originated from the Vietnamese agricultural economy which required farmers to continuously attempt to find ways to harness natural forces to reap good yields of crops (Tran, 2006). The value was also
emphasised in Confucian teaching, which considered effort a key factor in determining the ultimate results of one’s actions (Hofstede, et al., 2010). As often found in Confucian Heritage Cultures (Carless, 2011), examination candidates are encouraged to retake the exam, trying to achieve a pass despite already experiencing failure. The government also emphasises teaching the love of work to students (Doan, 2005). The wide use of such Vietnamese sayings and proverbs as “your hard work compensates for your intellectual limitations” (Can cu bu thong minh) or “the person who is sharpening steel will finally get the needle” (Co cong mai sat co ngay nen kim) reflects the Vietnamese belief that good results come from effort.

Vietnamese appreciation of effort influences the teaching and learning of English language at universities. Students are expected to work hard both in class and at home (Lewis & McCook, 2002). In fact, students’ class attendance and effort in participating in learning activities are also taken into account when assessing and measuring their learning outcomes (MOET, 2007a). Many students take extra English lessons at language teaching centres (Tran, 2013; Vu, 2008) or at home with English tutors at their own expense, although only a few of them are successful in mastering the language. Thus, to support students’ EFL learning, assessment of English language needs to utilise this cultural value. Students need to be provided with opportunities to improve their own work or performance in using English language. The use of subsequent test results to replace the low marks of a preceding test (Carter, 1997) can also encourage students to continue trying to learn the language.

In short, the main cultural values that affect English language education at tertiary level in Vietnam include respect for harmony, respect for learning, knowledge and the teacher, face saving and appreciation of effort. These values indicate that Vietnamese students and teachers have some culturally-rooted characteristics that, at present, may both facilitate and impede the learning of English language. With such characteristics, the potential of assessment for learning largely depends on the EFL teachers’ English knowledge, their understanding of the students, and their pedagogical skills. In order to exploit the potential of assessment for learning, the teachers have to design appropriate learning activities, create a collaborative learning climate and encourage students’ engagement in assessment and/or learning.
2.3.2 Assessment context in Vietnam

2.3.2.1. Assessment in education prior to 1945

Assessment in Vietnam’s education in the period prior to 1945 was characterised by Mandarin examinations (referred to as the Imperial examination in China) due to the strong influence of the Confucian Heritage Culture (Pham, 1998; Wright, 2002). Confucian heritage culture is the term popularly used to refer to “the countries or educational systems...whose shared values and orientations ...are examination-driven” (Carless, 2011, p. 4). For example, the Temple of Literature in Hanoi with the statue of Confucius and a series of stone stelae /monuments records the names of successful candidates in over 100 Mandarin examinations (Broadfoot, 2009) and represents the examination context of this period. The exams, which firstly took place in 1075, were literacy competitions with absolute respect for established knowledge in books and candidates’ memory (Nguyen, 1995). Candidates were required to understand and memorise the classic texts containing Chinese philosophical principles of ethics and sciences in order to transcribe, interpret or compose commentaries at examinations of different levels (Nguyen, 1995; Woodside, 1988). Moreover, although the content and organisation varied slightly according to feudal dynasties with different titles given to the laureates, the primary purposes of the examinations were to “reveal talented scholars” and “choose functionaries” (Broadfoot, 2009; Nguyen, 1995, p. 291). Therefore, examinations were regarded as opportunities for men (not women) to gain social status by way of study (Nguyen, 2004). Although only a small proportion of the top candidates succeeded and were later appointed to official posts, passing Imperial examinations to “leave the ranks of the people to enter the mandarin caste” ((Nguyen, 1974) as cited in (Nguyen, 2004, p. 167)) was the desire of many ordinary men. Many unsuccessful candidates made repeated attempts to pass the examinations despite high failure rates (Carless, 2011). The ‘life-long obsession’ of passing examinations (Carless, 2011, p. 52), together with respect for course book- based knowledge and candidates’ memorising ability, have been identified in the assessment context in Vietnam today.

The Mandarin examinations in Vietnam came to an end in 1919 due to the influence of French colonialism. Significant changes occurred in the Vietnamese educational system during French colonialism: education was conducted in French instead of Chinese and it was provided for a small group of children from the French
and Vietnamese elites. Nonetheless, the assessment focus remained predominantly summative for certification and selection purposes (Tran, 2007).

2.3.2.2. Assessment in education from 1945 to 1998

Assessment was not given much attention during the period from 1944 to 1975 due to social, political and economic factors. After attaining national independence in 1945, the newly-established government was faced with enormous challenges. As a result of French invasion and colonialism, only a small proportion of school aged students were educated; the economy was flagging with the over-exploitation of natural resources; and the collaborative tradition was damaged as a result of colonial policies which stimulated groups of elites to suppress working-class people (Dang, 2005; Nguyen, 2010). Therefore, the primary objectives of education in the post-colonial period were to eradicate illiteracy (Wright, 2002); to contribute to the country’s struggle for liberation from foreign aggressors\(^1\) and to “establish a republic with a democratic regime” (Pham, 1995, p. 51). Examinations of literature and mathematics were occasionally held in the period from 1965 to 1975 to identify talented learners in preparation for national resistance against the American invasion (Nguyen, 2010).

After the liberation of South Vietnam and national reunification in 1975, educational assessment in Vietnam was carried out through various examinations, for the purposes of certification and selection. Examinations were held at the end of each education level and at the entrance to secondary and tertiary education (MOET, 1975a, 1975b, 1986). The most important examinations were held at the end of secondary school and at the entrance to universities and colleges (Nguyen, 2010; Nguyen, 2005). Most of those who had secondary school and tertiary certificates could be employed in state-owned organisations. Those who passed the university entrance examinations with outstanding results were sent to universities in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe. They were considered the best ‘seeds’ and many of them when returning home after studying were appointed to key positions in the government (Dang, 2005; Nguyen, 2004). Students with high results were also given scholarships (Tran, Lam, & Sloper, 1995) in the first semester of university, with the amount of scholarship dependent

\(^1\) I recognize that this is an ideological term. However, I use it because politics cannot be separated from Vietnam’s foreign language education history.
on the students’ grades in the university exam. Notably, bonus marks were given to those who or whose parents had made a contribution to national resistance against the French and American aggressors (MOET, 1975b, 1986; Nguyen, 2005). However, there were no official documents on assessment and neither were there designated courses on testing and assessment available in the teachers’ training programmes during this period (Le & Huynh, 2009).

2.3.2.3. Assessment in education from 1999 to present

Since 1999, the field of assessment has received considerable attention from educational authorities, as assessment has come to be regarded as one of the measures to improve educational quality essential for national industrialisation, modernisation and international integration (Dang, 2005; Le & Huynh, 2009). The Ministry of Education and Training has developed a series of official policies on assessment of learning outcomes (MOET, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). According to the latest regulations, learning outcomes are to be assessed both continuously and periodically during the course (MOET, 2007a, 2011). At tertiary level, assessment of learning outcomes can be carried out in different forms such as questioning, multiple choice testing, essay writing, assignment, and performance assessment (MOET, 2007a). As a result, the calculation of learners’ grades has changed from relying largely on the results of the end-of-semester exams, as it was before 2000 (Hoang, 2006; MOET, 1999), to the aggregation of results with different ratios given to different types of assessment (MOET, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2011).

In addition, there are differences in the objectives and purposes of assessment carried out at different education levels. At school level, assessment is focused on the pupils’ learning ability for the purposes of encouraging learners in their studying and self-improvement (MOET, 2006a, 2011). In contrast, in Higher Education, the selection of assessment methods emphasises the purpose of “developing students’ self-learning and group-learning ability” (MOET, 2007b). Moreover, assessment methods must be diversified to “ensure the reliability and validity of the results, the alignment with the curriculum objectives, the teaching and learning, and the target of measuring the learners’ accumulation of professional knowledge, performance skills and ability of identifying and solving problems” (MOET, 2007b). However, it can be seen from assessment regulations policy that the assessment of learning outcomes (or
summative assessment) and the reporting of assessment results are predominant. These are required to be valid and reliable for institutional management, classification and certification of students (Broadfoot, 2009; MOET, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Stobart, 2008).

With regard to assessment of learning achievement, it can be seen that the implementation of classroom assessment helps diversify assessment methods. However, it does not seem to reduce examination pressure or increase the reliability of the final academic results as expected. Examination results are publicly disseminated for a number of reasons: (i) as an important indicator of the schools’ educational quality, (ii) for the selection of learners for education at different levels, and (iii) for the extensive use of educational qualifications in recruiting people for occupational positions. This publicising of results appears to have resulted in the examination-oriented attitudes in teaching and learning at all educational levels (Carless, 2011; Stobart, 2008).

At school levels, examination pressure is commonly experienced, bringing with it serious problems such as examination-oriented schooling, coaching, examination cramming and “achievement chasing” (Nguyen, 2012; Nhat Quang, 2006). Pupils’ examination (or test) marks are regarded as an important (even sole) indicator of their learning and the educational quality they receive at school. Getting high marks is the central concern of pupils and their parents. Meanwhile, the percentage of pupils obtaining high marks in examinations, pupils’ fail-pass ratios, and the school’s rank in the local and national schools classification table are of great concern to school teachers and administrators. As a result, many pupils take extra classes to get high marks (Bui, 2009). Teachers and schools also manage to help pupils raise their marks at school-based and national examination by different means, for example, teaching to the test, imposing relaxed examination conditions which enable pupils to cheat on exams, and correcting pupils’ test papers before marking (Quoc Dung, 2006).

The two most important national examinations are those carried out at the end of secondary schools and at entrance to university. The results of the exams not only determine students’ occupational orientation and their future but also act as an important indicator of the teachers’ expertise and the schools’ educational quality. Thus, examination corruption, extra-classes, and cramming for these two
examinations are popular (Huynh, 2006). Such social problems as well as negative washback effects on teaching and learning, also identified by Stobart (2008), have been publicly highlighted in Vietnam’s mass media and have been regarded as serious problems undermining educational quality at the school level in Vietnam (Bui, 2009; Huynh, 2006; Kim Lien, 2004; Quoc Dung, 2006; Quy Hien, 2006).

Examination-oriented attitudes are also reflected at tertiary level. Due to diversity in subject specialism, there are no national examinations or national standards for assessment at this level. The design and execution of assessment is largely decided by the subject teachers (MOET, 2007a). Assessment results thus exert less impact on the teachers and higher education institutions. However, the results are of crucial importance to the students with reference to their study at university and their future, due to the primary use of assessment for purposes of managing and certifying students at universities (MOET, 2007a). The extensive use of qualifications for selections of well-paid jobs is also noted.

Students’ learning at universities has been profoundly influenced by methods of assessment and the ways assessment results are used. Students often try their best to get good marks (or at least a pass) in examinations and tests; thus learning to the test seems to be a normal practice (Dore, 1997a; Stobart, 2008). The attention that students pay to assessment also varies according to the importance the results play in the final grade. More attention is given to the assessment carried out at the end of semester because the result accounts for more than 50 percent of the student’s overall grade for the subject (MOET, 2006b, 2007a). Due to professional and economic factors (Nguyen, 2006), assessment carried out at this level is largely in the form of written achievement tests which often inadequately represent learning content, and which rely mostly on memorisation (Le, 2002). Thus, students’ test preparation and strategic learning which focus on “specific and predictable test demand” (Stobart, 2008, p. 103) prevail. Moreover, as students often try to get a mark higher than their actual ability, corruption and cheating in examinations such as copying other students’ test papers, using hidden notes, and giving teachers valuable gifts to get high marks are “rampant” in Vietnam HE (McCornac, 2007, p. 25). Although such problems definitely reduce the validity and reliability of the assessment results, the decisions made on the basis of the assessment results are generally accepted as fair and reasonable.
It can be seen that at tertiary level, assessment plays a central role in stimulating learning (Huynh, 2006). However, the kind of learning stimulated by assessment as it is currently conducted in Vietnamese universities promotes students’ memorisation of knowledge and test-taking strategies, rather than learning strategies such as problem identifying, problem solving, and self-learning. Meanwhile such strategies are considered essential for students so that they can work effectively in the present information age and changing labour market (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Pham, 2010) and to improve educational quality to meet demands for Vietnam’s industrialisation, modernisation and international integration.

Dramatic changes in assessment practices in education in Vietnam can be predicted as a result of the enormous effort of educational authorities, researchers and practitioners to improve educational quality. Since 2003, the subject of student assessment has been taught in teacher training programs (Le & Huynh, 2009). In addition, a national movement with the slogan “say no to cheating in examinations and achievement chasing in education” has been publicised since 2006 and has received strong support from most parts of Vietnamese society (Thu Ha, 2006; Government, 2006). At tertiary level, the recent establishment of the institutional organisation responsible for all assessment activities within each university (MOET, 2007b), including teaching and learning, has aimed to eliminate cheating in examinations. Furthermore, the MOET’s requirements to diversify assessment methods and procedures (MOET, 2007b) have brought considerable changes in tertiary assessment practices. For example, banks of examination items have been developed, which can make examination questions more consistent and more difficult to predict. These measures discourage students from focusing on specific parts of the curriculum and tests. The use of examination questions or tasks which require students to demonstrate such learning skills as synthesising, applying, reflecting, analysing, and evaluating (Anderson & Bloom, 2001) have also been proposed by many educational experts (Le & Huynh, 2009; Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen, 2012; Vu, 2007). In addition, recent studies on assessment, such as those on portfolios as assessment tools in Vietnamese classrooms (Huynh, 2006) and rating scales for measuring portfolio writing competence of Vietnamese EFL students (Duong, 2011), suggest a promising future for educational assessment in Vietnam.
Despite these positive signals, the present assessment context suggests that the influence of the examination tradition and dominant use of assessment for selection, certification and accountability seem to impede rather than facilitate the potential of assessment for learning. In such a situation of high-stakes testing and accountability, the potential of assessment for learning depends greatly on the alignment of assessment with the teaching and learning objectives, as well as the analysis and use of assessment information to feedback and feed forward to teaching and learning in ways which are appropriate to the local sociocultural context (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003b; Carless, 2011; Harlen, 2005; Wininger, 2005). Thus, the development of assessment for learning in English education at tertiary level in Vietnam presents a challenge to teachers who are both the designers and facilitators of university-based assessment.

### 2.4 TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES TO AFL OF EFL IN VIETNAM HIGHER EDUCATION

Considerable tensions can be identified in the field of English language education at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The country’s industrialisation, modernisation and international integration presents Higher Education with an increasing demand to develop students’ English ability so that students can study and work in a global and fast-changing environment. In response to the demand, considerable efforts from HE institutions, and EFL teachers as well as their students have been initiated to facilitate students’ learning outcomes. However, the assessment practices of EFL in HE institutions, which are predominantly in the form of summative tests for the institutional purposes of managing, classifying and certifying students, do not seem to promote the desired learning. As well, the common use of test results as an important base for allocating educational and occupational opportunities and the recent use of the results for accountability purposes do not tend to support ELL. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the assessment of EFL to support learning that is, developing students’ English ability as well as their lifelong learning skills, so that they can use English for communication and professional purposes and contribute to national development.

From a sociocultural perspective, there are considerable challenges to the development of assessment for learning of EFL in HE in Vietnam. The challenges can be identified from an educational culture that reflects distinctive characteristics
of Confucian Heritage Cultures, the examination-oriented assessment and EFL education context in Vietnamese HE. In terms of educational culture, although the cultural appreciation of learning effort can do much to encourage students in learning, the cultural respect for teachers, knowledge and community harmony, together with the cultural concern with issues of face losing, tend to restrict collaborative learning opportunities. For example, teachers generally do not feel comfortable when being confronted by students. Similarly, students do not often feel at ease asking their teacher for further explanation, assessing or challenging peers. Thus, such culturally-rooted characteristics of teachers and students may present difficulties to the utilisation of the support from assessment for learning which is based largely on students’ interactions and collaborative learning with teachers and peers (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Lantolf, 2000).

The assessment context in Vietnam presents another challenge to the implementation of AfL in EFL education at tertiary level. Together with the examination culture and the extensive use of students’ examination results for administration, certification, occupational and professional selection, the recent regulation on institutional accountability and the adoption of CEFR as common standards for EFL assessment place even more emphasis on summative assessment. Meanwhile, too little attention seems to be paid to formative assessment (Le, 2014b). The focus on summative assessment at the system level presents a barrier for the implementation of AfL at classroom level (DeLuca, et al., 2012).

The current context of English language education poses other challenges to the development of assessment for learning of EFL in Vietnam HE. The context of high-stakes testing, examination corruption, teachers’ low salaries and heavy workloads may hinder the practices of AfL. This is because implementation requires teachers to devote more time to their teaching in order to create collaborative learning discourses, to give students constructive feedback and to design summative tests aligned with learning objectives. Even when the teachers are willing to develop AfL, their limited expertise in teaching and assessing students may negatively affect their practices. Thus, the results might not be as good as they might expect, which could make them abandon attempts to implement AfL.

These tensions and challenges to the development of assessment for learning of EFL in Vietnamese Higher Education institutions call for the attention of researchers and practitioners in the field. So far the potential of assessment for learning has been
mentioned by several assessment experts including Le (2014b), Nguyen (2006a) and Vu (2008) and some educational authorities including the former Minister of Education and Training - Nguyen Thien Nhan (N. Nguyen, 2009). Implementation and development of AfL in EFL education in the context of Vietnamese Higher Education, however, have not been thoroughly documented and analysed. This situation, together with the unsatisfactory outcomes of various efforts to improve the effectiveness of EFL education in Vietnamese universities (details presented in Section 1.2), inspires the researcher to conduct this study. The aim is to examine current assessment practices to explore and develop their potential for ELL in the Vietnamese HE context.

2.5 SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter has presented a critical review of the literature on second or foreign language assessment, and teaching and learning from a sociocultural perspective in the Vietnamese Higher Education context. Section 2.1 illustrated the sociocultural perspective employed to investigate the research problem. Informed by this perspective, Section 2.2 discussed the origin, definition, development and practice of assessment for learning to highlights the benefits of assessment for learning and to indicate how it is practised. Section 2.3 situated the research in the educational culture and assessment context of Vietnam, considering the sociocultural factors which may influence the support of assessment for ELL. The tension in EFL education at tertiary level, the need to develop the potential of assessment for ELL, as well as the challenges of such development, were presented in section 2.4. It is also indicated in the literature review that although the use of assessment to promote learning has gained momentum in educational research, policy and practices in various contexts, the potential support of assessment for learning is underresearched in Vietnam. Therefore, this study aims to investigate current assessment practices in EFL education at two Vietnamese universities in order to propose potential improvements to current practices for the enhancement of learning and to bridge this gap. In the next chapter, the design and methodology that was used to investigate the research problem will be presented.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter describes the design adopted in this study to investigate the assessment practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education at two Vietnamese universities. The objectives of the study are to explore and find ways to develop the potential support of assessment for the teaching and learning of EFL in the two universities. The first section of this chapter (Section 3.1) elaborates the application of sociocultural theories to the research. The methodology used in the study is presented in Section 3.2. Section 3.3 details the selection of cases and participants in the study. The next section (Section 3.4) lists all the methods used in the study and justifies their use in the study. Then detailed descriptions of the piloting (Section 3.5) and the actual data collecting process (Section 3.6) are presented. The measures taken to validate the study are covered in Section 3.7. This is followed by the data analysis procedures (Section 3.8). Lastly, Section 3.9 discusses the ethical considerations of the research.

3.1 A SOCIOCULTURALLY INFORMED RESEARCH DESIGN

Sociocultural theories are significant to this study in the cognitive and psychological sense of learning theory, which reconfigures the understandings of learning and explicates the relationship between assessment and learning (Black, et al., 2003a; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Lantolf, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). These theories are also of significant value to this study as a theoretical framework that informs and underpins the research design.

Sociocultural theories are used to elucidate the trajectory of human actions within their situated context (Wertsch, Rio, & Alvarez, 1995b). Thus, by highlighting the impact of sociocultural factors on human mental functioning, the theories have provided the frame to research specific educational practices and the possibility of adopting non-indigenous educational innovation. That is, educational practice needs to be understood within its own context and the adoption of any educational innovation needs to take into consideration the local educational culture with its potential support or resistance.
From a sociocultural perspective, “assessment is a social activity” (Gipps, 1999, p. 355) which is profoundly influenced by the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which it operates (Sutherland, 1996). There are social and cultural issues at the level of the HE system macrostructure and at the level of the classroom microstructure (Gipps, 1999). At the macro level, historical, political, and economic issues may affect the way the assessment of EFL is designed and delivered, the way the assessment results are used, and ‘washback effects’ that assessment exerts on teaching and learning. At the classroom level, cultural, social and institutional factors may affect the frequency, the method, the content of EFL assessment carried out in the classroom, the integration of assessment in teaching and learning, and the assessment-related interactions between teacher and students and among students. The teacher’s expertise and experience in teaching and assessing students, as well as the individual student’s English competence and his/her experience and attitude to the assessment and/or learning of EFL, may also have a significant impact on the nature of assessment practice. Thus, all those sociocultural and individual factors may affect EFL assessment and its support for students’ learning of EFL.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning arises from the individual’s social interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). From such interactions, the individual actively constructs knowledge and meaning, which, at the same time, determines the way (s)he interacts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moore, 2003; Murphy, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). Thus to support learning, assessment must facilitate interactions between individual students and the teacher and other students in the classroom. In such interactions, the students are provided with opportunities to validate their understanding and are assisted cognitively, affectively and emotionally by others to continue learning (Black, 2010; Lantolf, 2000). In other words, assessment must result in the students communicating their own understanding and being scaffolded by others who not only show them what to do to progress, but also help them believe that they can progress towards their desired objectives (Black, 2010). Thus, to support learning, assessment must be integrated in and aligned with teaching and learning, must involve students and facilitate collaborative learning among students and between students and the teacher (ARG, 2002b; Black, et al., 2003a). The understanding, from a sociocultural perspective, of learning and assessment, and the
influence of the sociocultural context on assessment and its potential for learning, informs the design of this study.

This study aims to investigate current assessment practices in EFL education at two Vietnamese universities to explore how these assessment practices support the students’ learning of EFL. Applying a sociocultural perspective, the study examines the involvement of students in the assessment process, the source, type and quality of feedback students receive on their learning, and the use of assessment results by teachers and students to investigate how assessment intellectually, emotionally and socially promotes students’ learning and use of English language.

Therefore, the overarching question is:

What are the current assessment practices in support of the learning of English language at the two Vietnamese universities?

The sub-questions that derive from the main question are:

- In what ways, and to what extent, are students involved in the assessment process?
- In what ways do teachers’ feedback practices align with AfL principles?
- How are assessment data used by teachers and students?

The study takes into full consideration the sociocultural factors that have been identified as exerting considerable impact on assessment practices and the potential of assessment for learning in order to identify the factors facilitating and constraining the support of assessment for learning, and to identify implications for improving the teaching and learning of EFL in these two universities.

### 3.2 Qualitative Case Study Design

A qualitative case study methodology is employed in this study. According to Merriam (1988) the choice of methodology depends on (1) the nature of the research questions; (2) the kind of control the researcher has over actual situations; and (3) the desired end product. This study aims to investigate current assessment practices in EFL education at two universities in Vietnam. Thus, it focuses on answering the questions of “What” ELL is assessed, “How” EFL assessment is being practised and “Why” it is being practised that way. The control that the researcher has over the actual situation is limited since the research focuses on the current assessment
practices in “their natural settings” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). The research outcome is a holistic, intensive description and interpretation of the EFL assessment practice in terms of its potential to support learning to “inform policy development or professional practice” (Simons, 2009, p. 21), to improve the quality of EFL education at the two universities. For such research on “contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” in which the researchers have little or no control and the contextual conditions are expected to be “highly pertinent” to the phenomenon under research (Yin, 2003, p. 13), the adoption of qualitative case study design is appropriate.

The qualitative case study design is also employed because the design is particularly suitable for understanding and interpreting educational practice in order to improve it (Merriam, 1988; Simons, 2009). A qualitative approach permits the researcher to explore “naturally occurring phenomena in their naturally occurring states” (Patton, 1990, p. 41), in order to “make sense of, or to interpret the phenomena in terms of the meanings [and accounts] people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). In the field of second language research, qualitative approaches have gained increasing popularity (Duff, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Richards, 2009), enhancing understanding of the language teaching and learning processes, the learning experience of language learners and particularly the interactions in the language classroom (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Richards, 2009). The case study allows for an investigation of “the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi).

The case study also has the unique strength of dealing with a variety of evidence such as documents, artefacts, interviews and observations (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988, 1998; Yin, 2003). Thus, a qualitative case study allows the researcher to conduct “in-depth exploration” of current EFL assessment practice “from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness in the real-life context” (Simons, 2009, p. 21) at two Vietnamese universities. The resulting “thick description”, which includes both the complete, literal description of current EFL assessment practices and the “interpretation of the practice in terms of cultural norms and mores, community values, deep-seated attitudes and notions and the like” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 119) facilitates the identification of implications for improving
practice in support of the learning of EFL at the universities. The study is exploratory, descriptive and interpretative in nature.

There are common concerns over the utility of qualitative case study research. Case studies are often criticised for their lack of rigour and for being influenced by personal biases (Yin, 2003). Moreover, case study findings cannot be generalised to a larger population (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003), which may limit the contribution of the research (Creswell, 2007). However, it has been shown that the issue of rigour can be addressed when the researcher applies certain methods of data collection and analysis, such as using multiple sources of evidence; establishing a chain of evidence; and having key informants review the draft case study reports (Yin, 2003). The research design can also be strengthened when the researcher, as “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, ... is responsive to the context, ... [and is able to] adapt techniques to the circumstances, to unforeseen events and change direction in pursuit of meaning” (Merriam, 1988, p. 19). Moreover, the researcher’s awareness of his/her influence on the research process and outcomes can facilitate his/her monitoring of the impact on the reconstruction of the meaning and interpretations that the participants ascribe to their world (Merriam, 1988; Simons, 2009). Transparent research procedures which describe in detail how the researcher’s values and actions shape data gathering and interpretation, how people and the events in the field impact on the researcher (Simons, 2009), and how (s)he establishes connections between diverse elements of the research issue, can make case study research more rigorous (Holliday, 2004; Yin, 2003).

With reference to the criticism centred on the generalisability of case studies, van Lier (2005) claimed that:

*Particularization* may be just as important - if not more so - than *generalization*... Insights from a case study can inform, be adapted to, and provide comparative information to a wide variety of other cases so long as one is careful to take contextual differences into account. Furthermore if two cases provide apparently contradictory information about a certain issue ... this contrast can provide much more food for thought and further research, thus being of great benefit to the field (van Lier, 2005, p. 198, original emphasis).

Simons (2009, p. 20) also emphasises that “studying the particular in depth can yield insights of universal significance”. Thus, although results of qualitative case study research are not suitable to be generalised statistically to populations, they can be generalised analytically to other situations (Yin, 2012). Since this study adopts a
To sum up, the qualitative case study design is adopted for this research because this design enables the researcher to gain a thorough and holistic understanding of the current EFL assessment practices within the two particular educational contexts. Based on such understanding, recommendations for improving assessment to facilitate the teaching and learning of EFL in these two universities can be identified. In order to strengthen the research design, different measures have been taken in the course of designing and conducting the research, and reporting the research findings. Detailed discussion of the research design will be presented in the following sections.

### 3.3 SELECTION OF CASE AND PARTICIPANTS

#### 3.3.1 Case definition and selection

Defining the case to be studied is important in designing qualitative case study research (Simons, 2009; Thomas, 2011). The reason is that the case must be “an integrated system” (Stake, 1995, p. 2) which is “bounded” and “separated out for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries” (Creswell, 2008, p. 476). Although there is considerable controversy over the definition of “case” (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2011), according to the widely-used definition provided by Simons (2009, p. 4), “the case could be a person, a classroom, an institution, a program, a policy, a system”. In this study the case is a university, which is a unit within the Vietnamese higher education sector and a micro system itself. Since the study focuses on the assessment - related interactions between students and the teacher and among students in the classroom, the “embedded unit of analysis” (Yin, 2003, p. 40) is the university class. The boundaries of the case in terms of place, time and the participants will now be elaborated.

This study is a multiple case study consisting of two cases. The primary consideration in designing this “two-case” study (Yin, 2009, p. 258) is the validity of the study given the researcher’s limited time and energy. The first reason for investigating two cases rather than a single case lies in the fact that “more than one-
case study is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust, even if it is only two cases” (Yin, 2003, p. 46). In addition, the investigation of two cases intentionally selected on the basis of certain criteria enables the researcher to elaborate further the influences of the sociocultural factors on the assessment practices of EFL carried out in different settings within HE in Vietnam.

The study is carried out in two universities in Vietnam: one is a Public University (PU) and the other is Non-Public University (Non-PU). PU is one of over 200 public universities in Vietnam. The university was upgraded from the college level in 2005 and is still in the process of improving its organisation and operation in order to function effectively in the higher education system. At the time of this study, PU offered educational services in a variety of disciplines at multi-levels including university level with 21 disciplines, college level with 17 disciplines, and vocational level with 12 disciplines. In the school year 2012-2013, there were nearly 60 000 students enrolled, among whom about 15 000 were students at university level.

Non-PU is a non-public university founded in 2006 and belongs to a business corporation in Vietnam. The University offers undergraduate, vocational, and post-graduate courses in two main disciplines that are also the main business areas of the corporation. Non-PU charges extremely high fees for its educational services, which is about six or seven times higher than the average tuition of non-public universities and about ten times higher than the average tuition of public universities. According to the university leaders, the reasons for its high fees include the use of English as the medium of instruction in major subjects, the employment of many foreign teachers, updated educational programs, small class sizes, and an assurance of employment after graduation. In order to enable students to pay their tuition fees, Non-PU carries out preferential credit programs that allow students to borrow up to 90 per cent of their tuition fees. The students can repay their loan within 10 years at the interest rate equal to that of one-year loan in other banks. Non-PU also gives scholarships to new students who have won national awards or have outstanding results from high schools, at the national university entrance exams, or at the Non-PU’s subordinate entrance exam. Non-PU makes extensive use of information technology in administrating and assisting teaching and learning activities. Students and teachers are provided with financial support to buy personal laptops for studying and teaching.
purposes. Most of the communication between the university and the students, the teachers and the students’ parents is carried out online through the University’s website. In 2012, there were more than 4500 students at Non-PU. The teaching staff consisted of not only academic lecturers but also successful practitioners in the field. Not all of the teaching staff worked full time at the university.

There are two main reasons for this selection. The first reason is to maximise the ‘understanding of what is happening’ (Simons, 2009, p. 29) and how the differences in context impact on assessment practices and outcomes of EFL education. The second reason relates to the context of HE in Vietnam. Universities in Vietnam fall into two categories: public and non-public sectors. In 2014, there were over 90 non-public universities in Vietnam, accounting for 20 percent of the total number of Vietnamese universities (Phan, 2014). However, the sector has expanded rapidly over the last 20 years, and according to the HE reform agenda (Government, 2005) the non-public sector will account for 40 percent of Vietnamese HE by 2020. Hence, the two cases in this design are representative of the two categories of Vietnamese universities. The two selected universities are both located in one large city, so that the researcher could travel back and forth from the sites to conduct field work in the same semester. The universities possess typical and atypical features (Yin, 2003) which have the potential to exert an impact on EFL assessment practices, such as the institutional policies on EFL education and EFL assessment, the administration and evaluation of teaching activities, and the facilities for EFL teaching and learning. More details about the distinctive features of each case will be presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.3.2 Selection of participants

An important advantage of qualitative case study methodology is that it allows researchers to obtain access to multiple participants, document their perspectives and engage them in the research process (Simons, 2009). The selection of participants, according to Merriam (1998), depends on their potential contribution to the researcher’s understanding of the research issue. This study, therefore, involves EFL teachers, their students, and their Executive Officers.
Teacher participants

The study invited three teachers in each university to participate. In PU, the participating teachers included two mid-career teachers and one early-career teacher. In Non-PU, the teachers included one mid-career teacher and two early career teachers. In this study, early career teachers are those who have less than five years of teaching experience and the mid-career teachers are those whose teaching experiences are from five to 15 years. The study included both early career and mid-career teachers since it has been found that teachers’ professional knowledge and experience in teaching and assessing have been shown to play an important role in their assessment practices (Black, et al., 2003a; Cumming, 2009; Deng & Carless, 2010). There are two reasons for using a five-year experience as a dividing line to distinguish teachers’ experiences in this study. First, courses on assessment have been taught in teacher training programs in Vietnam since 2003 (details in section 2.3.2.3). Second, the changes in the EFL teaching methodology were introduced in Vietnamese HE in the early years of the 21st century (details in section 1.2.2). Hence, it is assumed that the formal education offered to mid-career teachers differed from the training offered to early career teachers. This might affect teachers’ instructional and assessment practices. Demographic information about the participating teachers is presented in table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Demographic information of participating teachers and their classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Graduating from university</th>
<th>Completing Masters study</th>
<th>English course</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public university</td>
<td>Ms Lan</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Elementary (advanced class)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Yen</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Elementary (regular class)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Hong</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary (regular class)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Public university</td>
<td>Ms Minh</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Tam</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Van</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3: Research Design

Student participants

Since students’ engagement in learning and/or assessment plays an important role in determining the potential of assessment for learning (Black, et al., 2003a; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Broadfoot, 2007), students of the participating teachers were invited to participate in the study. Six students from each teacher’s class were invited to take part in a student focus group interview. There were six students in each focus group as suggested by Fern (2001) as appropriate for collecting both homogeneous and heterogeneous information from group members. The criteria for selecting students for the focus group interviews included the students’ activeness in participating in lessons, their English proficiency level and their learning performances in class. Specifically, each focus group consisted of two high-achieving students, abbreviated as S1 and S2, who often responded to teachers’ questions and gave correct answers most of the time; two students, abbreviated as S3 and S4, who responded only upon request but still gave correct answers most of the time; and two low achieving students, S5 and S6, who responded only when personally nominated and did not often give correct answers. The selection was based on students’ willingness to participate, the students’ profiles, the researcher’s classroom observations and consultation with the class teacher. The aim was to select participating students with a range of proficiency levels and performance in learning and participating in classroom assessment. Demographic information about students participating in focus groups is demonstrated in table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Demographic information of student focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year of learning English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms Lan’s students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Yen’s students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Hong’s students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Minh’s students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Tam’s students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>5-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Van’s students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>5-13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is noted that together with the students participating in focus group interviews, other students in the participating classes also played an important role in the study. With consent given by all students in the participating classes, the students’ activities during English lessons were observed, audio or video recorded, and examined closely by the researcher. All the students were in their first semester in the first year at university. The reason for this selection lies in the perceived differences in EFL education at tertiary and school levels. ELL at the school level focuses on grammar and vocabulary in order to pass the final exams, and the lessons are predominantly teacher-centred (Le, 2013). Meanwhile, ELL at tertiary level aims to develop students’ ability to use English for communicative and professional purposes (Government, 2008), and to enhance their active and collaborative learning (Government, 2005). Hence, it was assumed that the first semester at university would be a transitional period for most students in terms of ELL, and the implementation of assessment for learning has the potential to establish new patterns of classroom interactions which would be of great significance to promote ELL given the wide range of students’ English proficiency levels as a result of the recent growth in the enrolment.

Since the starting level of the majority of first year students at both universities is elementary, which is also reported at other Vietnamese universities (Le, 2013), English classes at elementary level are the main focus of this study. Specifically, five out of six participating English classes were at elementary level. The remaining class was purposefully selected to consist of students whose English proficiency was estimated to be at intermediate level. The aim of including one class of students that supposedly has a higher English proficiency level was to investigate the influence of students’ English proficiency on assessment practices and its support for ELL. Information about the level and number of students in the participating classes is demonstrated in the table 3.1.

The potential of assessment to enhance learning is also influenced by the administrative and professional management at the university (Black, et al., 2003a; Carless, 2011; Harlen, 2005). Therefore, at each university, one Executive Officer at faculty level responsible for the teaching, learning and assessment of English language at the university was asked to participate in the study. The aim was to collect data about different aspects of institutional culture related to the teaching,
learning and assessment of EFL. Demographic information about the two participating Executive Officers is given in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Demographic information of participating Executive Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
<th>Managerial experience</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms Dung</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>PU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Hanh</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Non-PU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To select and invite the participants, I contacted Executive Officers via email and phone to discuss the study and ask for their assistance and consent. From the Executive Officers, I received information about schedules of EFL classes and EFL teachers. I contacted the potential teachers via email and phone to ask for their assistance and consent. The teachers introduced me to their classes and allowed me to introduce the study to all students in the class and to ask for their assistance and consent. Two weeks before the courses ended, I contacted potential students individually to invite them to take part in focus group interviews in the last week of the courses. All participants agreed to take part in the study.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TOOLS CONSTRUCTION

The three most commonly used data collection methods in qualitative case study research are observation, interview and document analysis (Merriam, 1988; Simons, 2009). These methods were employed in this study to enable the researcher to gain “a rich picture with many kinds of insights coming from different angles, from different kinds of information” (Thomas, 2011, p. 21) of the EFL assessment practices at the two universities. The application of these methods to obtain information from different sources also makes the study more rigorous and the research findings more valid and credible (Chapelle & Duff, 2003).

3.4.1 Interview

Interviews are frequently used in qualitative case study research as they enable the researcher to “get to the core issues in the case more quickly and in greater depth, to probe motivations, to ask follow-up questions and to facilitate individuals telling their stories” (Simons, 2009, p. 43). Interviews can be used with flexibility and can be structured, semi-structured or open-ended. Interviews can be conducted with
individuals or in groups, and can be carried out face-to-face or via telephone (Gillham, 2005). In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed to allow the researcher to respond and probe the subjects’ answers (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988). A semi-structured approach helps to capture the informants’ perspective of their experiences and understandings of assessment, while at the same time keeping the communication focused on the topics of interest (Gillham, 2005; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers, six focus groups of their students, and two Executive Officers at Faculty level, one in each university.

The teachers were interviewed once before and once after the classroom observations. The pre-observation interviews with the teachers focused on (a) their teaching experience, their perspectives on (b) English language teaching, (c) purposes and qualities of EFL assessment, (d) their practice of student assessment, (e) their use of assessment results, their perspectives on (f) students’ use of assessment results, (g) the washback effect of existing assessment practices at the university, and (h) their suggestions to improve existing assessment to further support students’ learning (refer to Appendix 1 for further details). The post-observation interviews with the teachers related primarily to their practice of teaching and assessing students’ ELL. The subtopics of the interviews include (a) their practice of questioning, (b) their employment of pair work and group work activities, (c) their practice of student peer- and self-assessment, and (d) their practice of giving feedback on students’ learning (refer to Appendix 2 for further details). In the post-observation interview, the teachers were also asked to share their teaching intentions and expectations when carrying out specific activities noted by the researcher during her class observations.

The interviews with the focus groups of students related to (a) their experience in English learning and assessment and (b) their perspectives on the current EFL assessment practice carried out by the teachers and their own practices, and (c) their suggestions for improvements in existing EFL assessment practices to support their learning further (refer to Appendix 3 for further details).

The interviews with the Executive Officers at the two universities focused on their experience working at the university and their accounts and perspectives of the current EFL assessment practice at the university, which include (a) the procedures
of EFL assessment at their universities; (b) the use of assessment results; (c) their perspectives on the purposes that assessment serves in EFL education at the university; (d) the washback effect of current assessment practice on teaching and learning; and (e) the changes they would like to make to EFL assessment at the university (refer to Appendix 4 for further details).

All interviews were audio recorded. The researcher also took notes on relevant points for further elaboration during the interviews. To enable interviewees to fully express their ideas and ensure the quality of the data, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.

3.4.2 Observation

Observation is the process of gathering open-ended, first-hand information by observing people and places at a research site (Creswell, 2008). In qualitative research, observation represents a frequently used form of data collection which offers the investigator the opportunity to gather live data from naturally occurring situations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). In this qualitative case study, observation is employed because the method, according to Simons (2009), allows the researcher (1) to gain a comprehensive picture of the research site, a sense of setting which cannot be obtained by solely speaking with people; (2) to document interactions between students and teachers and among students in class, which is regarded as a principle source of evidence about the formative potential of assessment (Heritage, 2013); (3) to discover the norms and values which are part of institutional or classroom culture which has been proved to profoundly influence the assessment practice and its potential for learning (Kennedy, et al., 2008; Pham & Renshaw, 2014); and (4) to cross-check data obtained in interviews with research participants.

Classroom observations were carried out with videotaping in this study since video observation enabled the researcher to capture interactions among students and between students and the teachers with many non-verbal cues to meaning such as facial expressions, eye contact and body positioning (Simons, 2009). Classroom observation with video also allowed the researcher to explore how assessment is enacted inside the classroom and how the practices support students in their learning cognitively, affectively and emotionally. Close attention is paid to (a) the
involvement of students in assessment activities including how they get involved and who is involved; and (b) the interactions among students and between the students and the teacher. In addition, video recordings enabled the researcher to examine any changes in the classroom discourse during the semester and to reflect on her own interpretation about the factors influencing assessment practices. The researcher took the role of a non-participant observer and recorded five to eight lessons of each participating English class. Five of the lessons were video-recorded and the others were audio-recorded.

The times for conducting the classroom observations were decided in consultation with the participating teachers based on their teaching schedules at the beginning of the course and the researcher’s availability; field work at both universities was conducted at the same time. A schedule for classroom observation (Appendix 5) was developed to enable the researcher to focus on the central topics of the study. The oral communication among the students while working in pairs and groups was also audio-recorded. Data obtained from videotaped and audiotaped classroom observation enabled the researcher’s identification of the support to students’ learning from their interactions with others in class during the assessment process, or as a result of assessment events. Particular attention was paid to finding out how the students’ linguistic and psychological learning needs were revealed and addressed. Multiple observations were conducted in order to overcome the initial awkwardness with an outsider in the classroom (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and provide a more comprehensive picture of classroom practice (Creswell, 2012).

3.4.3 Document analysis

Documents or artefacts represent a valuable source of information for qualitative case study research (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988). These can be public documents such as institutional regulations, meeting reports, official memos or private documents, for example personal notes or journals. In this study, the method of document analysis was employed to enable the researcher to portray and enrich the description of context which contributes to the analysis of issues (Simons, 2009). Artefacts collected include course implementation plans, teaching materials, teachers’ records of students’ progress, students’ work with written feedback from peers and from teachers, and English tests used in the courses.
3.4.4 Linking research questions with data sources and methods

The table below presents the links between the research questions, the target data and the specific methods for data collection in this study.

Table 3.4  *Link between research questions, data sources and data collection methods*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Sources of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the current assessment practices in support of the learning of English at the two Vietnamese universities?</td>
<td>Observation: Self-assessment; Peer-assessment; Assessment procedures; Students’ interactions with teacher and peers</td>
<td>Document analysis: Students’ work with feedback from peers; Course implementation plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways and to what extent are students involved in the assessment process?</td>
<td>Document analysis</td>
<td>Interview: Teachers; Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do teachers’ feedback practices align with AFL principles?</td>
<td>Interview: Teachers; Students</td>
<td>Document analysis: Teachers’ written feedback; Peers’ written feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are assessment data used by teachers and students?</td>
<td>Observation: Teachers’ oral feedback and questioning; peers’ oral feedback</td>
<td>Document analysis: Records of students’ progress; Reports of students’ assessment results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview: Teachers; Students; Executive Officers</td>
<td>Observation: Classroom activities such as feedback on students’ performance; teachers’ adjustment in teaching content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5 PILOTING

The purposes of the piloting were to trial the data collection tools and refine them for the main study (Creswell, 2012). These included the classroom observation schedules and interview schedules for Executive Officers, teachers and student focus groups.

The interview schedules for teachers and students, and the observation schedules were piloted in both universities. At PU, the interview schedules were piloted with a mid-career teacher and six students in her class. At Non-PU, the piloting was carried out with an early career teacher and six students in her class. The reasons for the selection of those piloting teachers lay in the fact that most of EFL
teachers at Non-PU are early career teachers, whereas, at PU, more mid-career teachers were allocated to teach the EFL courses targeted in this study (refer to Section 4.1.1 for different types of EFL courses at PU). After contact by phone and email with individual teachers to obtain their consent to participating in the pilot study, the researcher met them in person to establish the time for interviews and classroom observations. Observations were carried out twice in the same class with each piloting teacher. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the teachers before and after the classroom observations. After the first observation, six students in each piloting class were invited to take part in focus group interviews that took place after the second observation.

The interview schedule for the Executive Officer was piloted with one of the two faculty leaders at PU. The schedule could not be piloted at Non-PU since at Non-PU there was only one Executive Officer at faculty level who was selected to take part in the main study.

The piloting enabled the researcher to work out effective ways of using audio and video instruments in class and to revise the wording of some interview questions in Vietnamese to help participants comprehend the questions and respond accordingly. The timeline for the piloting study is detailed in Appendix 6. Pseudonyms were used for the teachers and the Executive Officer involved in the piloting.

3.6 MAIN STUDY

The main data collection for this study was conducted in the two research sites in the first semester of the academic year 2012-2013 (from November 2012 to February 2013). Since the locations of the two universities are close to each other, the researcher travelled back and forth between the two universities to do the field work every day. The procedures and timeline for data collection for the main study are demonstrated in Appendix 7.

3.6.1 Adjustment in the actual data collection

There were three main issues in the actual data collection, which made it slightly different from the original design. First, the study was designed to involve one early career and one mid-career teacher in each university. However, at the time of the study, together with normal EFL courses, PU offered advanced classes for
selected groups of students. Those advanced classes were provided with favourable teaching and learning conditions (refer to Section 4.4.1 for details), which could impact assessment practice by teachers and students. Therefore, one mid-career teacher who was allocated to teach one of the ‘high-quality’ classes at PU was invited to take part in the study. At Non-PU, based on students’ results in the English placement test, about two thirds of first year students in the school year 2012-2013 were placed at elementary level and the others studied at pre-intermediate level. Since the students’ English proficiency can influence teaching, learning and assessment practice in class (Reinders, 2010), one more early career teacher (who was allocated to teach one of the groups of students who had a higher level of English proficiency) was invited to participate in the study. As a result, the number of participating teachers increased from four to six teachers, three mid-career teachers and three early career teachers. The increase in the number of participating teachers aimed to address the emerging issues in the research contexts and to increase the quality of the data collected for the study.

Second, the researcher originally intended to observe five teaching periods of each participating teacher with each observation lasting for 45 minutes. However, at both universities, the teachers often taught continuously for 90 minutes, and had a break for about 15 minutes and continued for another 90 minutes. In order to minimise the impact of my presence on the teaching and learning activities in the participating classes, I often stayed in the class and continued observing until the break time or the end of the lessons. Hence, each actual observation lasted either 90 or 180 minutes.

The third issue relates to unexpected changes in the actual teaching of participating teachers. During the data collection, the teachers often informed me of any unexpected changes in their teaching plans and asked if I desired to change the observation time accordingly. However, due to my appointments with other participants, I sometimes could not manage to change the observation time. One of the most notable consequences of the unexpected changes was that I could not collect sufficient information about the practice of using progress tests carried out by Ms Van, one of the three teachers at Non-PU. Detailed information about the data collected for this study is presented in Appendix 8.
3.6.2 Identification of data sources

The first letter in the teachers’ pseudonym name and the ordinal number of the interviews or observations are used to identify the sources of excerpts or quotations incorporated in this study. Each student in the focus group was assigned an ID number from S1 to S6 in accordance to the purposeful selection referred in Section 3.3.2. In the conversations among students or between students and the teacher, letter “T” refers to “the teacher”, letter “Ss” refers to “students” and letter “S” refers to “one student”, letter “S” and an alphabetical number for example “SA” and “SB” are used to indicate that they are different students. Table 3.8 explains the way the codes are used to identify the data sources in this study.

Table 3.5 Identification of data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with teachers</td>
<td>Ms Lan’s 1st interview</td>
<td>L1I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Yen’s 2nd interview</td>
<td>Y2I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with students in focus group</td>
<td>High achieving and responsive students</td>
<td>S1, S2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High achieving but low responsive students</td>
<td>S3, S4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low achieving and shy students</td>
<td>S5, S6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation</td>
<td>Ms Hong’s 1st Observation</td>
<td>H1O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Van’s 4th observation</td>
<td>V4O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One student</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Ss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                                          | Particular students                           | S_A, S_B, S_C...

3.7 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY ISSUES

Validity and reliability are the criteria to judge the quality of academic research including qualitative case studies (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). According to Merriam (1988), criteria used to assess the quality of case study research include internal validity, external validity and reliability. The following discusses how these three criteria are met in this study.

Internal validity deals with the question of how one’s findings match reality or whether the findings capture what is really there (Merriam, 1988). In qualitative research, the nature of reality is understood as changeable (Merriam, 1988) so
“validity must be assessed in terms of interpreting the investigator’s experience rather than in terms of reality itself” (Merriam, 1988, p 167). In order to ensure internal validity, the researcher needs to demonstrate that (s)he has “represented those multiple constructions adequately” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). According to Merriam (1998), there are six basic strategies an investigator can use to ensure internal validity, including triangulation, member checks, repeated observations of the same phenomenon, peer examination, a participatory mode of research and identification of researcher biases.

In this study, five of the six strategies are used. First is triangulation. The study collected data on the same research issues from multiple sources, which enables the researcher to obtain a holistic understanding and to construct plausible explanations about EFL assessment practices carried out at the two universities and their potential for ELL (refer to Section 3.4.4 for more details). Second is repeated observation. The researcher carried out field work at the research sites for the whole semester and conducted multiple classroom observations at different times during the period.

Third, as the sole researcher of the study, the researcher can afford the supportive mode of research. A significant amount of time and energy was invested in developing collaborative research relationships (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2012; Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Reilly, 2010). At the beginning stages, full disclosure of the requirements for the study were discussed with the participants, outlining their roles and contributions. The disclosure included information regarding the researcher’s background, the background of the study, the design of the study, the research objectives, procedures of data collection, interpretation of data collected, and the potential findings. The participants were also well informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. In addition, all the data collection activities were conducted in consultation with related participants and any concerns emerged or sensed during the data collection process were openly discussed and solved. As a result, the study was well supported by all the participants. For example, the Executive Officer at Non-PU invited the researcher to attend a professional meeting of the whole division, where all EFL teachers at the universities met to discuss the teaching and learning situations and test results of their classes. One teacher, Ms Yen, at PU informed the researcher that she decided to give an extra lesson to help students revise for the final test and that the researcher
was welcome to attend if it was helpful for the study. After becoming familiar with the researcher’s presence and activities, students in the participating classes assisted with the set up of the camera before the lessons and locate the audio recorder to record their talks during pair and group work.

Fourth, the analysis of collected data was closely examined and validated by three supervisors who have comprehensive knowledge in assessment and learning from a sociocultural perspective, second and foreign language teaching, and acquisition of English as a foreign language. Lastly, the theoretical orientation, the researcher’s personal experiences and subjective world view of the phenomena under study, and how the view is influenced by the emergent situations and events during research, were described.

External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations or how generalisable the results of a research study are (Merriam, 1988). As discussed in Section 3.2, the generalisability of qualitative case study research should be looked at analytically (Yin, 2003; 2012; van Lier, 2005). In order to maximise the analytical generalisability of the study, the two universities were selected to have considerable differences in institutional contexts, the participating teachers involved (three early career and three mid-career teachers), and the focus group interviews involving students with different learning attitudes, behaviours and performance in class. Additionally, detailed information about the research sites, the participants, and their assessment practices are presented so that others can compare their proposed contexts and find similarities.

Reliability is another criterion used to assess the quality of academic research. It refers to the extent to which a study’s findings can be replicated. In qualitative research, reality is multidimensional and ever changing (Merriam, 1988, p.167), so it is impossible to repeat any research with the same results. Thus, the goal of reliability is “to minimise errors and biases in a study” (Yin, 2003, p. 37). In this study, this issue is addressed by documenting the procedures in detail and by constructing a database to organise and manage every piece of evidence collected (Yin, 2003). This database is available for external examination of the reliability and consistency of the study.

Since all the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to enable interviewees to fully express their ideas and ensure quality of interview data, this study involves a
validity issue in translation. To ensure the quality of the English translation, the “blind back-translation” procedure (Chen & Boore, 2010) was employed. As I am proficient in both languages and know both language and culture well, I translated all the significant excerpts from interviews into English. Then a professional translator, who is familiar with professional English and Vietnamese, was employed to translate the English version back to Vietnamese. The back-translation excerpts were then compared with the original source in Vietnamese. No significant differences were found between the two versions.

3.8 ANALYSIS

As explained in Section 3.2, the design of this study incorporated elements of exploratory and interpretive studies. Accordingly, the data analysis was logically interpretative in nature. For an interpretative study, it is important to explicate the perspective taken by the researcher to view the issue under research and the researcher’s self (Simons, 2009), which are presented in Section 3.8.1 and 3.8.2. Since the transparency of data analysis is regarded as critical to enhance the quality of qualitative research (Flick, 2011), the data analysis procedures are detailed in Section 3.8.3.

3.8.1 Sociocultural perspective of learning and Assessment for Learning

This study has adopted a sociocultural perspective to underpin its framework and methodology (elaborated in Section 2.1 and 3.1). The sociocultural perspective underlines the role of the individual students as active constructors of their own learning and the importance of their social interactions with others in triggering and scaffolding their learning process (Lantolf, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). The sociocultural perspective also highlights the integration of assessment in teaching and learning and emphasises the important role of assessment for learning (Black, 2010; Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Lantolf, 2007). In order to learn effectively, students need to actively participate in dialogue with teachers and other students via learning activities, gain an understanding of the learning objectives, reflect on their own learning experiences and learn from peers to direct their own learning (ARG, 2002a; Klenowski, 2009). In order to facilitate students’ learning, instruction needs to be sensitive to students’ Zones of Proximal Development (Lantolf, 2000), which requires teachers to gain an understanding of
students’ understanding and their learning trajectory and provide them with relevant assistance in a timely manner to scaffold their learning in both cognitive and social ways (Moore, 2003; Murphy, 2008). Since teaching, learning and assessment are social activities which are culturally contextualised and constructed (Gipps, 1999; Hofstede, et al., 2010), the contextual factors play an important role in shaping and influencing assessment practices and their support for learning. These are the theoretical lenses that I adopted to analyse and interpret the collected data.

3.8.2 Researcher’s self

The involvement of the researcher’s self is widely acknowledged in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Holloway & Biley, 2011), particularly in qualitative data analysis (Denscombe, 2010) and this study is no exception. I admitted the influences of my personal background and experiences in data interpretation. I was an English learner who had gone through competitive assessment procedures to learn and become a teacher of English at tertiary level in Vietnam. Before starting this study, I had more than ten years of experience working as an EFL teacher at three different universities including both public and non-public universities. I also had experience in developing English tests and assessing English test banks developed by my colleagues. In fact, my subjective feeling of the negative impact of the existing EFL assessment practice on students’ learning and my desire to assist students to develop their English ability played an important role in stimulating me to conduct this study. Additionally, I received substantial support from the Vietnamese Government, my own University, the participants from both universities and my supervisors, to carry out this study with the hope that the study could contribute to improve the effectiveness of EFL education in Vietnamese universities. More importantly, I was provided with professional training in a higher degree research program in a different cultural mode, which enabled me to view the issue under research as an insider from outside (Evered & Louis, 1981). All these factors added to the sociocultural lens with which I viewed and interpreted the data. Being aware of those influences, I carried out critically reflexive practice, thinking about my personal assumptions and values, and trying to understand their impact on my interpretation (Cunliffe, 2004), to maintain some distance between myself and this study.
3.8.3 Data analysis procedures

My involvement in conducting and transcribing all the interviews with the participants, observing and note taking on classroom activities for nearly 60 hours, and translating some of the interviews into English, enabled me to become familiar with the data, which was the first step in the data analysis (Creswell, 2012). Based on my preliminary understanding of the data, of the sociocultural perspective and of the principles of AfL, I developed a provisional start list of 58 codes with 10 main categories to analyse the data. The main categories included four main areas of AfL practices identified by Black, et al. (2003a): questioning, feedback, self-assessment, peer-assessment, formative use of summative tests, and six levels of contextual influences from culture, from society, from the higher education system, from institution, from teacher and from students.

Employing the developed analytic frame and based on my notes during field work, I examined the video recordings from classroom observations to identify and transcribe significant episodes into textual documents. While examining and transcribing the video episodes, I also wrote down my own analytical notes in relation to the assessment practices and their support for ELL. Then, all the textual documents related to the assessment practices carried out by individual teachers and their students were imported into Nvivo 10 for manual coding. The purpose of employing the Nvivo 10 program in this study was to assist me in managing and organising the data in a systematic way for effective and efficient retrieval of significant data for analysing and writing up the results. The imported data was coded both deductively using the provisional list of codes and inductively with additional codes developed to address the issues that emerged from the data. Consequently, the final list of codes expanded substantially to 163 codes with 9 subcategories and three main categories. The codes, subcategories and main categories formed a node tree of hierarchy. Figure 3.1 illustrates the hierarchy of tree nodes and an example piece of text coded with a specific node.
After all the collected data about an individual teacher’s teaching and assessment practices were coded, the list of coded nodes with frequency numbers together with actual texts were exported to separate Microsoft Word files. The researcher examined the selected texts carefully to examine the assessment-related practices carried out by the teachers and draw on sociocultural theories and AfL principles to make interpretations about the support of existing assessment practices for students’ ELL and influential factors. The investigation of individual teacher’s assessment practices centred on four areas: questioning, pair and group work activities, feedback, and use of summative tests. To facilitate an understanding of the assessment practices, individual teachers’ perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment, and the institutional context regarding administration of teaching and learning activities, teaching and learning conditions, EFL education programs and institutional regulations on EFL assessment were also investigated.

This study investigates the EFL assessment practices of two universities and in each university the study examined the assessment practices carried out by three teachers and their students. Therefore, the data was not only analysed as individual teacher’s practice but the data was also analysed across the teachers and across the cases to identify similarities and differences in assessment practices by teachers and students, and to establish plausible explanations for the practices. The comparison within the case focused on the teachers’ assessment-related pedagogical practices,
which were integrated in the description and analysis of the practices. The comparison across the cases centred on the similarities and differences in the institutional contexts, the teachers’ perspectives and the assessment practices carried out by teachers and students at the two universities. The results of the cross-case analysis were then analysed following three key themes including (1) the involvement of students in the assessment process, (2) the alignment of feedback practices with AfL principles, and (3) the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning, to explore the support of assessment for ELL.

The data analysis was an iterative process (Denscombe, 2010) with the researcher’s constant reflection and validation of her own understanding and interpretation of the data. The coding and analytic process is illustrated in Figure 3.2. Examples of the development and application of analytical codes in this study are shown in Table 3.9.

![Figure 3.2 The coding and analytic process (adapted from Denscombe, 2010)](image-url)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theoretical concepts &amp; AFL principles</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>• Encourage students’ participation</td>
<td>• Who can talk about this?</td>
<td>Q-EN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus students’ attention on important areas/issues</td>
<td>• What form is the adjective “worse”?</td>
<td>Q-FO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain knowledge of students’ learning to scaffold</td>
<td>• Do you know [the word] “patient”?</td>
<td>Q-KN</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Elaborate on students’ response</td>
<td>• Why do you choose “A”?</td>
<td>Q-RE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student-initiated question</td>
<td>• How do we say “bat taxi” in English?</td>
<td>Q-SI</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inform assessment criteria</td>
<td>• We need to practise using the structures and also responding well</td>
<td>F-CRI</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>• Show students’ strengths</td>
<td>• She has provided lots of information about...</td>
<td>F-STR</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Show students’ errors</td>
<td>• You made lots of pronunciation errors</td>
<td>F-ERR</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Suggest how to improve</td>
<td>• To improve your [intonation] I recommend you listen to the tape at home</td>
<td>F-IMP</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Demonstrate and validate own understanding</td>
<td>• The spelling of ‘gift’ is G-I-F-T, right?</td>
<td>PG-DE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Correct peers’ errors</td>
<td>• Your spelling of the word ‘sightseeing’ is wrong, missing letter ‘t’!</td>
<td>PG-CO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seek help from peers</td>
<td>• What does this phrase mean?</td>
<td>PG-PT</td>
<td>1,2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair &amp; group work</td>
<td>• Revising important areas to prepare students for tests</td>
<td>• Today we revise the grammatical structures</td>
<td>T-REV</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analyse students’ errors</td>
<td>• These are your three main types of writing errors!</td>
<td>T-ERR</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adjust teaching after tests</td>
<td>• The teacher gives us more listening exercises to practise at home.</td>
<td>T-ADJ</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative use of tests</td>
<td>• Cultural values: face saving</td>
<td>• I do not give my answer since I am unsure if it is correct</td>
<td>FA-CU</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutional policy on salary</td>
<td>• My salary here is much better. [...] I can devote my full attention to preparing interesting lessons</td>
<td>FA-IN</td>
<td>1,2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers’ knowledge</td>
<td>• We base on our feeling when designing tests.</td>
<td>FA-TK</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study followed QUT ethical guidelines. Permission to carry out research at the two universities was obtained in September 2012 and QUT ethical approval number 1200000623 was granted on 5th November 2012. During the research process, the participants’ rights of informed consent, confidentiality and beneficence were ensured. All participants were presented with a consent form that states clearly the research objectives, the type of information to be collected, and the confidentiality terms that they signed the form before the data collection was conducted. The participants were free to withdraw at any time and contact details of the researcher and her supervisors were included. The data collection activities were conducted at mutually convenient times for participants and the researcher. The collected data were securely stored and the video recordings were viewed only by the researcher and her supervisors. Anonymity and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the universities and participants. All information that has the potential to identify the universities or the participants has been omitted.
Chapter 4: Case A - Public University

This chapter presents the case study of the Public University (PU), in particular its assessment practices in relation to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Specifically, it examines the assessment and pedagogical practices carried out by three teachers. The sociocultural factors influencing the assessment practices are also highlighted since this study takes a sociocultural perspective, which regards considerations of context as foundational to understanding EFL assessment and pedagogical practices. The first section of this chapter (Section 4.1) provides the institutional context of EFL education and assessment at PU. The next section (Section 4.2) presents EFL assessment practices as undertaken by three different teachers. The final section (Section 4.3) summarised the case study.

4.1 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AT THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Demographic information about PU is presented in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.1). Further information about this public university relates to its administration of teaching activities as summarised below. Mainly institutional inspectors, who supervise the teachers’ punctuality and adherence to prescribed teaching plans, carry out the administration. Teachers are required to bring a complete collection of lesson plans, course implementation plans, class notebooks and teachers’ handbook to their classes. They are required also to show the documents on request of inspectors. In addition, PU collects students’ feedback on their teachers’ practices at the end of the semester. The criteria for feedback include teaching content and methods, learning materials, employment of teaching facilities, compliance with the prescribed teaching plans, enthusiasm in teaching, support for students’ active and collaborative learning, and fairness in assessing, and promoting students’ learning. However, the feedback results are not disseminated to teachers unless fewer than 75 percent of the students indicate that they are satisfied with the courses. In this case, the faculty executive arranges a meeting with the teacher to give feedback and discuss solutions for improvement. At PU, in term of institutional administration, the teachers themselves have not experienced AfL. What they experience is predominantly summative assessment. This institutional context is considered carefully to understand the assessment practices carried out by the participating teachers. In the following sections, other aspects of institutional context including EFL education (Section 4.1.1) and the assessment of students’ EFL learning (Section 4.1.2) will be presented.
4.1.1 EFL education

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is considered a priority at PU. Since the upgrade to university level in 2005, the University has increased the time allocated for English education, making it three times longer than the amount stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). EFL education is divided in two phases: General English (GE) education, which takes place in the first three semesters, and English for Special Purposes (ESP), offered in the fourth and fifth semesters of the eight-semester tertiary program. In accordance with the research design (refer to Section 3.3 for further information), the following section focuses only on the GE program offered to first year students in their first semester.

In the school year 2012-2013, there were three types of EFL programs offered to first year students. The first was the program offered to students of three faculties, including the Faculties of Auditing and Accounting, Information Technology and Business Management. Upon completion of EFL education, students of these faculties are required to achieve a score of 400 in the American Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to graduate. The course books used in the program are a business-oriented series named *International Express*, published by Oxford University Press. In the first semester, English courses feature blended learning modes with 65 periods in face-to-face classes and 25 periods online. The students often have one face-to-face session a week, with each session lasting for four periods (equal to three hours). The online sessions provide students with further exercises and practice in the four macro-skills and the grammar and lexis items learnt in each unit. Students are required to complete online exercises on their own. The percentage of online exercises completed by individual students is viewed by the teachers who are required to generate automated reports on students’ online work before each face-to-face session for monitoring purposes.

The second type of program was offered to students in the other 18 faculties. The course books used in this program were the *New Headway* series, also published by Oxford University Press. Upon completion of their EFL education, these students are required to achieve level A2 according to the Common European Framework of References to languages (CEFR) to graduate. In the first semester, these students studied six periods of English a week (equal to 4 ½ hours). All English sessions offered to this group were carried out face-to-face.
The third type of program was offered to the so called advanced classes (Lop chat luong cao) which were conducted in some faculties (refer to 1.2.1). The teaching and learning conditions in these classes were superior to those in other classes, with well-equipped and air conditioned classrooms, and teachers who had demonstrated a high level of expertise. The students were selected according to three criteria: (i) results in the National University Entrance Exam (NUEE); (ii) results in the English placement test; and (iii) willingness to pay higher tuition fees. The course books used in the program were also the *International Express* series. However, upon the completion of EFL education, the students were required to achieve a score of 550 in the TOEIC, which was higher than in the first program. In the first semester of the school year 2012-2013, students studied 10 periods of English a week (equal to 7 ½ hours). All the English sessions offered to this group were face-to-face. However, the students were provided with access to the online learning program that was offered to students in the first program, and they were encouraged to utilise the online resources. The students’ work online was not regarded as a compulsory part of their study program.

As indicated by the Executive Officer in the following excerpt, the design of EFL education programs at PU originates from the requirement to conform to the national standards of foreign language educational outcomes (MOET, 2012a; Government, 2008). In addition, the programs are responses to the employers’ policy on recruiting university graduates and the institutional self-assessment of students’ EFL learning.

*We reformed the EFL curriculum so that we could meet the required standards set by the Ministry. For the students of such faculties as Business and Management, after a three-year trial time we decided to continue offering the TOEIC-oriented program since it can facilitate the students’ learning of their major subjects and enable them to apply for jobs after graduating. For students majoring in technical disciplines, achieving 400 scores in the TOEIC is too difficult and they may not need a TOEIC certificate to apply for jobs, so we use the CEFR.* (Executive Officer)

The Executive Officer also indicated that the selection of course books to be used in each program was largely influenced by the tests that students have to take at the completion of their EFL courses.

*We choose International Express series for TOEIC-oriented programs since the language situations in these textbooks are all related to the working environment. Thus, it helps students develop vocabulary and communicative
abilities which are related to working places. We choose the New Headway series for CEFR-oriented programs since the series is recommended by the CEFR developers. (Executive Officer)

The way EFL programs are developed at PU reflects the influences of Higher Education (HE) reform, particularly the promotion of EFL education (Government, 2008), the regulation on educational quality assurance in HE (MOET, 2007b), and the recent regulation on using international standardised English tests to measure the quality of EFL education (MOET, 2012a). The programs also reflect the influences of the social use of students’ test results for occupational purposes (Broadfoot, 2009; Carless, 2011) and a heavy reliance on international English course books for designing EFL curricula (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012).

At the time of this study, only the TOEIC-oriented program (type 1) involved both mid-career and early career teachers. Most early career teachers were allocated to the CEFR-orientated program (type 2) and only mid-career teachers were allocated the advanced classes (program type 3). Since this study aims to investigate assessment practices carried out by both mid-career and early career teachers and the influences of contextual factors on the practices, the TOEIC-oriented programs (type 1 and 3) were selected as the focus of this study.

4.1.2 Assessment of students’ EFL learning

This section presents detailed information about the assessment of EFL learning at PU. It starts with the institutional EFL assessment framework (Section 4.1.2.1), which describes the components of EFL assessment and how they are administered. This is followed by the institutional use of EFL assessment results (Section 4.1.2.2), and the design and development of EFL tests (Section 4.1.2.3) at the University.

4.1.2.1. The English language assessment framework

Following MOET’s regulations, assessment of ELL at PU includes four components: attendance and participation, progress tests, a mid-term test and a final test. Figure 4.1 denotes each components of the assessment framework.
Assessment of students’ attendance and participation is carried out by the class teachers. Students are generally required to attend all teaching sessions and participate in learning activities in class in order to get full marks. They are also required to attend at least 80% of lessons to be eligible to take the final test.

The progress tests and the mid-term test used to be designed and delivered by individual class teachers. However, since the second semester of the school year 2011-2012, students of the same cohort are required to take the same progress and mid-term tests. The teachers who teach the courses design the tests and the Division Head approves them. The reason for all students of the same cohort taking the same tests is to ensure the reliability of test results, since “many young teachers are unable to design valid tests. The test items sometimes have difficult or tricky language” (Executive Officer).

The initial implementation, however, showed problems of test reliability, “some teachers found that some students could manage to know the test and all the answers before they took the test” (Faculty Executive). This occurred because the same test was taken at different times by different classes. Therefore, to prevent students from discovering the test questions in advance, five parallel tests are designed for each test and only those students who take the test on the same day are delivered the same test. The test papers are only given to class teachers on test day. The changes focus mainly on assuring fairness in test administration procedures and the reliability of test results. Although class teachers deliver and mark the progress and mid-term tests, the fact that they do not develop the tests themselves hinders their use of the tests to promote learning which is pointed out by two participating teachers, Ms Yen (Section 4.2.2) and Ms Hong (Section 4.2.3).
The final test is generated from the test bank and is approved by the division Head before being delivered. The University’s Centre of Education Quality Management is responsible for organising the final test and informing students of their test results. The students’ anonymous test papers are marked by teachers in the faculty using a 10-point grade scale. If a student’s final result on the ten-point grade scale is below 4 the student has to retake the final test, and if the result is still below 4 after the student retakes the final test, s/he will have to retake the whole unit of study. As demonstrated in figure 4.1, although EFL assessment consists of different components, students’ overall learning results are largely determined by their marks of the final test. The high-stakes nature of the final test exerts considerable influences on teaching, learning and assessment practices which will be elaborated further in Section 4.2.

4.1.2.2. Use of students’ English language assessment results

At present, English test results at PU are mainly used for reporting and measuring students’ learning achievement for classification and certification purposes. As elaborated in the previous section, English test results are used to determine whether a student can advance to the English course in the next level or to repeat the course. Students’ final results of the English language subject are also used, with the results of other subjects according to the assigned number of learning credits, to calculate the students’ Accumulated Grade Point Average (AGPA) of the semester and of their tertiary study. Since EFL education accounts for 20 percent of students’ total learning credits at PU, EFL assessment results can significantly affect students’ AGPA which determines whether the students receive Honour or ordinary degrees at graduation.

According to the Executive Officer, the Faculty has made a plan to make use of English test results for other purposes. First is for moderation. Students’ progress and mid-term test results are compared with final test results to “*adjust teachers’ marking practice*” (Executive Officer). Second is for teacher evaluation. Students’ test results are compared across classes: “*if all the classes taught by a teacher have lower test results than other classes, there might be problems with the teacher’s instructional practices*” (Executive Officer). Third is for checking if there is a normal distribution of the test scores: “*when none or too few students in the class get high marks at a test, the problem might lie in the test itself*” (Executive Officer). However, little attention seems to be paid to the use of assessment data to inform English language teaching and learning.
4.1.2.3. Design of English language tests

As indicated by the Executive Officer, English tests at PU focus on “students’ knowledge and skills of English language”. The development of English tests is based on the test formats developed by the Executive Officers and a group of mid-career teachers. The teachers and students are informed of the test formats in advance to “give a better direction for their teaching and learning” (Executive Officer). This indicates the intentional use of tests, at faculty level, to make the teaching and learning targets clearer and more focused (Herman, 2010; Perrone, 2010). However, test formats only clarify the sections in the test, weighting of each sections, the number and possible types of test questions in each section without any specification of knowledge areas or language skills to be tested. Therefore, that intentional use of tests to influence teaching and learning did not seem to be effective.

There are four sections in progress and mid-term English tests at PU. The first section focuses on testing students’ knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, which is often covered in the textbook selected for the course (thereafter referred as the course book). The other three sections test the three major macro-skills of listening, reading and writing. The final test has the same structure as progress and mid-term tests but includes a speaking component. Listening, reading and writing skills are weighted equally and account for 80 percent of the total mark in progress and mid-term tests and 60 percent in the final test. In TOEIC-oriented programs, test questions in vocabulary and grammar, reading and listening sections often take the same formats as those in TOEIC. This reflects the influences of the use of international standardised tests to certify accomplishment and accreditation of EFL education program on EFL assessment practices at institutional level. As indicated by the Executive Officer, the purposes are to “help students get familiar with the kind of English test that they will have to take later for graduation”. However, analyses of collected tests reveal both similarities and differences between what students were tested on and what they learned in the semester.

Considerable similarities were found in the teaching and testing of speaking and language knowledge. The speaking activities that students were required to carry out in the end-of-semester test, which included introducing themselves and using information cards to make conversation in English, were generally similar to speaking activities that they undertook in class. The topics of the conversations were also taken from the course book. Most of the questions in the vocabulary and grammar section were drawn from the language structures that students had studied or came across in
lessons. These similarities appeared to exert positive washback on learning motivation (Perrone, 2010) as students in the focus groups indicated that all the test questions in the grammar and vocabulary section are related to the lessons, and if they studied carefully they could answer the questions.

Considerable differences, however, were found between the teaching and testing of listening. Listening activities in lessons were often aimed at presenting the use of target language structures for communicative functions, for example using simple present tense to talk about leisure activities or using *there is/are* to describe a place. Students were asked to listen for specific details with abundant contextual information. However, in the tests, which were TOEIC-oriented, students were required to listen and understand short pieces of spoken language with very limited contextual information. To successfully complete listening tests, students needed to have an extensive vocabulary and be able to understand almost every word. The following illustrates the differences between listening tasks in lesson and those in the tests.

**Table 4.1 Comparison between listening tasks in the lessons and in the tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample of the listening tasks in the lesson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening tape script 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stephanie</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er...in the evening, I always read the newspaper. I never watch TV in the evening because my daughters always want to watch cartoons. At the weekends, I often go shopping in the supermarket. I invite friends to my house and we have parties...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*International Express, elementary, student’s book, (p.16 & 101)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples of listening tasks in the test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening tape script 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part one. Listen and choose the statement that best describes each picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture one. (A) This is a picture of a motorcycle. (B) This is a picture of a chair. (C) This is a picture of a wheel chair. (D) This is a picture of a bicycle. Picture two…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part two: listen to a question and three responses, then choose the best response to each question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 1. Where is A4 paper? (A) On the table, next to the laptop. (B) She is on her way home. (C) I feel fine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Progress test 1, (p. 1)*
Differences were also found between writing activities in lessons and those in the tests. In lessons, students were rarely required to write in English. The only writing activity that they were sometimes required to do was to use given words and phrases to build up sentences and conversations in English. These activities were designed to practise using specific target language structures and phases. However, in the tests, students were required to do such tasks as ‘use given words to make meaningful sentences’; ‘make questions for the underlined words and phrases’; ‘rearrange the following words to make complete sentences’; ‘choose one word from the box to fill in each gap’ and ‘write about your best friend’. The differences identified between learning tasks and the design of test items suggest a lack of alignment between learning and testing of listening and writing. The lack of alignment appeared to result in the fact that all the participating teachers spent time to teach students strategies to do the listening tests (elaborated in Section 4.2), which did not necessarily facilitate the development of their listening ability. The lack of alignment could also inhibit the use of test results to inform the teaching and learning of listening and writing.

There also seemed to be a lack of alignment between the test and the course objective of developing students’ ability to communicate in English. The analysis of test questions in the writing section indicated that only one out of the four writing tasks required students to express their own ideas in writing. The other three tasks still appeared to test students’ knowledge of English language structures and vocabulary. Consequently, about 45 percent of the marks in the progress tests and mid-term test and about 35 percent of the marks in the final test were allocated to testing students’ language knowledge. Only the final test included the speaking section. However, since all the information cards used in the speaking test were given to students many weeks before the test, the speaking tasks appeared to test students’ memorisation of spoken language rather than their ability to communicate or to seek new information orally. The primary focus on language knowledge in English tests at PU not only posed possible threats to the validity of EFL assessment results (Crooks, et al., 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 2009) but also hindered the implementation of assessment practices to promote the development of students’ English language ability, elaborated in the following section.
4.2 CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AT THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Assessment and its potential for learning are best demonstrated in the classroom context (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) and via teachers’ practices of questioning, self- and peer-assessment, feedback and formative use of summative tests (Black, et al., 2003a). In order to investigate the current EFL assessment practices at PU, the following sections examine practices carried out by three different teachers: Ms Lan (Section 4.2.1); Ms Yen (Section 4.2.2) and Ms Hong (Section 4.2.3). The focus is on the roles of these assessment practices in supporting ELL. To facilitate understanding of the assessment practices and their potential for ELL, the teachers’ teaching experiences and their perspectives on effective English language teaching, learning and assessment, as well as their students’ perspectives on the helpfulness of their assessment-related practices, are also taken into consideration.

Each section starts with the teacher’s profile, which provides information about the teacher’s teaching experience and key characteristics of the English course that she was delivering. It is then followed by the teacher’s perspectives on ELL, teaching and assessment. After that the teacher’s assessment-pedagogical practices are illustrated. The practice of self-and peer-assessment was not explicitly employed by the teachers but implicitly enacted in pair and group work activities. Therefore, the examination of current assessment practices focuses on four main areas of questioning, pair and group work activity, feedback and use of summative tests. The section ends with a summary of current assessment practices undertaken by the teachers and their students, the potential support of the practices for students’ ELL and the influences of the sociocultural, institutional and classroom contexts on the support of assessment for ELL.

4.2.1 Assessment practices in Ms Lan’s class

4.2.1.1 Teacher profile

*English language learning and teaching experiences*

Ms Lan graduated from university in 2001 and obtained her Masters degree in 2007. She has been teaching English to non-English-major students at PU for over 10 years and has not worked in any other HE institution. Given the criteria established for this study, Ms Lan is considered as a mid-career teacher. The course she delivered
belonged to the advanced program. This meant that her teaching time was longer, her class size was smaller, her students’ levels of English proficiency were higher, and the facilities inside her classroom were better than those in other English courses offered to the majority of first year students at PU (refer to Section 3.3.2 and 4.1.1 for further information).

**Perspective on English language teaching, learning and assessment**

In this section, Ms Lan’s perspective on English language teaching and learning as well as her understanding of different purposes of assessment will be elaborated. The aim is to investigate how her instructional and assessment knowledge may influence her practices of utilising assessment to support ELL.

In terms of ELT, Ms Lan stated that the most important goal is to “develop students’ ability to use English language” (L1I) and the only way to develop students’ language ability was to “create more chances for students to practise using English in class” (L1I). However, as illustrated in her account of her own practice, she seemed to focus on transmitting and facilitating students’ memorisation of language knowledge via drill and practice rather than developing their ability to express their own ideas in English: “while teaching, I try to transmit to students the basic knowledge written in the course book […]. After that, I organise activities for students to practise to memorise the language knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar” (L1I).

Ms Lan indicated her belief that “course books have been developed to include all the needed language knowledge and skills. If we do all activities in the course book well, we can attain our objectives” (L1I). Her tendency to rely on the course book for selecting teaching content and designing learning activities limited her use of assessment data to adjust the teaching plan to address students’ learning needs emerged during the lesson.

Ms Lan highlighted the importance of students’ self-study and learning agency: “after learning the basic things at the university, students must have the ability to self-study. Once they have that ability, they can manage to learn themselves to be able to carry out more difficult tasks” (L1I). However, she did not seem to think that teachers needed to play a role in developing students’ ability to self-study and take control of their own learning. She regarded students’ self-study as teacher-directed learning.
which students carry out at home, “I just ask students to complete all the tasks that I give. I do not require them to study more” (L1I). Ms Lan’s perspective on students’ independent learning is influenced by the educational tradition characterised by teacher-centeredness, resulting in her limited understanding about students’ active learning and the role of teachers in scaffolding students’ active learning (Reinders, 2010), which affects her practices of utilising assessment to promote learning (further elaboration is presented in Section 4.2.1.1).

In terms of assessment, Ms Lan indicated her understanding that assessment could be embedded in teaching: “assessment can be regular class activities, for example, through the practice section we can see if students make any errors or if they are able to generate the target sentence” (L1I). She highlighted the potential of assessment to inform teachers and students about the effectiveness of their previous teaching and learning and what they need to do improve:

> Based on the information about students’ learning gained through [classroom] assessment, teachers can adjust their teaching to make it more suitable for students. [...] Assessment in the form of tests can also give feedback to students. Based on the test results, students can know what percentages of the test they had completed. They can also identify their errors, reasons for making the errors and what to study or to notice while studying. (L1I)

She reported her own practice of using assessment information to adjust her selection of learning activities to increase students’ engagement: “I may find out that the activity is too difficult or unattractive to students so I may adjust the difficulty or choose another one more appropriate to them” (L1I). She also indicated her use of assessment to identify students in need to give them more individual assistance during the lesson: “[after having the test results] we may pay more attention to low-achieving students, for example, call them more often or notice their errors to discuss with them” (L1I). However, her adjustment appeared to be limited by her tendency to rely on the course book for the identification of the lesson objectives: “My teaching objectives will still be the objective of the unit, but I will select activities which are suitable for students and appropriate for that unit” (L1I).

Ms Lan underlined the summative purposes of assessment including measuring students’ learning achievement and classifying their proficiency.

> We expect students to master what we have taught them, so we assess to see how much they have achieved. [...] Sometimes, we design test questions slightly
differently from what we have taught to see if the high achieving students can do it. (L1I)

She indicated that she had difficulties in assessing students’ learning: “I often feel stuck. I do not know how to assess students to know if they have achieved what I expected”. She further explained her difficulties as follows.

For example, I ask students to learn the vocabulary at home. However, I do not know how to assess their learning to see how much they have learned or if they are able to use the new vocabulary. […] I cannot check the whole class since there is limited time. (L1I)

Her explanation suggests that she has limited knowledge about using classroom assessment, which includes not only mini-tests but also alternative assessment such as portfolios, journals, self- and peer-assessment, and examination of students’ interactions with teachers and peers (Rea-Dickins, 2007), to gain knowledge about students’ learning.

Ms Lan emphasised the alignment between learning and testing: “Our principle is to test what students have learned”. However, in accordance with her perspective on ELT previously elaborated, she seemed to regard ELL more as memorising language knowledge rather than developing linguistic competence and skills: “Tests are not aimed to challenge students but to check if they have mastered learning content such as specific grammatical structures, vocabulary or responses to particular communicative expressions. Tests are based on what students have learned” (L1I). Due to her focus on language knowledge, she indicated difficulties in designing reading and listening tests to align with what had been taught and learned: “To be honest, it is difficult to test only what students have learned. […] It cannot be completely what students have learnt since the reading passages in tests cannot be the passages that students have read in class…” (L1I).

Ms Lan was particularly concerned about the construct validity of the tests which were developed by the university teachers: “we think this question tests students’ vocabulary but it may turn out to test other things”. She valued international standardised tests: “it would be easier to take the whole test from some trusted sources where the tests have been designed according to specific standards” (L1I). She was also concerned about the current practice of delivering parallel tests to prevent students from cheating on English tests: “…when more tests are used, it is less likely that students know the test questions and answers before officially taking the test.”
However, the problem might be that the tests are not equal” (L1I). Her concerns indicate her awareness of possible problems regarding the validity and reliability of English test results. However, she did not know how to solve the problems: “Honestly, since we are not experts in assessment, we base largely on our feeling when designing tests… I cannot think of any solutions” (L1I). This, together with the above elaboration on her difficulties in designing reading and listening tests, indicates her limited knowledge and expertise in designing language tests, which affects her use of English tests to promote ELL.

**4.2.1.1. Assessment-related pedagogical practices**

In this section, Ms Lan’s practices of questioning, using pair and group work activities, giving feedback and using English tests will be elaborated. The aims are to explore, from a sociocultural perspective, how these practices may support ELL and to investigate the alignment of these practices with AfL principles (presented in Section 2.2.4).

**Questioning**

Ms Lan frequently asked questions of her students during lessons. Most of her questions were closed questions. As illustrated in the following excerpt, her questions could help students demonstrate their understanding and direct their attention to key issues in the lesson.

*Can we use ‘some’? This is a negative sentence; can we use ‘some’? Why is it incorrect to use ‘many’? Ah, because ‘milk’ is uncountable noun. So what should be used with uncountable nouns instead of ‘many’?* (L4O)

Only some students responded to her questions individually. They often responded loudly in chorus if the correct answers were easy to find. Otherwise, they responded softly or kept silent. Ms Lan did not ask individual students for their responses. She often asked questions of the whole class and answered them herself. Her questions and answers were mostly in Vietnamese. She allowed students to respond in chorus and expanded on the correct answers to check “whether they have understood properly” (L2I). When few students responded, she asked more specific or guiding questions, and revised the related knowledge. The following excerpt is an example of her practices. In this excerpt, Ms Lan was checking students’ answers to the following multiple choice question.
We were so disappointed because we had... weather on our holiday to France last week.

a. bad  b. a bad  c. a worse  d. a good

T: ...“worse” là đúng gì đấy nhỉ, là so sánh hơn của tính tử, vậy ta phải expect là có từ gì? “than” nhưng ko có vậy a or b? [What form is the adjective 'worse'? It is the comparative form of the adjective, so which word is expected to be there? ‘than’ but there isn’t that word so option ‘a’ or ‘b’ is correct?]

Ss: (A few students responded softly, some say ‘a’, some say ‘b’)

T: ‘a’ hay ‘b’ chỉ khác nhau cái gì thôi? [What is difference between ‘a’ & ‘b’?]

Ss: ‘a’

T: Thế để quyết định có ‘a’ hay ko ‘a’ thì mình căn cứ vào cái gì? [What helps you decide whether or not to include ‘a’ in that sentence?]

Ss: Danh từ / Noun

T: Danh từ nào? [Which noun?] ‘Weather’. Countable noun or uncountable noun?

Ss: Uncountable

T: So can you use ‘a’? có thể dùng ‘a’ được ko? Có thể dùng lả ‘a bad weather’ được ko? [Can we use ‘a’ with that noun? Can it be ‘a bad weather’?]

Ss: Không[ No]

T: Không, đã bảo là không dể được làm sao dùng được. Vậy đáp án sẽ là bad, đáp án a: bad weather. Không có “a”, ko được “a” được chưa? [No, I have already told you that we can’t use article ‘a’ with an uncountable noun. So the correct answer is bad. Option a: bad weather without ‘a’, we cannot use ‘a’, OK?]

(L4O)

She sometimes asked questions of individual students and expanded on the students’ responses, which appeared to facilitate students’ use of English to communicate their own ideas. As illustrated in the following excerpt, she repeated incorrect sentences, elicited peer-correction or used different intonation and sentence stress as prompts to elicit students’ self-correction.

T: What did you do last weekend?
S: I went my friend’s home
T: ‘Went my friend’s home’ thiếu gì cả lớp?[What is missing in “went my friend’s home,” whole class?] | Elicit peer-correction

Ss: Giới tử [Preposition]

T: I went to my friend’s home.
What did you do at your friend’s home?
S: Er..er..
T: What did you and your friend do? | Clarify questions using intonation

Recast & expand

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According to the focus group students, Ms Lan’s questions provided them with opportunities to “practise listening to English” (Ss) and helped them focus on learning: “we have to pay attention to the lesson since the teacher may call on us to give responses to her questions” (S1). The reasons they gave for not responding to the teacher included their uncertainty about the correct answers: “I do not respond when I am not sure about my answer” (Ss), and their understanding of the questions: “Sometimes, I had not been able to understand the teacher’s question when other peers gave the answers” (S5). This reflected the inhibitive influences of the cultural face-saving concern (Ashwill & Diep, 2004) and the impact of students’ self-perception of their language proficiency on their involvement in responding to the teacher’s questions.

It was observed that students sometimes initiated questions of Ms Lan during lessons. The focus group students stated that they “asked questions of the teacher whenever we [they] need her help since she is easy-going” (Ss). The student-initiated questions were in Vietnamese and often related to English vocabulary, for example “Is there a word which has similar spelling or pronunciation with the word ‘passenger’?” or “How do we say ‘bát taxi’ in English?” (L2O). Some of the students’ questions were about the time of coming tests and how their accumulated marks were calculated. Ms Lan often answered the students’ questions immediately. Her practice of giving direct answers to students’ questions could help provide students with assistance to solve their problems in real time, which could facilitate their learning engagement (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004). She rarely referred to the questions in her teaching after that, which suggested her limited use of students’ questions to diagnose their learning needs (McGrew, 2005), and to inform her subsequent teaching. She indicated her primary concerns were whether she could give answers to the students’ questions. Her concern reflects the influences of cultural respect for teachers’ knowledge (Nguyen, et al., 2005b) on her practice of responding to students’ questions.

...Normally I know the answer...If I know the answer I will tell them immediately.... Otherwise, ... very rarely ...I will tell them that I will give the answers later. However, I rarely need to delay the answer since most of their questions are within my ability to answer. (L2I)
**Pair work and group work activities**

In alignment with her perspective on ELT which emphasised students’ need to practise using target language structures in order to master them, Ms Lan was observed to make frequent use of pair and group work activities. The large amount of EFL teaching and learning time allocated to an advanced class was a facilitative factor for this practice. She asked students to work in pairs to repeat the model conversations in the course book and to create new conversations based on the model. She also asked them to work in pairs to formulate questions and answer those questions themselves using the target grammatical structures or vocabulary. She used group work less often, mainly for student discussion. She also frequently prepared materials in addition to the course book to organise more pair and group work activities for students. The supplementary materials used were closely related to students’ current lessons and varied in type, including handouts, images, drawings, sounds and movies. Thus, although she indicated her tendency to rely on the course book for teaching content and activities, she actually demonstrated some level of agency over the use of the mandated course book by using supplementary materials and adapting learning activities according to her own understanding of students’ learning needs.

Ms Lan’s practices of organising students to work in pairs/groups and her use of supplementary materials facilitated students’ engagement in learning. All students were observed to participate in the activities and the classroom was filled with laughter and positive noise when students were working in pairs and groups. The focus group students also indicated that they “have lots of fun working together” (S6) and “like the supplementary materials, particularly those with sounds and images” (S2 & S3). The practice has the potential to develop students’ English language ability as focus group students indicated that they “enjoyed working in pairs/ groups because we have chances to freely use English to exchange ideas” (S2 & S5). For a silent student, who preferred to work individually and to focus on grammar and vocabulary since it brought her high marks in the tests, pair and group work activities prompted her to participate in speaking English in class: “I do not like talking with other people, particularly in English, but working in pairs or groups I have to” (S3).

Students were observed using Vietnamese frequently to communicate with their peers while working in pairs and groups. The activities seemed to provide them with opportunities to carry out collaborative learning, peer-assessment and self-
assessment of their learning. Students’ interactions with peers together with their frequent use of Vietnamese appeared to enable them to demonstrate and reflect on their own learning and to learn from peers.

(Students are working in group to discuss and write down advantages and disadvantages of travelling by train)

\begin{quote}
S_A: Từ sightseeing viết sai rồi, thiếu chữ t. Railway viết thành một từ thời. [Your spelling is wrong, need letter ‘t’ in the word ‘sightseeing’ Write ‘railway’ as one word.]
S_B: Đâu dự trang thiết bị là gì nhỉ? [How do you say that it has all the equipment we may need?]
S_C: Good service
\end{quote}

(Students are asking and answering questions in the course book about past activities)

\begin{quote}
S_D: When did you begin English lessons?
S_E: Bắt đầu học à?
[Do you mean beginning learning English?]
S_D: Bắt đầu học TA khi nào? Bắt học TA bắt đầu tiên à?
[When did you begin learning English? Your first lesson!]
S_C: Bắt đầu học chủ?
[Is it about when I began learning English?]
S_D: Ú, bạn bắt đầu bắt học TA khi nào, lesson là bắt ấy
[Yes, when you began learning English, ‘lesson’ means ‘bai hoc’]
S_E: Theo kiểu là lớp hay là ấy? [Formal or informal learning ?]
S_D: Chắc theo lớp [I think formal learning in class]
\end{quote}

While students worked in pairs and groups, Ms Lan often circulated from one group to another “to see if students have any difficulties” and to make it easier for students to approach her for help: “If they want they can ask me for help with new vocabulary or anything they are not clear about” (L2I). Her close observation of students’ work in pairs/groups seemed to provide her with information about the students’ learning and opportunities to adjust her teaching accordingly. As demonstrated in the following excerpts, she often repeated the task requirements or gave additional instructions while students were working in pairs/groups.

\begin{quote}
…Now work in pairs and make your own story about James’s unlucky Saturday. We can rearrange the six pictures; add more details to make a story about his day. You have three minutes…(Ms Lan starts to move around the class, listening to students’ conversations)
\end{quote}

(… one minute later)
We need to remember that [it happened] last Saturday so we have to put the verbs in past tense, don’t we?

(…one minute later)

We can use such words as ‘first’, ‘then’, ‘after that’ to show the order of the activities… whatever order but we need to demonstrate what happened first, what came later…

(L2O)

She sometimes got involved in students’ pair work to model the language performance as follows.

(Students are working in pairs, asking and giving direction using the map in the course book)
S1: Excuse me can you tell me how to get to the shopping centre?
S2: Yes, it’s the first er … er..
S1: Turn left, go..
S2: Turn left, go …er…
T: Go straight on
S2: Go straight on er…
T: South Avenue
S2: South Avenue, turn first left…

(L1O)

It was also observed that students often asked Ms Lan for help with English vocabulary while they were working in pairs and in groups, particularly when she was near their seats. Thus, her close observation of students’ work in pairs and groups facilitate her provision of relevant and timely assistance to support students’ learning. This finding is consistent with Pham’s (2014a) ideas which emphasise the important role of teachers in facilitating students’ learning in group settings.

After students had finished their pair and group work, Ms Lan often asked them to perform in front of the class, pairing with a new partner or demonstrating the results of their group work. She did not give marks for such performances but sometimes encouraged competition between groups. During students’ performances, she sometimes got involved to model language performance or to provide students with further guiding questions. She said, this was because she “could understand what the students wanted to say in that situation and they just needed a bit of help to get over their difficulties” (L2I). The following excerpt illustrates how Ms Lan supported her students while they were performing in front of the class, which helped inform students of expected learning outcomes, enabled the performing student to correct errors, and encouraged the student to use English to express meanings.
(A student is talking about her partner’s last holiday)

...  
S: She stayed there a week  
T: For a week  
S: For a week. She travelled Ha Long bay by car....
(The student continues talking about the weather and place and suddenly stops)
T: Where did she stay? Did she like her holiday?  
S: She stayed in a hotel. She liked it very much....  

The focus group students indicated that Ms Lan’s practice of not giving marks to their language performances in class freed them from their mark-related concerns: “We feel more relaxed when our performances are not marked”(S5). They also valued the support that the teacher gave them individually while they were working in pairs or performing in the front of the class: “[I like pair and group work activities also because] the teacher can correct me when I make errors” (S4). As shown in the following excerpt, her relaxed attitude towards students’ errors while performing in the class also helped them gain confidence in demonstrating what they knew and in seeking help with their learning problems.

When the teacher appoints us to perform in front of the class, none of us refuse to go even when we are not quite sure if we can do it. That is because the teacher creates a relaxing atmosphere in the class. If she was a strict teacher, we might feel nervous when we could not speak well. However, we feel quite comfortable performing. Even when we can’t do the performance, she smiles and tries to cheer us up then we feel better and she helps us so we finally finish the task. (S2)  

Thus, Ms Lan’s practice of not giving marks to students’ language performance, her continuous support and her relaxed attitude towards students’ errors while performing in class helped facilitate students’ involvement in demonstrating their learning for further support to develop it further. This finding is in accordance with the results of studies related to factors affecting students’ learning attitude in class reviewed by Ellis (2012).

Feedback  
Ms Lan often gave feedback to students after their language performances in class, mostly in Vietnamese. She elaborated on strengths and weaknesses of the performance to help “students learn from their peers’ strengths and realise errors to avoid” (L2I). The criteria she used to assess performances included the use of target language structures, communication content, fluency, and meaningful interactions. She also
communicated her expectation that students could be creative in using English to express their own ideas. As illustrated in the following examples, her feedback could help inform students about expected learning outcomes.

*You have used a lot of prepositions [to give direction] (L1O)*

*We have to try to be fluent, don’t we? (L1O)*

*She has provided quite a lot of information about weather and people… (L6O)*

*We should not depend too much on the model conversation. We do not need to speak exactly the same sentence. The question can also be slightly different but the response should be in accordance to the question. For example, the question in the book is ‘will people speak English?’ we can ask ‘what language do people in Vietnam speak?’ and your friend - S2 said ‘now a lot of people speak English well so you can get help’ or ‘you won’t have any language problems, don’t worry’… (L6O)*

Ms Lan particularly “[focus[ed] on [identifying and correcting] students’ errors …so that the whole class can recognise it” (L2I). She identified and corrected the errors herself most of the time. Before a student performed a language task, Ms Lan often remind other students: “[Listen to your friend’s story and see if there are any errors!” (L2O). After students’ language performances, she pointed out their error: “[You made lots of pronunciation errors ‘dessert’…” (L3O). However, she did not criticise students for making errors. She told them that “[it is not a problem at all that you make errors, just fix them!” (L2O). She sometimes made use of the errors to create a jovial atmosphere in class. In the following excerpt, she was commenting on a student’s practice of giving direction.

*T: My goodness! Giving direction like this is so time-consuming. Standing in the street and listening to such direction (laughs)… not sure how long it would take to reach the destination. Do you think so?

(All students laugh including the students who have done the performances) (L1O)*

Ms Lan’s feedback sometimes incorporated further instruction:

*We can see that when giving directions, he says ‘you go’ like this and that. However, we do not need to use ‘you’. That means we can use the imperative form of the verb, can’t we? If we want to show the direction clearly, we need to use ‘first’, ‘then’, ‘next’… (Ms Lan gives the direction again using the linking words). (L1O)*

She sometimes adjusted her teaching, adding unplanned teaching content in her
feedback. For example, in the following extract, she added cultural content to the lesson when realising that the students’ lack of cultural knowledge prevented them from performing the task.

(In a review lesson, two are students performing on stage, practising making and responding to offers and requests in English)

S1: Can I take your coat?
S2: No…
T: (to the whole class). Listen to S2’s reply. S2, again, please.
S2: Thank you.
T: (to S2) [Did you] change your mind [about what to say to reply]?
S2: Em không định đưa cho bạn mà em tự cắt
     [I did not intend to give it to her since I intend to hang it myself]
T: … (Ms Lan explains the etiquette in some countries)

Ms Lan appeared to analyse students’ learning problems to help resolve them. However, she rarely gave students the chance to explain their own understanding or problems, but made her own assessment of their problems and adjusted her teaching accordingly. As illustrated in the following excerpt, she clarified her perception of the students’ learning problems and adjusted her teaching by briefly revising the target language structures before appointing another pair to perform.

…What is your problem? You do not know the language or do not know which way to go? (Not one student responds. The teacher does not seem to expect students’ responses). In terms of language structures, they are just ‘go straight on’, ‘go ahead on’. Now, what to say to indicate turning left or right? (Some students speak up). If the street is named, it will be ‘turn left on’ or ‘turn right on’ or ‘take the first left’, ‘second left’. When there is some signpost we say for example ‘at the traffic light, turn left’. Now another pair, please! (L1O)

Ms Lan often asked questions such as “Is that [performance] OK? or “Do you agree?” to invite students to give feedback on peers’ performances. However, few students volunteered to give their comments. Some students in the focus group indicated their intention to wait to be specifically nominated by the teacher: “if she nominated me, I would give my opinion” (S3) . Since Ms Lan did not call on specific students, she was the only one who gave feedback to students in class.

As indicated by the focus group students, Ms Lan’s feedback seemed to enable them to gain understanding about expected learning outcomes and raised their awareness of specific errors.

She [the teacher] tells us when we made errors in language structures or when our stress or intonation is wrong. (S1&3)
She also tells us that we have to improve the content and intonation. (S4)

The feedback also appeared to help students gain further understandings about the process of learning the English language. However, its usefulness seemed to be limited in terms of helping students to undertake necessary actions to achieve the expected learning outcomes as illustrated in the following response.

I find it easier to pronounce individual words with correct stress. However, it takes time to read with correct stress in a conversation. The teacher can help us realise our errors when we make them and we can improve gradually not immediately. (S2)

Ms Lan did not seem to place importance on giving feedback, guiding students on what to do to improve their performances, or involving students in self-reflection, apparently because of time limitation.

Sometimes I give my feedback right away as a natural reaction, saying what [of the performance] is OK and what is not. Sometimes, when there is not much time left, for example near the end of the lesson, I do not ask students to perform the task but I myself summarize [the main ideas of the sections or the lesson] so that I can move to the next task or finish the lesson. (L2I)

Ms Lan’s practice of giving feedback had the potential to enhance students’ understanding of the learning objectives to facilitate their learning (Black, 2010). Her relaxed attitude towards students’ errors and the incorporation of corrective instructions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) according to her interpretation of students’ problems reflected her use of assessment information to inform her teaching and her consideration of affective factors, which seemed to enable students to realise and learn from their errors. However, her feedback seemed to be inhibited by her concerns over the time restriction, which was caused by the institutional requirement to follow the prescribed teaching plan. Her lack of the use of peer- and self-assessment suggests the influences of traditional education practices characterised by teacher-centeredness.

Use of summative tests

After marking and returning progress and mid-term tests, Ms Lan often helped students redo all the test items, highlighted the typical errors and explained test-taking strategies, mostly in Vietnamese. She focused on exhorting students not to repeat their errors.

Some made errors about verb tense, some made errors with prepositions. [...] Who made which error must try to remember not to make it again. You may
make another error but not the same one. You must realise your error to avoid making it. Those who did not make the errors also need to pay attention. You may make the error in the next test if you do not pay attention. (L4O)

She sometimes nominated the students who made the errors to write down their wrong sentences on the board and then corrected them.

Who wrote incorrect sentence for question 1? (Several students raise their hands). S6, go to the board and write your sentence!...How could you write ‘eating home’! Not just one but many of you did so. (L4O)

The nominated students did not seem to be embarrassed, perhaps because Ms Lan repeated that many students made the same errors. Therefore, the individual student who made the errors did not feel they were losing face.

Ms Lan paid attention to the reasons why students made the errors. However, she did not ask students to explain but she herself did it explicitly in the class. As can be seen in the following excerpt, she adapted her teaching according to her assessment of learning problems.

T: The error in question 1 is very typical. Anyway, I am thinking maybe some of you think that we do not use prepositions with ‘next’ and ‘last’, don’t you? Do you try to apply that rule? (Asks the whole class)

S1: Yes

T: When being used with a point of time, ‘next’ and ‘last’ we do not take prepositions before them. OK? However, in this sentence, it is not a point of time but ‘English lesson’ so we need to use the preposition ‘in’ ‘in your last English lesson’…

(L4O)

Meanwhile, when asked about what changes they would like the teacher to make, some focus group students indicated their desire to have more opportunities to explain their own answers and to have their answers validated by the teacher, as demonstrated in the following excerpts. The responses indicated students’ desire to demonstrate their own understanding and their awareness of the potential support of the demonstration for their learning, which seemed to be overlooked by the teacher.

I like to explain my answer myself but she hardly offers us the chance. She often explains for us. I prefer to be given chances to explain myself since I may have the right answer but wrong way of getting it. Moreover, I consider my explanation to the teacher as one opportunity for language performance. (S3)

I want the teacher to let us express our understanding more often. It can be either in Vietnamese or in English. The teacher will validate our understanding in the end. (S1)
Ms Lan spent a considerable amount of time after each progress test and before the final test to give instructions about the test format and test-taking strategies “to help students become familiar with the format of the test that they are going to take” (L11), which was also mentioned by the Executive Officer. As illustrated in the following excerpts, she gave further explanation of the requirements of listening and writing tasks in the tests and provided students with hints about how to do the tasks.

To describe a picture is to describe what we can see, not what we can infer from it...Among three details, you can hear two but the information about the position is wrong so the option can’t be correct.[...] We need to eliminate the unlikely option. Knowing which option is unlikely is a success. (L4O)

Ms Lan seemed to use tests to motivate students’ learning. She sometimes showed the students examples of the alignment in content between what they were learning and what they would be or had been tested to encourage them to study hard to get high results. In the following excerpts, for example, she highlighted the alignment between learning and testing of oral English.

These are questions about a holiday. We need to know the questions since they are questions we need to ask if we want to ask someone about his/her holiday. If someone asks us about our holiday, he/she also uses such questions. It is very likely that in the speaking test at the end of the semester we will be asked such questions. (L4O)

Ms Lan paid considerable attention to students’ test results. She gave norm-referenced feedback on test results: “Our lowest mark is 6. However, two or three of you achieved a rounded 6” (L4O). She also reminded the students of the importance of getting high marks, which reflected the influence of the high-stakes testing context.

Since we are in an advanced class, your marks are one of the conditions [to continue studying the advanced program]. Your accumulated GPA needs to be higher than the benchmark. English subject has many credits so you need to make sure that your English marks do not pull your average mark down, otherwise you will be in trouble. We need to try to get mark A, B… (L4O)

Ms Lan’s practices of identifying the link between the tests and what the students had learned, and reminding them of the importance of test results had the potential to encourage students to focus on learning. Her practice of revising test-related language knowledge and highlighting typical errors seemed to enable students to recognise the specific errors they had made, which helped them reflect on previous learning and avoid making same errors. However, with these practices she appeared to focus more on improving students’ test results rather than their language ability for communicative purposes. This focus demonstrates the influences of the examination
culture (Carless, 2011) and the washback of English tests that did not align with learning that the students experienced, and the learning objectives (Perrone, 2010).

Students in the focus group indicated their use of test results to judge their learning ability: “low marks mean we cannot learn” (S5), and their level of attainment: “I think my studying of English is OK, everything is OK, I can get 80-90% correct answers” (S4). Some used test results to identify the areas they need to work on in their independent learning or source for means to improve it: “I feel resentful….I will read more about that error in the grammar books” (S1). However, as illustrated in the following excerpts, students did not seem to have a clear understanding of the sources of their errors, especially in reading and listening, and they tended to focus on drill and practice to improve the language skills.

The reading passage was short and not very difficult. Why could not I do it? (S5)
I can still do the tests but I think my listening is awful. It is better now but in the past I could not hear anything at all. […] when people [on the tape] speak English, they speak so quickly so it is difficult to understand. I am trying to improve my listening ability. I listen to English before going to bed and after getting up in the morning. (S2)

As indicated in the following response, the student’s effort to self-improve their test errors decreased over time: “I also practised listening before going to bed and after getting up, but it makes me feel fed up when I practise listening for too long” (S1). It appeared that students’ use test results to inform their learning was challenged by their limited understanding of the learning methods and strategies they could employ to improve their language skills and also by the limited diagnostic value of test results.

4.2.1.3. Summary

Ms Lan carried out various assessment-related pedagogical practices which had the potential to promote students’ ELL. Her adaptation of the mandated course book to frequently organise students to work in pairs and groups seemed to enable them to carry out self- and peer-assessment, which provided them with various learning opportunities and facilitated engagement. Her practices of not giving marks for students’ language performances, her relaxed attitude towards students’ errors in the performances, her continuous support, and her close monitoring of students’ work in pairs also exerted positive impact on their learning. That is because the practices created a supportive learning discourse inside the class, which reduced students’ anxiety and increased their willingness to demonstrate their own learning (Dornyei,
2001, 2007) for others to scaffold it. In addition, she frequently asked questions of
students during the lesson and adjusted her teaching accordingly. She also highlighted
the connection between the tests and class learning and gave feedback on students’
language performances. These practices could support students’ learning by directing
or maintaining their attention and enabling them to identify their learning problems.
The implementation of these practices was supported by the institutional policy related
to the advanced program. The allocation of a large amount of teaching time and a
small number of selected students in a high-quality class appeared to enable her to
organise more cooperative learning activities for students to engage them in learning,
and to adjust her teaching to fulfil the students’ learning needs.

However, Ms Lan carried out some practices which might exert an inhibitive
impact on ELL. First, her practice of not nominating individual students to give their
answers or giving peer feedback reduced students’ involvement in the assessment
process, which also prevented her from giving them timely assistance to scaffold their
learning. Second, her practice of frequently using Vietnamese to give instructions to
students limited their exposure to English and reduced their opportunities to learn
English in class. Third, her practice of focusing more on developing students’
language knowledge and test-taking strategies in test revision or preparation lessons
might encourage students to focus less on improving their ability to use English to
express their own meaning. These practices were influenced by contextual factors.
Specifically, the educational tradition characterised by teacher-centeredness and the
cultural value of face-saving concerns seemed to inhibit her from involving students in
assessment activities to demonstrate and reflect on their own learning. In addition, the
faculty’s practice of designing internal English tests that replicated the format of
standardised tests and focusing exclusively on language knowledge prevented her
from developing communicative English using different assessment approaches.

4.2.2 Assessment practices in Ms Yen’s class

4.2.2.1. Teacher profile

English language learning and teaching experiences

Ms Yen graduated from university in 2001 and obtained her Masters degree in 2008.
She had been teaching English for non-English major students at PU for eleven years
and is considered a mid-career teacher in this study. Before working at PU, Ms Yen
taught English at another HE institution for a short time. In this study, she taught a
TOEIC-oriented English course which is offered to the majority of PU’s first-year students (refer to Section 3.3.2 and 4.1.1).

**Perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment**

Ms Yen appeared to have contradictory beliefs about English language teaching and learning. She emphasised that EFL education should aim to develop students’ ability to communicate orally in English: “what we expect students to be able to do is to understand the English language spoken by people from different places and to respond appropriately” (Y1I). However, she also believed that “language [learning] is imitating … students just need to repeat and substitute [the language model]”, which indicated a focus on language form. She stressed the students’ need to build up a large English vocabulary since she viewed vocabulary as “the keys to a language” (Y1I) and underlined the importance of explicit provision of language knowledge: “before asking students to do any practice, I present everything clearly to them. It is necessary to make sure that students fully understand and are able to substitute information” (Y1I). As illustrated in the following excerpt, she seemed to perceive language learning as a mechanical process in which the input is the teacher presenting language knowledge and the output is students’ accurate use of oral English.

*After students have received a lot of input such as vocabulary and grammar, what should be their output? I think the ultimate target of ELL is the students’ oral production of English which is grammatically, phonologically and lexically correct. That is the output.* (Y1I)

These responses suggest that Ms Yen seems to have limited understanding of ELL regarding the development of students’ ability to use English to express their own ideas, and the role of teachers in identifying students’ learning needs and providing appropriate instruction to scaffold students’ language development.

Ms Yen emphasised the importance of students’ involvement in the teaching and learning process: “for this subject, the teacher’s presentation plays just a partial role, students must practise themselves” (Y1I). As the following excerpts show, she considered a positive attitude towards the language an essential requirement for success in ELL.

*When learning foreign languages, effort is not enough. Learners also need passion […] since learning a foreign language is a long process. Learners need to like it in order to learn it.* (Y1I)

However, after more than ten years working at PU, Ms Yen thought that non-English major students at PU often had poor ELL motivation and tests were their only external
source of motivation: “non-English major students often disregard English subject and just learn to pass the tests...” (Y1I). Thus, she emphasised the need to increase students’ motivation: “one important objective in EFL teaching was to provide students with an incentive to maximise their interest in learning. They can learn English only when they find the learning interesting” (Y1I). The motivational strategies she employed included enhancing students’ understanding of overall objectives of ELL: “I often spend two to three periods in the beginning of the semester to talk with students to help them understand the importance of learning English and increase their learning motivation”, and using continuous assessment: “if we did not assess them, they would not study... When they know that they will be assessed tomorrow, they will pay attention to their learning today” (Y1I). She was also observed to frequently check students’ homework, which seemed to assist students to maintain their motivation: “if the teacher did not check the work that she gave us and if it happened many times, we would not want to do it” (S1).

Ms Yen’s motivational strategies reflected the influences of the educational tradition characterised by teacher-centeredness. She appeared to have limited understanding about students’ active learning and about pedagogical strategies to scaffold and strengthen students’ learning agency (Reinders, 2010) to foster their motivation. She also seemed to underestimate her students’ motivation, since focus group students indicated their intrinsic motivation to learn English: “I started learning English when I was in grade five. I like English subject the most” (S1). As illustrated in the following responses, students also tended to learn English for occupational opportunities, knowledge development and international communication.

I think people who are good at English are often more sociable, active and productive at work than those who do not know English. That is because their English ability helps them gain more knowledge. (S2)

If we do not have English certificates, we won’t be given well-paid jobs. (S4)

English is an international language now. People in every country learn English so that they can communicate with other people when they go abroad. (S3)

Seemingly contradictory views appeared to coexist in Ms Yen’s accounts of her use of the course book. Although she did not think that it was relevant for her students, she indicated her reliance on the course book for her selection of teaching content due to the limited teaching time: “activities in this course book are so boring. There is not enough time to carry out more activities so it would be better to teach the
content in the course book thoroughly” (YII). She also indicated her practice of adapting the course book to make it more appropriate for students: “I use the same course book, but my teaching is not the same in every class. I may supplement or omit activities depending on the students’ levels” (YII). Nevertheless, as illustrated in the following account of her teaching of listening, the adaptation seemed to focus more on facilitating students’ comprehension through her use of the first language (Kieu, 2010) than developing their listening strategies (Ling & Kettle, 2011).

I let the [students] group who have good listening ability to listen for more details or I even stop the tape sometimes to translate into Vietnamese so that they can understand thoroughly. However, for the group [of students] who are not good at listening, I just stop the tape to help them gain necessary information [to do the exercises in the course book]. (YII)

Ms Yen tried to adapt the course book to make it more supportive for the students’ EFL learning. However, her support seems to be inhibited by limited teaching time and her perspective on ELT that did not place importance on the development of students’ language strategies.

Regarding EFL assessment, Ms Yen tended to use assessment for measuring and directing students’ learning. She highlighted the summative purpose of assessment: “The purpose of assessment is to check what students have achieved after a teaching and learning process to see if they have achieved the learning objectives” (YII). She explained her use of assessment to monitor students’ learning: “I control [student work in pairs] by calling some pairs to the board. When they can perform, it means that they have practised with one another as required” (YII). She did not make the content of what was to be assessed clear to students to maintain her control.

I do not tell students what I will be assessing. If I told them they would just cram on those parts, whereas I want them to study extensively. For example, since I have taught them the word, they have to know its definition in English, its phonological transcription and how to use it. If I tell them that I will check the phonological transcription tomorrow, they may just revise the transcription. (YII)

She valued classroom assessment in terms of increasing students’ motivation and connecting their previous learning with current learning.

I think the daily assessment is more important [than the periodical assessment]…if we do not assess them every day, they would forget quickly and not study until the tests. […]At the beginning of the lesson, we need to activate students’ prior knowledge, enabling them to recall what they have studied in the previous lesson so that they can link the lessons together. If we start teaching right away, they would not be able to study. (YII)
At the beginning of each lesson, she often checked students’ learning of new vocabulary or asked them to present about a topic that they had prepared at home. Ms Yen also believed that this practice could compensate for the limited opportunities that students had to speak English and could enable them to gain confidence in speaking in English: “When I ask them to speak English in front of the class, they can build up their confidence and get over their shyness since they do not have many chances to speak English” (Y1I). As indicated by the focus group students, Ms Yen’s practices seemed to have beneficial effects on their motivation, although the effects did not appear to be constant.

The teacher informs us in advance that she will check our homework so I also try to do it. However, sometimes I do not... since I do not like learning English. (S5)

I get familiar with speaking English in front of the class now. (S3, S6)

Ms Yen maintained that teachers needed to understand students’ learning in order to teach effectively. She reported that she “often asked students to talk about their learning problems so as to advise them on the suitable study methods” (Y1I). However, she did not appear to use classroom assessment to gain information about students’ learning. As illustrated in the following account of her talk with students, Ms Yen indicated her focus on students’ results and did not intend to give students the chance to talk about their learning problems.

[I often told my students] I do not care how many hours you spent studying. You just need to perform as I require. I do not care about your learning process or your learning styles.[...] Do not tell me ‘I have studied but because of this or that reason …’ No excuse is accepted, just your results. (Y1I)

She also indicated that she had no intention of using test results for formative purposes (Shute, 2008). She indicated no intention using the results to reflect on her prior since she believed that she had “…taught the students everything. If they can’t do the test well, it is because they did not study” (Y1I). She did not intend to use the results to inform her subsequent teaching, since she had to “follow the pre-defined teaching plan” (Y1I). She did not seem to think that she was supposed to use test results to inform her teaching: “if it were my private class, I would spend time [after the tests] to revise the language areas [that the students were still not good at] until they achieve the expected outcome” (Y1I). Ms Yen emphasised the summative value of assessment. Her perspectives reflect the influences of traditional pedagogy characterised by teacher-centeredness and knowledge-transmission. The institutional administration
based on a pre-defined teaching plan and the institutional context also reinforced summative assessment as predominant.

Ms Yen was not satisfied with the design and administration of English tests at PU. She expressed her concerns over the test content, which exclusively focused on language knowledge: “tests just focus on vocabulary, grammar and reading”. She also questioned the reliability of speaking tests due to the lack of representative samples: “oral tests are delivered only at the end of semesters but each student just has one to two minutes to speak so the result can’t be accurate” (Y1I). Furthermore, she doubted the validity of listening tests: “listening tests are often too difficult to reflect students’ true ability” (Y1I). Additionally, she predicted negative washback on students’ motivation due to the institutional practice of delivering the same progress tests to students of the same cohort, resulting in a mismatch between the fixed difficulty level of the tests and students’ mixed ability. She stated:

Ideally, we have to test what students have studied and the difficulty level of the tests must be appropriate for the students’ levels…For example, the tests should be slightly easier when delivering to low achieving students, and slightly more difficult when used with high achieving students…Otherwise, they will become discouraged and do not want to study. (Y1I)

It seemed that Ms Yen was aware of the problems that existed in the current design and administrative procedures of English tests at the university, and the problems appeared to prevent her from utilising positive washback effect to motivate and direct students’ learning (Cheng, 2005; Green, 2013).

4.2.2.2. Assessment-related pedagogical practices

**Questioning**

Ms Yen often asked questions of her students in both English and Vietnamese during lessons. Her purpose of asking questions was to focus students’ attention and check their understanding. She often praised, simplified or clarified her questions, or provided more clues to encourage the students’ involvement in responding to her questions.

*T: Now. What typical telephone phrases do you know?*  
*S3: Can I speak to…*  
*T: ‘Can I speak to...’ Good! (writes the phrase on the board).  
Anything else? (Seeing one student volunteering) Yes?  
Very good!*  
*S8: How can I help you…*
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T: Yes, very good. ‘How can I help you’ (writes the phrase on the board). Anything else?... Vây khi muốn giới thiệu tôi là Hương là Lan thì sao nhé? Có dùng my name is Hương được ko? [What should I say when I want to introduce myself as Huong or Lan? Can I say my name is Huong?]

Some students: Yes

T: Bạn nào nói được thì giơ tay nào. This is hoác là I am có được ko? [Who says ‘yes’ please raise your hand. Can I say ‘This is’ or ‘I am’?]

She also repeated parts of students’ responses with rising intonation to signal their errors and to elicit their self-correction, and expanded on students’ responses to facilitate students’ demonstration of their own learning. As can be seen in the following excerpts, Ms Yen often affirmed the student’s self-correction or gave the correct answer herself when the student could not self-correct.

Sa: (Talking about their free time activities)...I like watching TV...
I like listening...
T: Listening? | Signal error and self-correction
Sa: To music
T: Ah, OK I like listening to music. OK.
Sa: I like reading stories.
T: What kinds of stories do you like reading?
Sa: I like roman.
T: Ro...?
Sa: Roman
T: Ah, Romance. Thank you. | Recast to correct the student’s error

(Ms Yen sometimes asked questions from the course book to check students’ comprehension of the listening track or reading passage. As illustrated in the following excerpt, she often nominated specific students to give their answers and praised those who gave correct answers. However, she did not remember students’ names because she met students “only once a week and there are 43 students in the class” (Y2I), and she did not ask students to explain how they arrived at the answer. Consequently, the task appeared to be more oriented to testing than teaching.)

(Ms Yen is checking students’ answers to a listening task)

T: Now number one, cả lớp?
Whole class
Sa: 1000
T: One...thousand. Very good! Number 2 ‘A visitor to France spends [...]’, you please.
Sa: (Reads the whole sentence in the book including the answer)
T: Ah, 400 hundred on average. OK. That’s good. Các bạn có đồng ý với 400 ko nhỉ? [Do you agree that the answer is 400?]
Ss: Yes.
T: And number 3. Excuse me, you please.
S2: 140
T: $140. Do you agree?
Ss: Yes
T: OK (translates the sentence into Vietnamese and reads the next question)

(Y4O)

She also indicated that she did not intend to collect information about students’ learning: “If the student gives correct answers, I just need to confirm it. If he/she gives incorrect answer and no other students can correct it, I will provide the correct answer and explain why…” (Y2I). This appeared to reflect her focus on identifying correct answers to the task questions in the course book, rather than using the tasks as a means to diagnose students’ learning to scaffold it. As can be seen in her practice and her instructional intention from the above excerpts, she seemed to have limited understanding of the importance of students’ involvement in explicating their understanding to promote it further.

Ms Yen sometimes responded quite negatively to students’ incorrect answers.

The way you read makes me confused! I do not know which word you select, with -s ending or without -s ending…
Incorrect! That question is incorrect. [It] must be ‘how much’ what?
The answer is totally wrong!

(Y4O)

The students looked quite embarrassed when receiving such responses from the teacher. In fact, Ms Yen indicated her intention to use ego-involving assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) to push students to learn: “when one student is appointed many times but cannot give a correct answer, they will feel ashamed so they will try harder to study…to protect his/her face!” (Y2I). However, as noted by Ellis (2012), the practice of giving negative judgments may result in a poor relationship between the teachers and their students. In a Vietnamese sociocultural context, this is regarded as one of the main demotivating factors in language classes (Phan, 2010).

Ms Yen’s questioning strategies, which included simplifying and clarifying her questions, expanding on students’ responses and nominating specific students to give their answers facilitated students’ participation. As illustrated in the following responses, the students in the focus group found the teachers’ questioning practice and
their participation beneficial to their development of language knowledge and oral skills.

_The teacher’s questioning practice helps us get familiar with the ways people communicate in English every day._ (S1)

_Responding to the teacher’s questions helps us acquire skills in responding and speaking in English._ (S5)

The students were also aware that their participation would help them gain higher marks for attendance: “_those who often volunteer to give opinion during lessons will be given high marks for attendance at the end of the semester_” (Ss). However, it was often observed that students rarely volunteered to answer Ms Yen’s questions individually. As can be inferred from focus group students’ responses below, the main reason for their limited voluntary participation was their uncertainty about the correctness of their answers.

_There were many times when we had answers for the teacher’s questions but did not volunteer to respond since we are not quite sure if our answers were correct._ (Ss)

_I only volunteer [to answer the teacher’s questions] when I know the correct answers._ (S1)

Under the influences of cultural face-saving concern, Ms Yen’s dominant use of display and testing questions as well as her employment of ‘name and shame’ strategy, inhibited students from responding to her questions, whereas her practice of nominating individual students enabled them to demonstrate and validate their understanding.

Sometimes Ms Yen asked questions of specific students to assess their comprehension of spoken language and their ability to express ideas in English. She often switched to Vietnamese when the students seemed to have difficulty in understanding her question.

(S_B has just finished talking about her free time activities)

_T: You said you like watching TV, so what TV programs do you like watching?_

_S_B: …_

_T: Chương trình mà em xem ấy, là chương trình gì? Film? Music?_ [The programs that you watch, which programs?]

_S_B: I like film, cartoon._

_T: I like watching cartoons. Yes, OK._

(Y1O)

She also encouraged other students to generate questions of their peers, which
had the potential to increase students’ involvement. As illustrated in the excerpt below, she employed different strategies to encourage students’ participation, including nominating individual students, complimenting those who volunteered, attributing the lack of concentration on learning to those who did not ask questions, and using marks. As a result of her effort, some students initiated questions to their peers.

T: Who can go to the front and tell about your free time activities? Who can? Why does no one volunteer? If you volunteer, you will get good marks for your class attendance. If you don’t, your attendance mark will be reduced…

…

T: Have you got any questions for her? (Translates the question into Vietnamese). Any question for her? (Few students seem to be ready to create questions. Ms Yen nominates one student), You, please. Excuse me. Hỏi bạn một câu hỏi nào Dùng like, love hoặc enjoy + Ving.[Ask your friend one question using like, love, enjoy + Ving ]

…

(Ms Yen sees one student volunteering). Good, you please! Compliment the volunteer

S\textsubscript{A}: What kind of music do you like?

T: OK. What kind of music do you like?

(S\textsubscript{A} does not listen to S\textsubscript{B}’s answer but sits down right after the teacher confirms her question)

S\textsubscript{B}: It’s Pop.

T: Yeah, Pop music. Next question, cẦu hỏi tiếp theo, tiếp tục đi. Những người ngồi nhiều không chú ý là không hay hỏi ... [Next question, come on! Those who do not ask questions are not paying attention...Next question…]

(Y1O)

As the student who asked a question of her peer sat down right after her question was verified by the teacher, it seemed that the student focused more on asking correct questions rather than carrying out meaningful interactions with peers.

The reasons given by Ms Yen for her students’ seeming lack of focus on meaningful communication and their limited involvement in asking questions of their peers were their “shyness and unfamiliarity with the activities” (Y2I). However, observations of Ms Yen’s classes showed that other factors might also be attributable. First is the test-oriented atmosphere in class. As demonstrated above, Ms Yen explicitly indicated her intention to assess students through their questions with her main focus on form. The students needed to be certain that they could generate correct questions before deciding to participate voluntarily. However, given the cultural face-saving concerns, the focus group students indicated that many were fearful of losing face if giving incorrect answers so they decided not to participate. Secondly, there
seems to be a lack of focus on genuine communication in this task. Students were informed that their questions would be assessed in terms of language accuracy rather than meaning. They also knew that their peers, at the front of the class, were being assessed in terms of their ability to give appropriate responses rather than communicating meaningful information about themselves. The students who asked questions of peers therefore did not pay attention to the meaning of their peer’s response, rather the focus was on accuracy. When the students were free of test-oriented concerns and the activity was focused more on eliciting new information, there was more engagement in asking questions and more attention was given to the meaning of the responses to their questions, as evidenced in the following excerpt.

_T: Now, do you want to know about my leisure activities?_ (translates the question in to Vietnamese). _OK, you can guess about my free time activities. Let’s see who understands your teacher the best. You create a question; I just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Are you ready?_  

_Ss: Yes._  

_S_A: Do you like going shopping?_  

_T: Yes, I like shopping so much, especially when I have a lot of money._ (Many students laugh). _Going shopping. Good!_  

_S_B: Do you like travelling?_  

_T: Travelling? Yes, I like travelling with my family and my colleagues, especially in summer. Good!_  

_S_B: Yeeh_ (indicates excitement because they have guessed correctly)  

_S_C: (Turns to S_D) Trang điêm là gì República?_[How do you say ‘trang điêm’ in English?]_  

_S_D: Er… ‘make up’_  

_S_C: Do you like making up [wearing make-up]_?  

_T: Make-up? Not very much!_  

_S_C: Ooops_ (indicates regret because their guess is wrong)  

(Ms Yen often encouraged students to ask questions about “…anything you do not understand” (YO’s). Although her students sometimes asked her questions, which related to the marking of their test papers and the timing of the tests, not one of their questions was about the lesson or their learning. Ms Yen believed that this was because they understood the lesson well: “students do not ask questions since I often present everything clearly to them” (Y2I). However, according to the focus group students, it was their shyness that prevented them from initiating questions to the teacher, and they often asked peers instead. Ms Yen’s perception of students’ questioning behaviours, which differed from the students’ viewpoint, reflected the influences of educational tradition. She appeared to perceive the teachers’ role merely
as disseminating knowledge rather than facilitating learning through continuous
diagnosis of students’ learning problems to solve them. This is a similar perspective to
that of many Vietnamese teachers, as reported by Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, et al. (2012).
It was difficult for Ms Yen to enable students to overcome the cultural power distance
between teachers and students to approach her for help with their learning.

Although Ms Yen claimed that she asked students questions “…to provide
them with chances to demonstrate their understanding so that I can check how well
they understand the lesson” (Y2I), she did not seem to use the information gained
from students’ answers to adjust her teaching, making it more appropriate for students.
For example, before teaching about English countable and uncountable nouns, Ms Yen
asked questions about the differences, the use and examples of the two types of
English nouns. Her students answered all the questions correctly and confidently,
which showed that they already knew the target language knowledge. However, she
still kept to her teaching plan to teach English countable and uncountable nouns. Ms
Yen’s practice of not using classroom assessment information to adjust her teaching
probably has negative impact on the students’ learning interest.

Pair work and group work

Ms Yen often asked students to carry out pair and group work as provided in the
course book activities, which required students to ask and answer questions or
construct new conversation based on the model, to practise using the target language
structures of the lessons. She also asked students to work in pairs or groups to discuss
and share their background knowledge, role-play the model conversations, or translate
listening scripts into Vietnamese. Ms Yen often allowed students to work with the
same person sitting next to them during the 180-minute lessons. She seldom circulated
around the class while students were working in pairs or groups, but often asked some
pairs or groups to perform their work to check “if they have practised with one
another” (Y2I).

The pair and group work activities seemed to help increase students’
engagement in learning. Most students participated and they looked excited and active
when working with their peers. The focus group students also indicated that they
enjoyed working in pairs and groups since “it is less stressful” (S1) and “it would be
boring working alone” (S3). The activities also seemed to foster students’ social
learning. The focus group students indicated that pair and group work activities
enabled them to “demonstrate [their] own opinions and listen to others’ viewpoints and negotiate with one another to find out the most correct responses” (S1). They could also “be corrected by peers” and “learn from peers” (S3). They highlighted that they did not feel negative when being corrected by peers and that peer-correction helped them “remember errors longer [to avoid repeating the errors]” (S1). The audio recordings of students’ pair and group work showed that the students often sought to confirm their understanding, asked their peers for help and had their errors corrected by peers, mostly in Vietnamese. As demonstrated in the following excerpts, working with peers enabled students to demonstrate and validate their own understanding, learn from their errors and also from their peers. The use of Vietnamese also appeared to help them communicate their ideas.

(Students are role playing the model conversation in the course book)
S_A: This is Anna Pilon, I am calling (pronunciation error) about…
S_B: Calling
S_A: Calling about… [Incorporating peer-correction]

(Students are making a new conversation based on the model in the course book)
S_C: Cái này nghĩa là sao? [What does this mean?]
S_D: Đầu tiên khi người khác gọi đến thì mình chào xong mình hỏi là ai. [Firstly, when someone calls, we greet him/her and ask who he/she is]
S_C: I want to…
S_D: Thế xong mình chào và mình nói muốn gặp ai. Ví dụ ko phải là mình hỏi bao giờ… [Then we greet and say who we want to meet. If we are not the person the caller wants to meet, we will ask him/her to wait …]
S_C: Từ này nghĩa là gì? [What does this word mean?]
S_D: Cái đây là tên công ty [That is the name of the company]
S_C: A, ví dự nhé. Good morning I want Nga, please.
[Oh, ok. Let me try. Good morning I want Nga, please.]
S_D: Cái đây ko phải là I want đâu. [Do not use ‘I want’.] Can I speak to…
S_C: Can I speak to là sao? [What does ‘can I speak to’ mean?]
S_D: Nghĩa là muốn gặp ai đấy [It means you want to meet someone on the phone]
S_C: Ah, tôi muốn gặp Nga chăng hạn thì nói thế nào?
[Oh, what should I say when I want to meet Nga?]
S_D: Can I speak to Nga, please.
S_C: Can… I… speak…

(Y2O)

The learning opportunities offered to students in pair and group work activities, however, depended largely on members of the pairs/groups. It was noticed that
collaborative learning shown in the above excerpt only took place when at least one member of the pair or group was more proficient than the other(s), when the less proficient member was persistent in asking for help and the more proficient member was willing to help (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). As illustrated in the excerpts below, when all the members were at the same level of proficiency or when the more proficient member was not willing to help, few learning opportunities could be found.

S1: Đọc là / æt/ hay /ət/?
   [Pronounce this word as / æt/ or /ət/]
S2: Chả biết! [Don’t know!]
   (S2 stops asking S1 and does not ask anyone else.)

(Students are making a new conversation based on the model in the course book.)

S1: I am phoning about our party. Are you free on next Monday?
S2: I meet you again at 3 time… ah.. 3 o’clock afternoon
S1: Không được nói là I meet you again mà phải nói là tôi có thời gian rảnh rỗi vào lúc nào như thế. [Don’t say that ‘I meet you again’; say when you have free time instead.]
S2: Vậy thì lại giống như lúc này rồi như mà…
   [So it is like what I said before but…]
S1: Nhung bạn muốn nói gì? [What do you want to say?]
S2: Thi báo là hẹn gặp bạn vào 3 giờ chiều ngày mai. [I want to say that I would like to meet at 3 pm tomorrow.]
S1: Thi báo là I have free time on …on gì đây xong là we will meet again ah.. we will meet on cái gì đây
   [In that case you say ‘I have free time on …on’ something, then say ‘we will meet again…er..we will meet on’ something.]
   (S1 turns to another student who is not working on the required tasks but talking with her partner about a song)
T:(To the whole class) Have you finished? Which group volunteers?
S1: (turns to S2) nói đi! [Your turn!]
S2: Nhung mà cái đấy tổ chức xong rồi như thế nào? [But what to say next?]
   (Y2O)

The lack of supervision by the teacher also appeared to contribute to a loss of learning opportunities for students. As can be seen above, the two students S3 and S4 did not carry out the pair work as required. Meanwhile S1 and S2 misunderstood the task requirement of practising ‘starting a phone call’ and tried to have a completely new conversation. S1’s attempt to creatively use the language was not sufficiently
assisted by her partner. However, Ms Yen did not place importance on supervising students’ work in pair and group settings, but focused more on telling students about the importance of the activities for their learning and for their future.

If a teacher can help students know that they can learn from one another while working with peers and develop group work skills which are essential for their future work, she/he can save a lot of energy in teaching. That is because students carry out their work and the teacher just needs to check the outcomes of their work. (Y2I)

She expected that her students would “ask if they needed help since I encourage them to do so” (Y2I). However, under the influence of traditional education with high power distance between teachers and students (T. H. Nguyen, 2002), her students were “too shy” to ask the teacher for help (Ss). Ms Yen’s sociocultural misunderstanding of her students questioning behaviours inhibited her from maximising the learning opportunities created in pair and group activities. This finding is in accordance with the results of Pham’s (2014a) study which highlighted that pair work and group work activities have the potential to promote students’ cooperative learning, but in the educational culture of teacher-centeredness such as in Vietnam, the potential can be undermined by the lack of the teacher’s supervision and assistance to students’ work in group settings.

**Feedback**

Ms Yen often gave her students feedback after their oral language performance. Her feedback was often in Vietnamese and focused on explicating strengths and weaknesses of the performances. She particularly focused on identifying and correcting the errors that her students made. The criteria she used to assess students’ oral performance as reflected in her feedback often included language accuracy, the ability to give appropriate responses, and the coherence of the message. She did not clarify all the assessment criteria at the same time but kept adding more criteria after each performance as can be seen in the following excerpts of her feedback on the three students’ performances of the same task.

(Feedback on the first student’s performance)

Are there any errors in the performance? She used ‘don’t’ with the subject pronouns ‘she’, didn’t she? When we want to make a negative sentence with the subject pronoun ‘she’, we have to use auxiliary verb ‘doesn’t’. There was one more error, do you know? She did not use ‘V-in’ after the verb ‘like’, didn’t she? We must say ‘she likes going
out'. One more error was [her] pronunciation of s-ending. Did she pronounce it? [It should be] ‘she loves, she likes or she enjoys’. Understand?

(Feedback on the second student’s performance)

What do you think about the performance? What should we take notice of? She talked about her leisure activities, didn’t she? In the performance, she could use the structure ‘love/like + V-ing’. However, she spoke so softly that no one could hear her. Moreover, when I asked her questions, she couldn’t answer…until I gave her much more guidance. Thus, we not only practise using the structures but also practise responding well, don’t we?

(Feedback on the third student’s performance)

Do you have any comment on her performance? Is it ok? She did not separate between ‘like’ and ‘don’t like’, didn’t she? We should say all about what we like first and then about what we do not like…She generally could understand and answer peers’ questions. However, both of the two presenters did not say anything to conclude their talks although they all had introductions. To conclude, we can say ‘that’s all about me, about my leisure activities’. (Translates the sentence in Vietnamese) Understand?

(Y1O)

Ms Yen’s explicit identification and correction of the students’ errors seemed to have a positive impact on directing her students’ attention towards learning, since the students who presented later managed to avoid the errors made by the previous presenters, as seen in the above excerpts.

Such improvements in the students’ language performance were not often reflected in other cases when she did not give any feedback or when she only made implicit correction of the students’ errors by recasting their sentences. It was observed that while her students were performing language tasks, Ms Yen often verified their correct sentences and reformulated their incorrect ones, fixing the errors or adding more detail to make the sentences more meaningful. However, as demonstrated in the following excerpts, only a few students could recognise and incorporate the correction. Most of them did not realise that the errors and kept making similar ones. This finding is consistent with the results of the meta-analysis carried out by Lyster and Saito (2010) about the limited potential of recasting as one type of teachers’ corrective feedback.

(S2 is asking S1 about her free time activities using the structure ‘like, love, enjoy + V-ing’)

Identify strength: language accuracy
Identify weakness
Inform 2nd assessment criterion - responsiveness
Identify errors 3rd criterion - coherence
Identify strength: responsiveness
Suggestion for improvement
S2: Which sport do you like?

T: Yeah, what sport do you like playing, right!

S2: What sports do you like playing?

S1: I like playing tennis

Yen: Ah, I like playing tennis, OK.

(Y2O) (The student is talking about her ideal work place)

S1: There are some pictures

T: There are some pictures…. on the wall. (Translates the sentence into Vietnamese)

S: There is a printer

T: Yes, there is a printer next to the computer

S: There is a book. (Y3O)

Ms Yen also checked and gave feedback on her students’ learning of English vocabulary. At the beginning of her lessons, she sometimes required some students to show their written record of all new words in each unit and demonstrate that they had memorised the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of the words. Her feedback seemed to focus on giving judgement on the students’ learning rather than diagnosing and addressing their learning needs. As demonstrated in the following excerpts, she praised those students who successfully carried out the assessment task and criticised those who could not. There was no analysis of the students’ errors or suggestions for improvement, or opportunity for students to explain their learning problems or difficulties since she attributed the students’ failure to their lack of learning effort.

(Ms Yen calls one student to the board)

T: Show me your vocabulary book, please.

S1: Here you are.

T: (Checks the student’s note book) Good. Have you learned by heart all the new words?

S1: Yes, I have.

T: Very good. Now I will read some English words for you to write down on the board together with the Vietnamese meaning. […]

T: You have done a very good job! […]

(Ms Yen nominates another student-S2 to the board and asked her to do the same as S1. S2 cannot write the words required on the board.)

T: You have not learned the vocabulary, have you? Return to your seat. See, you have not learned. I gave you one week to learn just those few words but you did not learn. See what you have written…incorrect. You did not study, [I gave you] bad mark.

T: (Turned to the whole class) See? You do not study enthusiastically; you do not concentrate, do you? Just a dozen words per week, that means two or
three words a day only but you do not study. I will continue checking in the
next lesson.

(Y3O)

Ms Yen’s practices indicated the influences of the traditional teacher-centred
pedagogy which emphasises students’ rote memorisation of knowledge and learning
effort (Tran & Williamson, 2009). Given her emphasis that teachers “need to know
where our students are in their learning, their levels, learning purposes and
difficulties…” (Y1I), her practices of not using classroom assessment to gain more
information about the students’ current learning problems also seem to indicate her
limited knowledge about formative values of assessment (Cauley & McMillan, 2009;
Newton, 2007).

Ms Yen seemed to be aware of the potential of peer-assessment for learning:
“when a student assesses his/her peer, the teachers can know if he/she understands the
lesson. If he/she can find out the peer’s errors, it means he/she can avoid making the
errors and the peer can also learn about them” (Y2I). She was observed to sometimes
invite her students to give feedback on peers’ performances. However, no student
volunteered to give a comment. She did not nominate any individual student to do so,
either. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, although some students indicated
their recognition of their peers’ errors, she did not ask them to explain their own
understanding to correct peers’ errors. This seems to reflect a tension between her
belief and her practice of implementing students’ peer-assessment. Her practice of
peer-assessment provided further evidence of her limited knowledge about the
importance of students’ involvement in demonstrating their own understanding
(Brookhart, 2011; Wiliam, 2011).

(Yen is checking the words written by one student on the board)

T: Các em thử xem bên trên bản viết có tự nào chưa đúng ko? Có tự nào sai
ko? [Look at the board the whole class. Did she write any words
incorrectly?]  
Some students: Yes.
T: Tự nào? [Which word?]
Some students: Number 4
T: … idea, cái này sai đúng rồi, không phải ý kiến mà là gì? ideal
[…] ‘idea’ yes, this word is wrong. I did not say ‘idea’ but what? ‘ideal’]
Ss: Lý tưởng (student translate the meaning of the word ‘ideal’)

(Y3O)
The focus group students found Ms Yen’s feedback helpful in enabling them to identify and avoid their errors, which helped “improve [their] language performances” (Ss). They also reported that they often recorded and worked on the teacher’s feedback on peers’ performances to improve their own performances. The students recalled that the teacher’s feedback focus on “[their English] pronunciation, [their use of] grammatical structures and the content of [their] language performance” (Ss) and their “completion of the homework” (S5). It seems that Ms Yen’s feedback was not adequate to help students gain a sufficient understanding of expected learning outcomes, or of what to do to improve their learning.

**Use of summative tests**

After returning test papers to students, Ms Yen showed them the correct answers for every test question. She often explained the answers herself, mostly in Vietnamese. Sometimes she elicited the language knowledge related to the test questions from students. She also revised or taught the language knowledge related to the test questions.

*Question number 4,* (reads the question) ‘goes straight on and turn left’ … ‘at traffic lights’. Use preposition ‘at’. ‘Turn left or right at the traffic lights’. Do you understand? ‘at’.

*Question number 5:* Most of you were wrong. Why? Listen I will tell you… Look, people say ‘a five-star hotel’ (Some students turn around and talk with others about the test) Listen to me! ‘hotel’ is the main noun, […] (explains the meaning and structure of the phrase) (Y3O)

Ms Yen drew the students’ attention to the typical errors that they had made. For example, she identified the following common errors in the students’ first progress test: “Many of you did not put the verbs in the correct tenses. You also forgot to use articles such as ‘a’, ‘an’, ‘the’…” (Y3O). However, as evident in her comment about students’ results of the mid-term test, her practice did not appear to be effective in helping students avoid repeating the errors. This appeared to result from the limited opportunities that the students had to act upon the teacher’s feedback due to the lack of alignment between their learning experience and testing of writing.

*There are two main types of errors in your writing. The first is that you forgot to put the verb in the correct tense. For example, [you wrote] ‘I stay there for three days’ or ‘the weather is nice’. You should have put the verbs in the*
simple past tense. The second is that you use the wrong preposition. You used ‘in’ and ‘on’ incorrectly. (Y6O)

Like Ms Lan, while explaining the correct answers, Ms Yen highlighted examples of the alignment or repetition in content between students’ learning and the tests they had taken, and referred to their need to study: “Question number 6, we use ‘hold on, please’, don’t we? Have you learned this? (Y6O). She attributed students’ low test results to their unfamiliarity with the test format and their lack of effort: “Do you find it [the test] easy? Very easy! Just because you are not familiar with the test format and you did not study” (Y3O). As demonstrated below, she shared with students her marking approach and advised students to “do more exercises” to improve their test results.

For the writing, I deducted half a mark for every single error that you had made in each sentence. However, if you did not put the verbs in the correct tenses, I did not give any mark since the verb is the most important part in the sentence. (Y3O)

Ms Yen reported that she often advised students: “not [to] place too much importance on marks. The importance should be the language mastery” (Y2I). She also indicated that she did not intend to teach to the test since she believed that it would not help her students “develop their English language ability comprehensively” (Y1I). However, she was observed asking students to memorise the language structures that often appeared in tests and taught them test-taking strategies, as evidenced in the following excerpts.

…People will read four statements describing the pictures. You will have to listen to select the statement which best describes the picture. The correct statement will be the one which reports accurately what there are in the picture. If there is incorrect information in any of the sentence components, for example the nouns or the preposition, the sentence should not be chosen. Now, write down the [language] structures in your note book to memorise… ‘work for’ some companies; ‘give advice to somebody’, ‘arrive in’ big places such as city, country, ‘arrive at’ small places such as station, school…(Y3O)

This reflects a tension between her belief and practices in relation to summative tests. She seemed to be aware of and tried to minimise negative test washback on learning and teaching. However, her practices still seemed to be considerably influenced by the high-stakes attached to the test results. Consequently, she appeared to focus facilitating the mastery of test-oriented language knowledge rather than the development of language competence. Her practices also align with her perspective of ELT that largely focus on language form.
The students in the focus group indicated their desire to achieve high marks and that they expected the teacher to teach to the tests to improve their results. The considerable washback of high-stakes testing on students’ learning (Alderson & Wall, 1992; Herman, 2010) is evident here.

*I want the teacher to give us extra [grammar and vocabulary] exercises to do in the class, just like the teacher of the other half of the class. The formats of the exercises are similar to the ones we do in the tests but the content is related to what we are learning in the class at that moment.* (Ss)

According to the focus group students, they often compared their results with peers’ to position their learning: “*when the teacher returns our test paper, the first thing we do is to see our own marks and then ask others about their marks […] to see where we are in the class*” (Ss). This reflects their use of test results to gain understanding of their own learning in relation to the norm. The students also used the result to identify more competent peers to seek help to analyse and learn from the errors they had made in the test, or to identify the areas for improvement.

*I compare my test paper with others to see which of my answers were right, which were wrong. I often ask those who get higher marks than me to explain why my answers are wrong and learn from those peers.* (S3)

*I often make errors in the reading sections. I need to spend more time learning English vocabulary and practise reading.* (S2)

Additionally, they indicated that test results would not demotivate them since they would “*try our best to study and to gain higher marks*” (Ss). The students’ responses indicated their use of test results to reflect, inform and motivate their learning, which reflects the influences of the high-stakes testing context on students’ ELL and suggests the potential use summative tests to promote ELL (Carless, 2011).

**4.2.2.3. Summary**

Ms Yen carried out some assessment-related practices which could facilitate ELL. First, she often asked questions and adopted different techniques to encourage students’ responses to her questions, such as simplifying and clarifying questions, elaborating on students’ responses (Fisher, 2013), nominating specific students to give their answers (Strobelberger, 2012), and using Vietnamese to enhance students’ comprehension (Kieu, 2010). Her practices could enable students to focus on learning and to demonstrate their current understanding. Second, she often required students to work in pairs and groups, which encouraged students’ involvement in assessing their own and peers’ learning. Third, she sometimes gave feedback on students’ language
performance. Her explicit identification and correction of students’ errors enabled students to realise their errors, avoid repeating the same errors, and gain some understanding of the expected learning outcomes. Additionally, her practice of frequently checking students’ homework and highlighting the connection between the test and students’ previous learning motivated them to focus on learning.

Ms Yen carried out some practices that inhibited the potential support of assessment for learning. The negative responses that she sometimes gave to the students’ incorrect answers and her use of the ‘name and shame’ strategy did not encourage students’ participation to responding to her questions. Her focus on accuracy of oral language forms appeared to divert students’ attention away from developing their ability to communicate in English. Her lack of attention to supervising students’ work in pairs and groups hindered her from detecting their learning problems and supporting their learning in a timely manner. Her minimal use of assessment results to inform her teaching also appeared to be detrimental to promoting learning.

Ms Yen’s assessment-related pedagogical practices were influenced by various contextual factors. The educational tradition of by knowledge-transmission and teacher-centeredness seemed to prevent her from trying to gain and utilise information about students’ learning to support it. Her students’ face-saving concerns and the high power distance between teachers and students also appeared to inhibit students from responding to the teacher’s questions and initiating questions to her. As a result, students’ learning was not demonstrated to best effect and did not benefit from timely scaffolding. The institutional requirement to follow the course book-based teaching plan and the limited teaching time seemed to discourage Ms Yen from adjusting her teaching to make it more appropriate to her students’ learning needs. The Faculty’s practice of designing internal English tests, which followed the format of standardised tests and focused exclusively on language knowledge, appeared to inhibit her from utilising positive washback effects to promote learning. The recently-implemented practice of sharing the tests among students of the same cohort also limited her use of assessment to motivate learning.
4.2.3 Assessment practices in Ms Hong’s class

4.2.3.1. Teacher profile

English language learning and teaching experiences

Ms Hong graduated from university in 2008 and started her Masters study in 2012. She has taught English language at PU since graduation and has never worked in any other university. At the time of this study, Ms Hong was simultaneously working at PU and studying for her Master’s degree. In this study she is regarded as an early career teacher. Like Ms Yen, Ms Hong’s taught a TOEIC-oriented English course offered to the majority of PU’s first year students. This was the first time she had taught the TOEIC-oriented course (refer to Sections 3.3.2 and 4.1.1).

Perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment

Ms Hong highlighted that English language education needs to develop students’ ability to communicate in English since she believed that “after graduating from university, students will need to communicate in English” (H11). However, she seemed to focus particularly on functional aspects of English language (Sung & Pederson, 2012).

Students need to know how to use English in specific situations. That is, what grammatical structures or vocabulary to be used in the situations. Moreover, their pronunciation and intonation are also important. My [teaching] strategy is to try to provide students with opportunities to practise using English in specific situations. (H11)

She highly valued the currently-used course book for its selection and relevance of language situations: “the course book is quite practical and the [language] situations are closely related to what the students have to deal with when they go working after graduation” (H11). However, she acknowledged: “it may be difficult for students to understand some situations due to their lack of working experiences” (H11).

Ms Hong highlighted the need for teachers to understand their students to teach effectively. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, she attributed the limited effectiveness of EFL education at the University to the teachers’ lack of understanding of their students.

EFL education at the University is not effective despite the allocation of a considerable amount of time. I think one of the reasons can be the teachers’
lack of understanding of the students. That is, the teachers sometimes do not understand their students so they cannot help them make progress in learning. (H1I)

She indicated how her subjective understanding of students informed her teaching: “When designing learning activities I care about students’ English level. I also care about what they are interested in or concerned about” (H1I). She blamed herself for not understanding her students well enough to engage them in learning activities.

In fact, my students do not respond to my questions enthusiastically. One of the reasons can be that my questions are not appropriate for them. They do not know [the answers] or do not find the issues [raised in the questions] familiar. (H2I)

Ms Hong indicated her intention to “maximise students’ exposure to English” (H2I) through her frequent use of English as the medium of instruction and believed that this exposure facilitated students’ learning. She also used English predominantly in her teaching and only switched to Vietnamese when none of the students said “yes” to her questions of “Do you understand?” or “Have you got it?” (HOs). However, according to the focus group students, they preferred her to use Vietnamese more often since “up to half of the students in the class cannot understand her well” (Ss) and they often have to “turn to peers for help to understand the teacher” (S3). Thus, despite her awareness and willingness to understand students, Ms Hong’s frequent use of English in teaching seemed to inhibit student participation and prevent her from gaining sufficient understanding of students to inform her teaching. This is consistent with findings of other studies on negative impact of using of English as the sole medium of instruction on students’ comprehension in EFL context (Byun, et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2007).

Ms Hong emphasised students’ independent learning and underlined the roles of teachers in facilitating such learning, particularly in defining learning objectives and working out effective learning methods for students.

Students often carry out independent learning. However, it largely depends on teachers’ guidance. [...] Students may not know what and how to study since English language knowledge is vast. Thus, I think teachers need to show students the methods to study and the areas to focus to help them make progress. (H1I)

It is worth noting that Ms Hong was the only one out of the three teachers at PU who was explicit about teachers’ responsibility in students’ independent learning. She identified her support for students’ comprehension of learning objectives through the
practices of signalling important language points in relation to English tests or students’ future language use.

While teaching I often tell and show students the link between what they are learning and what they will need to use in their future work or what they will be assessed on in the tests. My purposes are to help students identify their learning objectives so that their learning can be more productive. (H1I)

She frequently assessed students’ written records of new words and their completion of exercises in the workbook to assist them to “develop a habit of learning” so that they can “continue the independent learning like that in following semesters” (H1I). The focus group students also stated that Ms Hong often asked them to do extra exercises and writing tasks at home. She also frequently gave short written tests in class which she then marked and returned to the students. As indicated by the focus group students, her practices of frequent checking of their homework and delivering short tests without informing them in advance made them “have to study” (Ss).

Ms Hong acknowledged the potential of assessment for learning: “assessment is also a chance for teachers to assess if their teaching is appropriate to the students.[…] Assessment results can provide us with information about students’ learning and our own teaching” (H1I). As the following excerpt illustrates, she foregrounded the alignment in content between her classroom assessment and students’ learning, and indicated her use of assessment results to inform her own teaching to scaffold learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

I assess students’ learning according to what I define as the lesson objectives.[…] If I find out that students often make errors in some areas, I will provide them with extra practice on the areas. I then check again whether they can avoid making the errors. (H1I)

However, her exploitation of the potential of assessment for learning seemed to be challenged by two main factors. First was the time restriction and the differences in students’ levels of English language proficiency: “I can’t spend too much time for those students in need since I also have to pay attention to other students” (H1I). Second was the lack of participation in learning activities by low achieving students: “I can follow and check the progress of only high achieving students since low achieving ones do not often give their opinions so I cannot know if they work on my feedback and make progress]” (H2I).
Although she had never thought of clarifying assessment criteria before asking students to assess their peers or themselves, she believed that such practices would facilitate the students’ learning since the students could “define and understand their own learning objectives clearly” (H1I). Thus, she seemed to be aware of the potential of assessment for learning, particularly for diagnosing students’ learning needs, and facilitating their understanding of learning objectives to take control of their own learning (Heritage, 2013; Klenowski, 2009).

Ms Hong emphasised the washback of English tests on her teaching and student learning: “the tests determine the way I teach and the way students learn” (H1I). She pointed out that her instructional design was based “firstly on what the students will be tested and secondly on their practical use [of English] in the future” (H1I). She also indicated her use of tests in different ways to motivate learning. For example, she frequently gave tests in different forms so students always had to pay attention to learning in order to get high test marks. She provided them with opportunities to improve their marks by using students’ marks of her self-created tests to give bonus marks in progress tests. She also highlighted the sections of the lessons which would likely appear in tests to draw students’ attention to learning (Carless, 2011; Harlen, 2005).

She indicated her concerns over test validity and reliability due to the mandated practice of delivering the same English tests to students of the same cohort as follows.

*The progress tests sometimes do not match with the learning I expected from students. For example, I want to check certain things but those are not included in the tests. […]It is also difficult to keep the shared tests confidential. [Since the same test is delivered to different groups of students at different times], some students can manage to have the answers before they sit for the test. So they give all correct answers without really understanding anything.* (H1I)

According to her, the mismatch between testing and learning could demotivate learning since it “makes students feel that it is useless to study and they do not need to study” (H1I). Given her awareness of test washback, Ms Hong appeared to try to exploit it positively. However, her exploitation seemed to be inhibited by the institutional regulations on test design and administration.
4.2.3.2. Assessment-related pedagogical practices

Questioning

Ms Hong frequently asked questions of students during lessons which purposefully aimed at stimulating learning: “I try to ask questions to make students think during the lesson” (H2I). As illustrated in the excerpt below, her questions seemed to enable students to recall their prior knowledge and demonstrate their understanding, elicit their self-correction (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) and provide them with opportunities for language output (Ellis, 2012).

_T_: Last week we learned about telling the time, is that right? So now tell me how many ways do we have to tell the time?... Remember? Now tell me how many ways do you have to tell the time?

_Ss_: ...(No response)

_T_: OK. Can you, Tam?

_Tam_: There are two.

_T_: There are two ways to tell the time. Right! Do you remember the first way to tell the time?

_Tam_: The first way is to tell minute and hour.

_T_: Alright, we tell [the] minute first and then [the] hour. Is that right? Can you give an example?

_Tam_: For example, eight thirty [8.30].

_T_: Ah, for example eight thirty (writes down the time in numbers and in letters). Is this [the] minutes first and then [the] hour?

_Tam_: This is ...hour and... then

_T_: Hour and then minute. Right! Very good! Thank you. This is the first way to tell the time. Do you remember the second way to tell the time? The second way?

_Ss_: ...(No response)

_T_: Do you remember?

_Ss_: ...(No response)

_T_: Right, look back again at what we learned last week. I’ll just look back again. In the second way, do we say the minute first or the hour first? Alright! The minute first and then the hour later. Now tell me what do you add between [the] minute and [the] hour?

_Ss_: ...(No response)

_T_: You just learned last week, right?

_Ss_: ...(No response)

_T_: Hey, just look at the screen [black board]. For example, (writes down on board while saying) we have ‘half’ ....eight’. What do you add here?

_S_: ‘past’

_T_: Right, ‘half past eight’. Alright! So we add ‘past’ or ‘to’ in between [the] minute and [the] hour. Right! Just
what you learned last week. [...] (further revises, asks questions and nominates individual students to answer.)

T: What time do you go to school, Tung?
Tung: I go to school at twelve o’clock.
T: What time do you get to school?
Tung: I get to school at quarter past twelve.
T: Right! at quarter past twelve. You get to school so early. Thank you.

[Note: Both Tam and Tung are high achieving and responsive students in Ms Hong’s class]

(H1O)

As the above excerpt shows, Ms Hong frequently repeated and simplified her questions to encourage students to respond. However, it was observed that only two or three students volunteered to respond or gave their answers softly. The others just kept silent although they believed that responding to the teacher’s questions would help them “understand the lesson”, “memorise the knowledge” (S1), and “practise listening and speaking in English” (S2, S3). Ms Hong also noticed students’ limited participation and indicated the reasons might be “my questions were not interesting or familiar enough” or “the students may have difficulties in recalling the learned knowledge or they are a bit lazy” (H2I). Thus, she tried to give further clues and examples to elicit responses. She seemed to be successful since finally some students did respond to her questions which had been modified to be as simple and specific as “what word to add [between ‘half’ and ‘eight’ to tell the time?]”.

Several reasons could be given for students’ minimal participation. The underlying reason seemed to be Ms Hong’s predominant use of English as the medium of instruction. Many of her students could not understand her questions since they were mostly in English. Audio recordings of students’ pair work showed that they often asked their peers about what the teacher was saying or had required them to do: “What did the teacher say? I did not understand anything!” (Pair work- H2O). It was often observed that some students gave their responses only after the teacher had made considerable effort in giving further explanation, simplifying the initial questions, giving examples and writing down the examples on the board as illustrated in the above excerpt. In the focus group interview near the end of the semester, the less responsive students indicated that they did not volunteer to respond because they were not “confident about my [their] English ability to respond in English” (S5 & 6). It seemed that Ms Hong’s dominant use of English as medium of instruction put these students under pressure to respond in English. As a result, the students’ limited
English proficiency and lack of confidence in speaking English appeared to prevent them from responding to her questions.

However, Ms Hong’s dominant use of English as a medium of instruction did appear to facilitate the development of students’ English proficiency. According to the focus group students, her use of English was beneficial to their “development of listening ability and English vocabulary” (S2). It was also observed that near the end of the semester more students responded voluntarily or automatically to the teacher’s questions. The focus group students stated: “it would be great if she could speak first in English and then [repeat her sentences] in Vietnamese” (S3 & S5). This suggests that Ms Hong needed to make judicious use of Vietnamese (Kieu, 2010) to facilitate students’ comprehension of her instruction while still maximising their exposure to English to foster their ability to communicate in English (Ellis, 2005; Littlewood, 2011).

Other sociocultural factors can also be drawn upon to explain the students’ reluctance to participate orally. First are the cultural imperatives of face saving and respect for harmony within the community (T. H. Nguyen, 2002). In the focus group interview, the more responsive students stated that they sometimes did not volunteer since they were “not quite sure about my answers” (S2) or they “want to give the chance to other students” (S1, 2). Second is the influences of the educational tradition characterised by knowledge transmission and teacher-centeredness (Tran & Williamson, 2009), which appeared to hinder a classroom discourse where students have frequent interactions with the teacher. In the focus group interview, the less responsive students highlighted that they were not “used to volunteering to answer the teacher’s questions in the class” (S5 & S6) and often waited until being nominated by the teacher to give their responses. This finding coincides with the results of other studies on the influences of educational culture on students’ ELL which might result in students’ passive participation in classroom activities (Ashwill & Diep, 2004; Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, et al., 2012; T. H. Nguyen, 2002).

Ms Hong was observed to frequently nominate individual students to respond to her questions. She often elaborated on students’ responses to gain understanding of the students’ learning and adjust her teaching accordingly. The following excerpt is an example. In this excerpt, Ms Hong was checking students’ answers to the following multiple choice question.
The five o’clock train arrive… New York…seven to five.

a. to/at b. in/at c. at/at d. at/on

T: What do you choose, Hung?
Hung: [Option] ‘a’

T: Why do you choose ‘a’?
Hung: Thưa cô, arrive ở đến New York thì dùng ‘to’ còn trước thời gian thì dùng ‘at’. [When we mention the destination like New York we say ‘arrive to’ when we mention the time of the arrival we say ‘arrive at’.

T: Thank you. Do you have another idea? Do you have another idea for number 16? Hung chooses A with preposition ‘to’ and ‘at’. How about you? Do you have a different answer? …. Do you have a different answer? Do you agree with him?

SS: … (no response)
T: Thế có bạn nào có đáp án khác không nhỉ? [Does anyone have any other ideas?]
SS: No.
T: No? OK. For number 16 remember that the verb ‘arrive’ usually we think that ‘we arrive to somewhere’. However, we do not use preposition ‘to’ but we use preposition ‘in’ or ‘at’. What are the differences between ‘in’ and ‘at’? For example, we have ‘arrive in Hanoi’ and ‘arrive at Noi Bai airport’ (writes down the sentence on the board). Alright, tell me Hanoi and Noi Bai airport which place is smaller?

SS: Noi Bai airport.
T: Alright, Noi Bai airport is smaller and Hanoi is much bigger. OK, for bigger places we use ‘in’ and use ‘at’ for small places. So for ‘New York’ we use ‘in’ or ‘at’?
Ss: ‘in’
T: Alright, you must choose B.

(H2O)

She indicated her intention to nominate both the high achieving and low achieving students to give their responses to provide a language model and gain understanding of students’ learning: “I often call volunteer or high achieving students to give other students good models of language performance.[…] I sometimes call on low achieving or less responsive students to check their understanding of the lesson”(H2I). However, she was observed to often nominate only the volunteers or high achieving students. The main reason for not asking low achieving students seemed to be the lack of time as evidenced in the following excerpt.
I cannot give that group of [low achieving] students too much time. However, if I spent more time with them they would make progress since I think they are not lazy. It is just because their learning is at a slower pace. They are absolutely able to understand. (H2I)

She also attributed lack of time for her practice of not giving the students chances to discuss before responding to her questions: “In fact, I also want to give them the chance to discuss with one another before responding to my questions. [...] However, it often takes lots of time. The limited time allocated for the lesson does not allow me to do that” (H2I). Time constraints prevented Ms Hong from utilising the potential of assessment for learning which includes gaining understanding of low achieving students’ learning and providing them with necessary assistance.

Ms Hong indicated her interest in gaining information about students’ learning and their learning difficulties to inform teaching: “I really want them to share with me their learning problems... I often show them how to study. When I find that many students have the same problem, I raise the problem in our related lessons” (H2I). However, it was observed that the students rarely asked Ms Hong any questions during lessons. The reasons given by the focus group students included their sacrifice for the benefits of the whole class: “Mine are just very small problems. If I asked the teacher, she would have to stop her teaching to help, which I don’t like” (S2), and their preferences for asking peers over asking the teacher: “peers are closer to us [than the teacher]” (S1). These responses reflected the inhibitive influences of the cultural respect for harmony (T. H. Nguyen, 2002) and power distance between teacher and students (Hofstede, et al., 2010) on students’ questioning practice. Since student-initiated questions often “demonstrate precisely what a student is wrestling at the moment” (McGrew, 2005, p. 65), the scarcity of student-initiated questions might result in Ms Hong’s inability to gain an understanding of students’ learning needs and provide them with timely and relevant assistance to promote their learning.

Students were observed to sometimes ask Ms Hong questions in break time. The focus group students also referred to their experiences of initiating questions to the teacher as follows.

I sometimes ask the teacher about the new words or the new grammatical structures [to use in my writing]. (S1, S2)

I asked her questions about the online learning. I had some [technical] problems with it. (S5, S6).
Those students all agreed that the teacher responded to their questions enthusiastically and they would continue to ask the teacher if they needed her help. Ms Hong also reported that “after initial small talks, some students approach me in the break and tell about their learning difficulties, asking for my consultation about learning methods how to learn vocabulary or listening…” (H2I). However, she emphasised that “only those students who do have problems or who were enthusiastic about learning English ask questions” (H2I). Although it did not seem to work with all students, Ms Hong’s practice of establishing a rapport with students in the informal context of break time seemed to enable them overcome the traditional power distance between teachers and students to approach her for help to learning while not affecting other peers. This finding is consistent with the results of T. C. L. Nguyen’s (2009) study on the facilitative impact of teacher and student rapport on students’ participation in overt learning activities in class.

_Pair/group work activities_

Ms Hong often required students to work in pairs to repeat model conversations or the taped scripts of conversations in listening sections. Students were also required to create new conversations based on the models or collaborate to do exercises in the course book. Her purposes were to “provide the students with opportunities to practise using English in communicative situations” (H2I) and to speed up the lesson.

_Sometimes I need to finish the sections quickly so I let them work in pairs…. For example, in the reading section, if one student reads he/she may have difficulties finding necessary information but if two of them read together, they can help one another locate the information and they can understand more quickly. Thus, I can finish the section more quickly. (H2I)

She organised fewer group work activities since “there were less situations for group work activities in the course book and it often takes longer when students work in groups” (H2I). It seemed that although Ms Hong was aware of the potential support of collaboration with peers for students’ learning, her utilisation of the support was negatively influenced by limited teaching time and the institutional mandated course book reliance.

Ms Hong’s practice of organising students to work in pairs/groups seemed to facilitate their ELL. All students in the class were observed to take part in the activities and they looked excited. The teacher also indicated that “those students who are often silent during the lesson tend to talk more and share their understanding more often
while working in pairs” (H2I). The focus group students also expressed that they “really like the [pair and group work] activities” (Ss) and pointed out the benefits of pair and group work activities. The benefits included enhancing their demonstration of own understanding and learning from peers, enabling them to practise oral English and communicative skills, and fostering their engagement in learning.

I think pair and group work activities help develop our ability to exchange knowledge with one another. There are things unknown to me but known by my partners, so they can share with me and I can know more. We can also practise communication skills. (S2)

I feel more inspired to talk with peers [than with the teacher.] (S5)

Audio recordings of students’ pair work activities also demonstrated that students were provided with various learning opportunities while working in pairs as illustrated in the following excerpts. In these excerpts, the two students were practising giving directions in English.

\[S_A: \text{…Go straight on when you see a bridge, you go over the bridge. Thấy chua? Nghe rõ chua?} \]
[Can you follow me? Get it?]
\[S_B: \text{Chua, nhắc lại đi.}[\text{No, repeat please.}]\]
\[S_A: \text{Nhắc lại nhé!}[\text{listen!}] \text{Go straight on hoặc là [or] straight ahead cũng được hoặc [or] straight on cũng được hiểu chưa?} [\text{Understand?}]. \text{Có hai cách hoặc là đi thẳng hoặc là…} [\text{There are two ways of saying}]… (S_A \text{translates the phrases into Vietnamese})\]
\[S_B: \text{Cái này là đi thẳng hà?} [\text{This means go straight, doesn’t it?}]\]
\[S_A: \text{Đây nhé. Đì thằng hay đi về phía trước.} [\text{Yes, go straight on or go straight ahead}]\]
\[S_B: \text{Go straight on} \]
\[S_A: \text{…xong куда báo gặp mới cái câu như thế nào nữa?} [\text{What did you say ‘gặp mới cái câu’ means in English?}]\]
\[S_B: \text{Then you turn… turn luôn đúng ko?}[\text{use ‘turn’, right?}] \]
\[S_A: \text{Ứ, turn gi?} [\text{Yes, ‘turn’ what?}] \]
\[S_B: \text{Turn… right. Turn right.}\]
\[S_A: \text{Ứ.} [\text{Yes.}] \]

| Peer-teaching: give model & check understanding | Peer-teaching: slower speed with further explanation |
| Demonstrate lack of understanding & seek help | Use first language |
| Validate understanding | Verify peers’ understanding & add further explanation |
| Start using the target phrase | Initiate question to seek help from peer |
| Confirm correct choice | |
As evident in the above excerpts, the more competent peer (S\textsubscript{A}) supported the less competent peer (S\textsubscript{B}) to learn how to give directions in English. The scaffolding was provided through giving input in the first language, modelling in the target language, providing prompts and clues for decision making, and confirming correct decisions and accurate choice of form (Lantolf, 2000). The result was that student S\textsubscript{B} was able to take more control of her contribution since near the end of the pair work she talked more to demonstrate and validate her understanding and to demonstrate management of her own learning. The support from the more competent student (S\textsubscript{A}) was also reduced from detailed explanation at the beginning of the conversation to just short questions to signal errors, provoke further thinking and validate her peer’s understanding and language choice.

Audio recording of students’ work in pairs also showed that they often corrected one another’s errors, particularly in pronunciation and grammar. They were also found to encourage one another to take a more active role in learning. For example, in the excerpt below the student was persuading her partner to volunteer to perform their pair work in class.

\textit{T: Everyone. Have you finished? I would like to hear some of your conversation…}

\textit{S\textsubscript{C}: Đứ lên độ thi độ to vào nhé. Nếu mà muốn đùng lên độ thì đocup to…}

[When we perform, remember to speak loudly. If you want to…]

\textit{S\textsubscript{D}: Nhưng mà thời lên làm gì [But let’s not do the performance.]]}

\textit{S\textsubscript{C}: Thời đocup di luyến nói luôn. Đùng lên luyến nói luôn}

[Come on, perform the conversation and practise speaking as well.]

(P30)

Pair work activities also appeared to facilitate students’ comprehension of lessons. Due to Ms Hong’s dominant use of English, many students had difficulties in understanding her instruction. In addition, she did not give them many chances to discuss with peers during the lessons since “\textit{the time restriction does not allow me [her] to do that}” (H2I). Pair work activities were opportunities for students to seek help from peers, to catch up with what was going on in the lesson, and also to understand the task requirements as evidenced in the following excerpt.
(Two students were asking and answering questions in the course book about their last holiday, using exclamatory phrases in English)

...  
_E: Did you have a good time?_  
_F: ..._  
_E: Ban có thể dùng những câu từ như này này [You can use these phrases] 'It was very good'; 'It was wonderful'

[...]
_F: Đây cái từ này đọc là gì? [How do you pronounce this word?]
_E: Fabulous.
_F: Bây giờ tôi hỏi bạn. [Now I will ask questions of you.]
_E: Ú, xong bạn gost vào tí có giáo hỏi bạn đấy [OK, then you need to write down, the teacher will ask you later.]
_F: Kiếp? [Really?]
_E: Ú, tí có giáo hỏi bạn thì bạn phải nói về tớ. Hiểu chưa? [Yes, later the teacher will ask you to tell about me and vice versa. Understand?]  

(H4O)

It is necessary to note that not all the pair work activities brought about such learning opportunities. When the proficiency levels of students in a pair were equal with neither being an expert or when they did not pay attention to helping one another, pair work activities did not seem to be very helpful, as evidenced in the excerpts below.

(The two students are talking about their daily activities using time.)

...  
_G: I began English lesson at ..._  
_H: Twelve half past... (translates in to Vietnamese) muôn hai rưỡi_  
_G: At twelve half past. _Learn incorrect knowledge!_  

(H1O)

(The two students are repeating the conversation in the tape script)

...  
_S1: I am on the right of the bank, /əpə...əpəsət/ [opposite] the museum /rɔːʃ/ [road]._  
_S2: Ok, I can see you. _Did not notice or ignored the errors_  

(H3O)

While the students worked in pairs, Ms Hong often circulated around the class, which seemed to enable her to gain more understanding about students’ learning and
provide individual instruction to help those students in need. For example, in the following excerpt she found and assisted the student who did not seem to understand clearly the task requirement.

*T: Understand what you have to do?*

*S: (Does not respond to the teacher’s question but turns to his partner) How do I get to the station?*

*T: First of all where you are. Where you are? Where you are?*

*S: (Points to someplace on the map) How do I get to the station?*

*T: Not here. You are on the South Avenue, in front of the cinema.*

Ms Hong allowed students to find their partners themselves so students often paired with the same partners who were sitting next to them during a 180-minute session. However, the focus group students expressed a preference to change their partners, believing that a change in the partnership could cognitively and emotionally facilitate their learning.

*Changing partners would be better since different people have different knowledge so working with different partners would enable us to learn different things from peers. (Ss)*

*It is sometimes boring to work with the same partner. (S3)*

It can be said that Ms Hong’s practices of requiring students to work in pairs and her close supervision of their pair work activities had the potential to enable students to get involved in peer-assessment and self-assessment, which might facilitate improvement in students’ engagement and achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998a). However, in order to fully exploit the potential, students’ awareness of the need to contribute to one another’s learning (Pham, 2014a) and to alternate pair partners are needed.

*Feedback*

*Feedback on students’ oral language performances*

Ms Hong often nominated specific pairs of students to carry out oral performances of their work in class. She took notes while they were performing and gave feedback after the performances. Her feedback often started with general praise and then elaborated on strengths and weaknesses of the performance. The criteria she used to assess language performances were quite consistent, including language accuracy, the
performing manner and the message content. She explicitly corrected students’ errors since she “…want[ed] the students to correct their errors and improve their [task] performances” (H2I). However, as illustrated in the following excerpts, she always identified and corrected the errors herself.

You tell the story well, however, you need to pay attention to some small mistakes, very small. For example, ‘he has’ not ‘have’. Another thing at activity five you said ‘he checks his /ˈdaiər/ [diary]

(H1O)

She sometimes analysed individual students’ errors, gave further instruction and showed them how to improve.

Tuan, I think you should have more practice about word stress and making intonation. The important words in the sentence need to have stress. For example, where do we eat lunch? You need to raise intonation at the end of yes/no questions. For example […], to practise this I recommend you listen to the tape more at home and practise. Ok? (H3O)

She particularly highlighted the errors made not only by the performing students but also by other students as she “noticed while they were carrying out their work in pairs” (H2I). As demonstrated in the following excerpt, she identified and helped them correct the common errors.

T: You have demonstrated a good conversation with good intonation and stress. However, I would like you to speak a bit louder. (Goes to board and writes down the word ‘conference’). Ok, whole class remember the pronunciation of this word, /ˈkɒnfərəns/. Ss: /ˈkɒnfərəns/ T: /ˈkɒnfərəns/ Ss: /ˈkɒnfərəns/ (H3O)

Ms Hong’s practice of giving feedback on students’ oral performance and her use of the same set of assessment criteria seemed to facilitate students’ understanding of the learning objectives. The focus group students learned from her feedback that “when we perform in front of the class, we need to be more confident, talk more naturally and make the intonation and stress clearly” (Ss). The students’ increased understanding of such expected outcomes could enable them to direct their learning effort. Audio records of students’ pair work also showed that they spent considerable
time practising pronunciation, intonation and stress. They also reminded one another to speak more loudly when performing. They were observed to sometimes take up the teacher’s feedback on peers to improve their own learning successfully. For example, after the teacher identified and corrected the error of sentence stress in the performance of the first pair: “…stress important words in the sentence, for example: Where are you?” (H3O), it was noticed that none of the three following pairs repeated the error.

However, it was observed that before asking some pairs to perform their work, Ms Hong did not explicitly require all students to stop their own pair work to pay attention to the performing pairs and to her feedback which followed. The audio recording of students’ work in pairs often revealed that some pairs continued with their own work without attending to peers’ performances or teacher feedback. Sometimes the students who performed did not pay attention to the teacher’s feedback on their own performances, either. They started talking about their own feelings of performing as indicated in the following excerpt.

(The teacher is giving feedback on the students’ conversation while the students themselves are talking with each other)

T: I think you have a quite good conversation. However, you still make some errors. For example, when answer the question number 6 you said ‘yes, I didn’t’.

S1: Tao nói cái gì mà bọn nó cười lắm đây?
[What did I say that made them [the class] laugh so loudly?]

S2: Cuông [You were so hurried in responding to my questions].

S1: Chả quan tâm là trả lời cái gì [I did not know what I was saying].

S2: Đã thế lại còn nói to nữa chút [But you spoke so loudly then].

(H2O)

To fully exploit the potential of teacher feedback, students’ awareness of the importance of feedback as well as their need to work on the feedback to improve their learning need to be raised. For example, the teacher could encourage the performing students to self-assess their performances before giving her own feedback. In such situation as the one illustrated in the above excerpt, because the student was curious about his peers’ reactions to his performance, the teacher’s feedback might need to address the students’ feelings about the performances first, before commenting on the linguistic aspects of the performance. This is because in the cultural context of high
face-saving concerns, students’ emotional state might prevent them from paying attention to the teacher’s feedback to improve their performances.

Ms Hong did not ask the students to give direct feedback on peers’ oral performances since she thought it would “take lots of time” (H2I). However, she was once observed asking her students to carry out peer-assessment in a way which was very helpful for their ELL, as demonstrated in the following excerpt.

Two students Vu and Hung have just finished performing their conversation in which they were talking on the phone, trying to find each other by describing where they were.

_T:_ Can you hear them clearly? Ok can you tell me where is Vu? Quynh, can you go to the black board and point it on the map? You say and point at the same time, can you?

_Quynh:_ Vu is in the hotel in the High street, in front of the hotel and I think Hung is on the corner of museum and Seafront [road]

_T:_ Corner of the museum…

_Quynh:_ I … I think and next to the bookshop.

_T:_ Next to bookshop. Where do you think he is?

_Quynh:_ I don’t think the place [I don’t know the exact place]

_T:_ OK, can you point his place on the map?

_Quynh:_ (Shook her head)

_T:_ So you mean he is on the corner of Museum and Seafront roads next to the bookshop?

_Quynh:_ (Nodded her head)

_T:_ Right. Thank you, Quynh. Now Vu and Hung, Did she understand you? Vu what’s your idea?

_Vu:_ ‘Near the bookshop’ not ‘next to’.

_T:_ Oh, you are ‘near the bookshop’. (Other students laughed). Alright. Thank you. Ok, so your friends understand your conversation…

As can be seen in the above excerpt, by asking Quynh to indicate Vu’s location on the map, Ms Hong could obtain information about Quynh’s comprehension of her peers’ performance and at the same time enabled Quynh to indirectly assess her peers’ success in communication. By asking Vu, the student who performed, to confirm the location identified by Quynh, Ms Hong assisted him to indirectly assess his peer’s
comprehension. As a result, both students were provided with a real purpose for learning and communicating in English in which they could demonstrate their own understanding and assess and be assessed by each other.

Feedback on students’ written language performances
Ms Hong sometimes asked students to do some paragraph writing at home although it was not required in the teaching plan. She asked students to peer-correct one another’s writings, using such codes as Wo (word order), c (capitalisation), Gr (grammatical) to identify errors. After their writing had been corrected by their peers, students were required to revise their writing and submit their two versions of writing including the feedback from peers. She then marked and commented on the second draft of the writing.

Although Ms Hong did not specify assessment criteria for students’ peer-assessment, it is reflected in students’ feedback on their peers’ writings that their main focus was on identifying and correcting the errors in spelling, word choice, grammatical structures and sometimes the communication content of the writing. They used different ways to identify peers’ errors. Many students used such abbreviations as gr.(grammar); sp (spelling); ww (wrong words) to signal the errors before correcting them. Some students identified peer’s errors in communication content by translating the incorrect sentences into Vietnamese: “Beneath the bed, there is a window.” Some students did not identify or correct specific errors made by peers but just gave comments such as “capitalisation, need concluding sentence at the end!”.

The feedback from peers appeared to help students recognise their errors. Most of the students were seen to accept peers’ correction or self-correct the identified errors in their second writing version, which was generally better than the first version in terms of language form. However, it was noted that not all the errors were spotted and sometimes the editing students did not do anything except put their names under the title of the editor. Although none of the inaccurate peer-correction was observed in the collected writings, the focus group students indicated that their writings sometimes were revised incorrectly by peers: “sometimes they give me wrong correction which made me feel a bit annoyed. Not very often but I think some of them are not good at English. They may not understand certain things properly so they give me wrong correction" (S1, S2).
Ms Hong’s feedback on students’ writing was also focused on correcting errors in spelling, word choice, grammatical structures and communication content. She sometimes commented on punctuation and coherence, for example “pay attention to using punctuation marks as stops and commas to separate ideas”: “you need introductory and conclusion sentences”. The focus group students valued Ms Hong’s feedback since “it helps us realise our errors and avoid making the same errors in our next pieces of writing” (Ss). They also preferred the teacher’s feedback over their peers’ feedback since it is “often more accurate” (Ss). Not enough data related to the usefulness of teachers’ written feedback on students’ writing were collected. Ms Hong noted that although her practice of asking students to practise writing in English supported their development of other English language knowledge and skills, she had considerable difficulties in carrying out her practice of giving feedback on students’ writings due to her heavy workload (over 30 teaching periods per week) and her Master’s study. In fact, up until the last day of the semester, she was able to return just one out of three pieces of writing her students had submitted. This indicates the inhibitive influence of teachers’ heavy workload on the utilisation of assessment for learning.

Use of summative tests

Ms Hong did not intend to use test results to adjust her teaching since she “must follow the prescribed teaching plan” (H2I). After returning the test papers to students, she did not give any comments on the test results but used the test as an additional teaching aid to revise and teach the language knowledge. She first asked questions to elicit what the students knew or understood. She then expanded on students’ responses to revise or teach the test –related language knowledge as illustrated in the following excerpt.

T: Question twenty one. What do you choose?
Ss: [option] ‘a’
T: ‘a’? Can you explain about your choice?...‘time’ trường hợp này có đếm được ko?[Is ‘time’ a countable noun in this case?]
Ss: Không [No].
T: Không đếm được tại sao các bạn lại dùng how many?
[If it is uncountable, why you use ‘how many’?]
S1: Đây là hoà số lần. [This question is about the frequency.]
T: So countable or uncountable?
S1: Đếm được [countable]
T: *Countable. Alright, thank you. OK trong trường hợp này chúng ta có từ times mang ý nghĩa số lần thì nó được dùng với thể chúng ta nói hỏi là how many. [In this case the noun ‘time’ denotes the frequency so it is countable. Thus, the question word is “How many”?]* Right?

Ss: *Uí troi [oops]... (Expressed regret for giving wrong answer)*

T: Các bạn chú ý từ time đôi khi nó là countable đôi khi nó là uncountable …

[Please notice that ‘time’ can be both countable and uncountable…]

(Gives examples and explains further)

(H6O)

She also highlighted students’ typical errors and attributed the errors to students’ carelessness: “when writing we sometimes forget to put the verbs into the correct tenses, or forget to use the structure when two verbs go together or forget to put in prepositions or articles for example” (H2O). According to the focus group students, Ms Hong’s practice of revising the test questions and the related knowledge helped them to “memorise [realise] my errors [to avoid repeating the errors]” (Ss).

Ms Hong drew students’ attention to the test formats and encouraged students to study harder and do more practice to get familiar with the formats: “the formats of the listening tasks are quite new to you so you need to do more listening practice” (H2O). Like the other two teachers, Ms Hong showed students strategies to do the listening tests. She also highlighted the link between the listening test and what they were learning in class to motivate learning.

For the listen and response task you have to read the response first and guess what may be the questions for the responses. The [section] ‘focus on communication’ in your book is very useful for this part [of the listening test]. Because you have a lot of conversations and you know which is the question and which is the response. (H2O)

Ms Hong seemed to be under pressure to help students to gain high marks at the final tests. In the lessons near the final tests, she organised fewer pair and group work activities and used Vietnamese more often. She taught extra hours in the last lesson, trying to help the students revise all the semester content and did mock oral tests with individual students using test questions which had been given to the students in advance. These practices demonstrate the washback of high-stakes testing on her teaching.

Ms Hong’s practices of revising test questions and prepare students for the final test demonstrate her use tests to encourage students to focus on learning and enable them to identify and bridge the gap between their current understanding and the
understanding required to complete the test. However, due to design of the English tests, which focused more on language knowledge, she seemed to focus more on facilitating students’ mastery of test-oriented language knowledge than on the development of their English ability.

The focus group students indicated their use of test results to identify more competent peers from whom they could seek help later: “when the teacher returns the test papers, I often exchange mine with peers to know what I am good at or what they are good at to learn from them” (S3). Based on test results, they also gained general ideas about strengths and weaknesses of own learning and sourced new means to improve it as illustrated in the following excerpts.

I am quite good at doing the multiple choice [grammar and vocabulary] tasks but not as good at listening. (S2)

I am not good at listening and vocabulary…I often practise by listening to English songs but I cannot catch the words. Thus, I often go online to search for the lyrics and listen to the songs again. (S5)

The students’ responses indicate their use of test results to inform their independent and cooperative learning. Their responses also suggest that assistance is needed to enable students to define more specific learning objectives, employ more individually-appropriate learning strategies and facilitate their collaboration in learning.

4.2.3.3. Summary

Ms Hong carried out various assessment-related practices that could support ELL. First, she frequently generated questions during lessons, which provided students, particularly responsive and high achieving students, with opportunities to activate their prior knowledge, self-reflect and assess their own learning. The practice also seemed to enable students to demonstrate their current understanding for scaffolding by the teacher. Second, she organised students to work in pairs and groups, which seemed to facilitate their involvement in peer- and self-assessment and their learning engagement. Third, her practices of giving oral feedback on students’ language performances with consistent use of assessment criteria and asking students to directly and indirectly assess one another’s language performances could enhance students’ understanding of learning objectives and improve their learning commitment. Fourth, her practice of carrying out frequent assessment of students’ learning and offering opportunities to improve their marks at the tests seemed to motivate students to focus on learning. In addition, her practices of establishing close rapport with students and...
supervising the students’ work in pairs also appeared to be helpful for students’ learning since she could gain more information about their learning needs and provide them with relevant assistance to facilitate cooperative and independent learning. Her practices reflect the influences of her perspectives on EFL teaching and learning which emphasised the need to diagnose student learning needs to provide relevant support, and her awareness of the potential of assessment for learning.

However, Ms Hong’s dominant use of English as the medium of instruction hindered students’ comprehension of her instruction and inhibited their participation in responding to her questions. Her practice of nominating mostly high achieving students also prevented her from obtaining sufficient understanding of other students’ learning to provide them with necessary assistance.

Ms Hong’s assessment practices reflect the considerable influence of some contextual factors. First, the cultural values of face-saving concerns and respect for harmony appeared to hinder students’ participation in responding and initiating questions of the teacher. Second, the institutional requirement to follow the course book-based teaching plan and the limited teaching time appeared to inhibit her adjustment in teaching according to her students’ existing understandings. Third, the faculty’s practice of designing internal English tests, which mimicked the formats of standardised tests and exclusively focused on language knowledge, inhibited Ms Hong from focusing on facilitating students’ development of language ability. Forth, the recently implemented practices of delivering the same progress and mid-term tests to students of the same cohort inhibited her from using the assessment results to inform her teaching. Last, her heavy workload challenged her practice of continuously assessing student learning to provide further support.

4.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the institutional context and current assessment practices carried out by three teachers at PU. The analysis of current assessment practices indicates the potential of assessment to engage students in learning, to facilitate their understanding of the learning objectives, and to enhance their reflection on their own learning. However, the potential is utilised to a limited extent due to various contextual factors. These issues will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

In the next chapter, assessment practices carried out at Non-PU will be elaborated to see if the support of assessment for ELL and influential factors are similar or different.
Chapter 5: Case B - Non-Public University

This chapter presents the case study of Non-Public University (Non-PU), in particular its assessment practices in relation to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Of specific interest are the assessment and pedagogical practices of three teachers. The sociocultural factors which influence the assessment practices are also highlighted. The first section of this chapter (Section 5.1) provides the institutional context of EFL education and assessment at Non-PU. The next section (Section 5.2) examines EFL assessment practices as undertaken by three different teachers. The final section (Section 5.3) discusses the key findings that have been identified in the case study.

5.1. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AT THE NON-PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

The foundational information about public and non-public universities in Vietnam is presented in Chapter 3. Further information about this specific Non-Public University (Non-PU) is that it is a private university affiliated with a business corporation with education as one of the corporation’s business areas. The educational services offered by Non-PU align with the fields that the corporation specialises in and about half of the graduates are employed to work in the corporation. The University’s commitment to ensure employment for its graduates helps it attract not only high school leavers but also mature-aged students who have finished their tertiary study in another university or who have working experience. Key features of the institutional context at Non-PU of significance to this study include its practice of collecting student feedback to evaluate teachers, favourable conditions for EFL education, and the high-stakes of EFL tests. Details of these features are presented below.

First, students play an important role in the recruitment, evaluation and continuity of teacher employment. When a new teacher is recruited, students in his/her preliminary demonstration lesson are asked to give feedback on the teacher’s practices, which will then be taken into consideration in decision making. Students are also required to give feedback about their teacher twice throughout the course: two weeks after the course commences and at the end of the course. Feedback is
collected online and if students do not fill the online feedback form, they are unable to access information on the institutional website. Student feedback focuses on five areas: teachers’ punctuality, implementation of the mandated teaching plan, responses to students’ questions in class, teaching skills, and support for students’ learning. The form also offers students opportunities to give suggestions for improvement in teachers’ practices. As demonstrated in the collated reports, most students only select a point on a four-point Likert scale without giving any explanation or suggestions for improvement. If the result of students’ feedback on a teacher after two weeks of study indicates some problems with his/her teaching practices, the Executive Officer will meet with the teacher and discuss ways to improve. The feedback at the end of the course is used to evaluate teachers and to make decisions regarding ongoing employment. One of the requirements for teachers’ continued employment at Non-PU is that the results of their students’ feedback at the end of the semester are at least 3.4 out of 4. The results are also taken into consideration in deciding any salary increase for teachers.

In addition to the online feedback, students’ informal comments about their learning experiences are also taken into consideration by administrative staff. Such comments can be made during students’ conversations with peers at the University campus or online via the student website. If the comments indicate that a certain teacher’s practices do not appear to comply with institutional expectations (for example the teacher did not follow the course implementation plan or (s)he taught to the tests), more information will be collected. Once the information is verified, those teachers will be asked to change their practices or even stop teaching at the University. According to the Executive Officer, “if many students in a class do not like a teacher, they can ask for a change of teacher”. Although such a demand is not always met, it often results in more administrative work, such as executives meeting with the students, and the teacher to facilitate their mutual understanding. The institutional practice of using students’ feedback to administer and evaluate teachers’ instructional practices appears to have considerable impact on EFL teachers’ assessment-related practices, which will be elaborated further in sections 5.2.1, 5.2.3 and 5.2.4.

The second feature about Non-PU is the provision of favourable conditions for EFL education and remuneration for EFL teachers. Classrooms are small in size
and equipped with a Wi-Fi network, air conditioner, an internet-connected desktop computer, overhead projector, and system of speakers. Students and teachers are provided with authorised course books in full colour. There are also substantial textual and digital resources available for teachers. The teaching staff consists of both Vietnamese teachers and teachers from foreign countries such as the Philippines, England and the USA. In addition, teachers are provided with a photocopying service and their salary is generally higher than that in most other universities in the area. As indicated by the Executive Officer and three participating teachers, favourable working conditions are an important reason for their decision to move from other universities to work at Non-PU.

The third feature relates to the high-stakes EFL tests at Non-PU. English is used as the medium of instruction in students’ major courses. Therefore, to be allowed to study their specialised subjects, students are required to take intensive short English courses to develop their English proficiency. If students’ results at achievement tests are not satisfactory, they have to repeat the course, which means that their preparation stage before studying their main courses will be longer and they will have to pay more tuition fees that are relatively high (refer to Section 3.3.1).

The following sections present detailed information about the EFL education (Section 5.1.1) and the assessment of students’ EFL learning (Section 5.1.2).

**5.1.1 English language education**

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is organised into two phases: a preparation stage and a main stage. EFL courses in the preparation stage are short and intensive. Students study English for three hours each day, five days per week and continuously for seven weeks with a total of 105 class hours. The courses are offered at five levels of elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. Only after completing the fifth level of preparation courses with satisfactory assessment results, are students allowed to move to the main stage, where they start studying their majors and study English for two days a week, three hours each day. All learning materials, tests and assignments in the major subjects are in English and the subjects are sometimes delivered by foreign teachers. Students are required to have a minimum English proficiency equivalent of 6.0 IELTS or 550 TOEFL score before starting their majors. Most first year students
at Non-PU cannot satisfy the English requirement to study their main courses immediately. Thus, they often have to spend about six to ten months in the first year studying English intensively. This study focuses only on the English courses offered to first year students in their first three months of academic study at Non-PU in the school year 2012-2013. The reason is that those first months form the transitional period for most students since they have to adapt to a new EFL learning environment at Non-PU, which is significantly different from that at high schools (refer to Section 3.3 for further details).

The first EFL courses that students study are determined by their results in the English placement test designed and used together with the course books series. In the academic year 2012-2013, half of the new students studied in elementary courses, about a third took pre-intermediate courses, and the remaining students joined intermediate and higher level courses. This study purposefully focuses on the courses that were offered to elementary and pre-intermediate students. Reasons for this selection are presented in Section 3.3.2.

The EFL courses at Non-PU are designed to have a close connection to the course books used. In fact, the course book series are used as the de facto curriculum and the course implementation plans specify sections of the course books to be studied in each lesson and indicate additional resources which should or must be used. Teachers are required to follow closely the course implementation plans.

In the EFL preparation courses, the course books are the *Top Notch* and *Summit* series, designed for international communication and published by Pearson Longman. As indicated in the content pages, the course books focus on developing students’ linguistic and cultural knowledge, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and intercultural knowledge, language skills and communication strategies. The language structures are recycled and expanded throughout the series, and there are many interactive pair and group work activities designed for students to carry out controlled and free practice using English language to express their own ideas about lesson-related issues. The core course books include a students’ book, a digital copy of workbook, a teachers’ book with digital audio and short video clips, and a package of achievement tests after finishing each unit. There are also compulsory and recommended additional resources for vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing lessons. As teaching and learning materials are parts of resources
packages, they appear to be systematic and comprehensive, which was acknowledged by all the participating teachers: “A resource package makes the teaching and learning more comprehensive and systematic” (VII) and “we can find supplementary materials easily” (TII). Since instructional materials play an important roles in determining teaching and learning in class (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012), the systematic design and the wide range of resources for teaching and learning exert considerable impact on teachers’ assessment practices at Non-PU, which will be elaborated further in Section 5.2.

In this study, the focus is on two types of English courses. First is the elementary course using the Top Notch-elementary resource package. Second is the intermediate course using the Top Notch-intermediate resource package. At the time of this study, two of the three participating teachers, Ms Minh and Ms Tam, were delivering elementary courses, and the third teacher, Ms Van, was delivering an intermediate course for those pre-intermediate students who had successfully completed their first course level after seven weeks’ study and moved on to their next course at intermediate level. In intermediate courses, Vietnamese teachers are encouraged to use English as the medium of instruction and they often share classes with foreign teachers.

5.1.2 Assessment of students’ EFL learning

This section presents detailed information about the assessment of students’ EFL learning at Non-PU. It starts with the institutional EFL assessment framework (Section 5.1.2.1) describing components and administration of EFL assessment. This is followed by the institutional use of EFL assessment results (Section 5.1.2.2) and the design and development of EFL tests (Section 5.1.2.3).

5.1.2.1. The English language assessment framework

In the preparation stage, the assessment of students’ ELL consists of three main components: ongoing assessment, a mid-term test and a final test. Ongoing assessment includes oral presentations, progress tests and participation in classroom activities. Since the courses are relatively short (seven weeks), the delivery of five progress tests, one mid-term exam, one final exam and daily classroom assessment means that students are frequently tested during the course. The weighting of each component is presented in figure 5.1.
Ongoing assessment is carried out by the class teacher who can make his/her own decisions on what and how to assess students’ oral presentation and participation. They can also develop their own progress tests which are delivered after every two units of the total ten units in the course book. However, the teachers were observed taking turns to develop and share progress tests so students in the same cohort were generally given the same progress tests. Although a complete assessment package is available as a course book resource, those suggested ready-made tests were not used due to the difficulties in protecting the security of test materials, which might affect the validity and reliability of the test results.

The mid-term and final exams are often set on the weekends of the third and the seventh week when students have completed the fifth and tenth units in the course book. Exam papers are generated by the Executive Officer from test banks developed by all teachers in the English division; test questions in the banks are updated every two years. The exams are delivered on computers and students are required to bring their own lap tops to the university to do these exams. The Office of Education and Training is responsible for administrating the exams with the help of technical staff. Students’ answers to multiple choice test questions are computer marked. Their answers to the writing test questions are written by hand and marked by teachers in the division. Speaking tests are included only in final exams. Beginner and pre-intermediate levels of speaking proficiency are assessed by Vietnamese teachers. Intermediate and higher levels of speaking proficiency can be assessed by
either Vietnamese or foreign teachers in the division. Since the exams are computer-based, considerable attention is paid to prevent students from using technology to cheat on exams. Students are required to do the writing tests on paper so that they cannot cheat.

_I do not allow students to do the writing test on computer since I am afraid that they could copy and paste others’ writing instead of writing themselves. The exam software is designed so that once it is running; it will prevent other computer programs from being operated. However, our students are skilful at using computers and they can still manage to access such websites as Google or Google translation and copy others’ writing._ (Executive Officer)

Teachers are also trained to invigilate students while they are doing the exams on computers: “_the computer screen must not be changing colours or blinking and the clock on the screen must count downward_” (Executive Officer). The careful attention to prevent cheating relates to the high-stakes nature of EFL tests at Non-PU, which will be elaborated in the following section.

**5.1.2.2. The use of students’ English language assessment results**

Students’ EFL assessment results in the preparation stage are used for several purposes. The primary purpose is to certify students’ completion of required English courses; otherwise they will have to spend more time and money studying in the preparation stage. In order to be certified as successfully completing a course, students have to satisfy three conditions: first, students must attend at least 80 percent of classes; second, their GPA must be equal to or higher than five (out of ten); and lastly, their marks at the final examination must be equal to or higher than four (out of ten). As illustrated in the following response, the last condition is applied to maintain students’ focus on learning until the end of the course.

_After having high marks in the mid-term examination and in progress tests, many students do not concentrate on learning [because their accumulated results are nearly equal to or more than 5 before taking the final exam]. Thus, the University requires that students’ mark in the final examination be equal to or more than 4. The purpose is to prevent students from neglecting their study._ (Executive Officer)

During the course, teachers are allowed to give bonus marks to encourage learning effort. There are no fixed rules on how bonus marks are used so teachers’ approaches to using bonus marks differ (refer to Section 5.2 for further details), which constitute a threat the validity of assessment results. The minimum mark requirement for the final exam and the permitted practice of giving bonus marks illustrates how
assessment results are used as a tool to control learning behaviours at the institutional level.

Students’ assessment results are also used for evaluating achievement of the course objectives and making adjustments in course design, which suggests a formative use of summative test results (Black, et al., 2003a). However, as indicated in the following excerpt, the focus is on adjusting supplementary learning materials, which reflects the pedagogical focus on drill practice of language skills and inadequate attention to the development of sub-skills and strategies (Ling & Kettle, 2011).

*If the objectives haven’t been achieved, I have to look back at the teaching plan. The core book will be kept the same but I may change the supplementary materials. [...] If we find out that students cannot listen well, then we need to use more supplementary listening materials.* (Executive Officer)

There is another use of students’ assessment results, which seems to relate to teachers’ accountability: “*There is a recent regulation that if less than 70 percent of students in our classes pass the [final] test, we have to provide an explanation [to the Executive Officer]*” (Ms Minh). However, according to the Executive Officer, the practice was designed to draw teachers’ attention to students’ learning and their assessment results, with the intention of leading teachers to reflect on their teaching practices in the courses.

*I often ask the teachers to comment on their students’ results. For example, why did only 50 percent of students in this class or 100% of students in that class pass the exam? The teachers then will explain, for example, that students in this group learn well, or students in that group are those who have had to retake the courses so many times so they are really unmotivated. We did not do this in the past but we have had this requirement for about half a year now.* (Executive Officer)

The Executive Officer also indicated that it would be invalid to use test results to evaluate teachers “*since there are a number of influencing factors*”, and that use of test results might cause negative washback effects such as “*teaching to the tests and focusing on test-taking strategies, which are completely undesirable*”.

### 5.1.2.3. Design and development of English language tests

There are four sections in the written English language tests at Non-PU. The first section focuses on course book-based knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. The other three sections test students’ language skills of writing, listening and reading. The writing test questions vary according to the course levels. For
example, at elementary level, students are required to write ten sentences about a particular topic they have learned, and at intermediate level, students are required to write a short paragraph of 120 to 150 words expressing their ideas on a topic related to prior lessons. Test questions in the listening and reading sections are on various topics which may not have been covered in the courses. Test methods include multiple choice, gap filling and matching tasks. Speaking is assessed only in the final exam and the test format also varies according to the course levels. Students at elementary level are required to give an individual talk about a topic covered in the course; intermediate level students are required to perform a task in pairs or groups in front of examiners.

The weighting of each section is fixed for each type of test, which is demonstrated in table 5.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test sections</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress tests</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term exam</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the weighting of each section is fixed within each type of test, there are no test specifications and analyses of the progress tests also show considerable variations in the number of questions within each section. The total numbers of test questions can range from 60 to 70; among them 10-20 are listening questions, 10 to more than 20 are reading questions; and up to 30 to 40 questions are on vocabulary and grammar. Although the number of questions on language knowledge is often smaller in mid-term and final exams than in progress tests, it still accounts for about half of the total test questions. As such, the tests appeared to place a considerable focus on checking students’ memory of language knowledge in the course books rather than their ability to use English language. Due to the lack of test specifications, test results of students’ language skills did not indicate clearly the sub-skills that they have developed successfully, which inhibited teachers and students from using test results to inform teaching and learning (elaborated further in Section 5.2).
Test questions in reading and listening and grammar sections are collected from different sources of English tests provided that the selected questions are at the same proficiency level as the test banks.

*I do not encourage teachers to create their own test questions since such questions often sound unnatural. I ask them to collect questions from available test books by well-known publishers such as Longman or Oxford. The books used must be at the same levels as the test banks, and teachers have to cite the sources with the questions they collect.* (Executive Officer)

Vocabulary questions are often developed by “*adapting the word definition in the dictionary*” (Executive Officer). Since the grammar and vocabulary questions are imported into test banks in the form of individual units, when generating mid-term and final exam papers, the Executive Officer randomly selects questions from each unit. As such, the development of English language tests at Non-PU depends largely on published English test books. There seems to be inadequate attention to defining the test constructs or domains to be tested, as well as the representativeness of the test constructs (Hamp-Lyons, 2009), which points to possible threats to the validity of test results (Crooks, et al., 1996) and inhibits the use of test results to inform teaching and learning at the institutional level.

Analyses of the collected tests at Non-PU showed that there is a close link between the tests and course book content in terms of vocabulary, grammar, writing and speaking. All the tested words, phrases, grammatical structures and writing topics were covered in the course book. This alignment between the tests and the course book content appeared to encourage students to pay attention to their lessons in class, since students in the three focus groups agreed that tests were about what they had learned in the course and “*it is necessary to listen to the teacher since her teaching content will appear in the test*”. Analysis of collected tests, however, identified possible threats to the validity of listening tests. As can be seen in the following example from one progress test for elementary level, the listening questions appeared to test students’ knowledge of rules for pronouncing English verbs which agree with the third person singular, rather than their listening comprehension.
Although this issue of listening test validity was found in only one out of four progress tests used in the course, it is important to note since the teacher who developed the test might not be aware of the issue. Together with the fact that there were no specifications of language sub-skills being tested, and the development of EFL tests depended largely on teachers’ access to EFL test resources, this issue implies a need for professional development of teachers in the area of English language assessment and in particular listening comprehension.

In short, six key factors characterise the institutional context of EFL education and assessment at Non-PU. First is the institutional use of students’ views to evaluate teachers’ instructional practices. Second is the high stakes attached to the EFL education and students’ EFL assessment results. Third is the intentional use of frequent summative tests and test results to maintain students’ focus on learning with a considerable awareness of negative test washback effects on teaching and learning. Fourth, computer-technologies are used in administering students’ high-stakes exams and there is careful attention paid to preventing students from cheating on the exams. Fifth, together with the use of assessment results for summative purposes, the results also appear to be used to inform course design and enhance teachers’ reflection on their teaching. Finally, the way English language tests are developed, the lack of test specifications and the practice of collecting test questions from test books in particular, indicate possible threats to the test validity as the example identified in the listening test. These factors exerted significant impact on the assessment practices carried out at the University, which will be elaborated in the following section.
5.2 CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AT THE NON-PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Assessment and its potential for learning are best demonstrated in the classroom context (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) and via teachers’ practices of questioning, self- and peer-assessment, feedback and formative use of summative tests (Black, et al., 2003a). In order to investigate the current assessment practices at Non-PU, the following sections examine the practices carried out by three different teachers: Ms Minh (Section 5.2.1); Ms Tam (Section 5.2.2) and Ms Van (Section 5.2.3). The focus is on the roles of these assessment practices in supporting ELL. Each section starts with the teacher’s profile which provides detailed information about the teacher’s teaching experience. It is then followed by the teacher’s perspectives on EFL learning, teaching and assessment. After that, the teacher’s assessment-pedagogical practices are demonstrated, focusing on four main areas of questioning, pair and group work activity, feedback and use of summative tests. The section ends with a summary of the teacher’s assessment practices, the potential support of the practices for students’ learning, and the influence of the sociocultural and institutional context on the support of assessment for learning.

5.2.1 Assessment practices in Ms Minh’s class

5.2.1.1. Teacher’s profile

English language learning and teaching experiences

Ms Minh graduated from University in 2008 and obtained her Masters Degree in 2011. After graduating from university, she taught English at PU for one and a half years, then moved to work at Non-PU, where she has been teaching English since 2010. She is considered as an early career teacher in this study since at the data collection time she had less-than-five-years’ teaching experience. In this study, she taught an elementary course.

With her experiences in working at both Universities, Ms Minh indicated her preferences for working at Non-PU over PU. She valued such working conditions as well-equipped classrooms, photocopy services, sufficient teaching resources and fewer requirements for teacher paper work at Non-PU, since these enabled her to “focus on the main tasks of teaching, and designing and delivering tests” (M1I). She also preferred working at Non-PU because it allowed her the freedom to be creative...
in teaching and to develop her own identity: “At Non-PU, I can teach whatever way provided that it is effective and students feel OK about it […] I prefer teaching here since I can freely express my personality. That is, I can interact informally with students in a relaxed way” (M1I).

Ms Minh was aware that students’ feedback played an important part in evaluating her practices. Although she thought that students’ feedback was subjective and did not always accurately reflect teachers’ practices, she valued the informative aspect of students’ feedback at Non-PU: “While I was teaching at PU, I was not informed about the results of students’ feedback. I did not know how students thought about my teaching, whether it was good or bad or which aspects I needed to improve” (M1I). She also indicated that the practice of collecting and using students’ feedback at Non-PU caused her to pay more attention to her interaction with students since “it surely influences how students evaluate me” (M1I). She seemed to pay attention to individual students and adjusted her instruction accordingly. Further details presented in Section 5.2.1.2.

**Perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment**

Ms Minh realised that most of her students learned English at schools and had a foundational knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar but they had not had much opportunity to speak and listen in English. Thus, her EFL teaching in low level courses focused more on “developing students’ speaking and listening ability” (M1I). She particularly emphasised students’ acquisition of skills to express their ideas, and responding in English, “I often ask students to […] learn to express themselves. I also ask their classmates to generate questions for them. That means they have to interact in English” (M1I). She also highlighted the need to develop students’ confidence and thinking skills when speaking in English: “Students need to be confident and become familiar with speaking in class. Moreover, they have to learn to generate ideas to speak on any topic” (M1I). Observations of Ms Minh’s class showed that she often asked students to briefly express their opinions about lesson-related topics. The focus group students also indicated that they practised speaking frequently throughout the course, and had many opportunities to do individual presentations in class.
Ms Minh also facilitated students’ acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge and practice of reading, listening and writing skills. She spent a significant amount of time explaining and helping students to recall forms and meanings of grammatical structures and new vocabulary in the course book. She also raised students’ awareness about the cultural differences between Vietnam and other countries for example regarding the social practice of giving tips to show appreciation for services. In addition, she gave extra listening, reading and writing practice which had the same topic and level of difficulty as those offered in the course book. It seemed that Ms Minh depended on the course book for her selection of teaching content, and her teaching focused on developing not only linguistic knowledge but also intercultural knowledge and language skills, particularly speaking skills. As pointed out by various scholars in the field of ELT, including Brandl (2008), Ellis (2005), and Littlewood (2011), her practices of providing students with sufficient and relevant language input, and ample opportunities for language output, her focus on both language knowledge and language skills, and the incorporation of cultural aspects of language use were supportive to the development of students’ English language competence.

Regarding EFL assessment, Ms Minh thought that there were two main purposes of assessment. The first purpose was to “check students’ comprehension of the transmitted knowledge” to inform the design of subsequent teaching: “If the results show that most students have understood my lesson, I will ask students to learn other things. […] If the results are lower than expected, I will have to think about how to improve” (M1I). However, Ms Minh indicated no intention of using the mid-term and final exam results to adjust her teaching since those two exams were delivered on computers, which might influence the accuracy of the results.

Students do the mid-term and final exams on computer. Thus, their results can be affected by many factors. For example, students may not get access to the internet or their computers may freeze during the exam. Even when there are no technical problems, the fact that students have to scroll up and down the screen to read and answer questions may also affect the quality of their answers. (M1I)

Ms Minh believes that the second purpose of assessment was to ‘assess students’ self-study” (M1I). She kept reminding students that “about 20 to 30 percent of test questions are about things not covered in the lessons and students are supposed to learn yourselves” and “if they do not self-study to improve their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, they will be at a disadvantage” (M1I). She
also guided students to reflect on their learning and use assessment results to direct their independent learning: “*when students told me that they did not know the words they need to write, I told them ‘you know that your vocabulary is too limited to express this? That again shows how important it is to learn vocabulary’*” (M1I). She often gave students mini-tests to encourage their self-study and identify areas to focus on, especially before mid-term and final exam. The following is one example.

> Only eleven of you got 13 correct answers out of 27! Everyone, please listen! You should practise reading at home. Have you borrowed the active reading book 1 for self-study at home? No? That’s why your results are so low today. 

*(3rd Ob)*

Ms Minh also indicated her use of frequent assessment to motivate learning: “*I often told students ‘the fact that you present in front of the class today does not mean that I am not going to call you tomorrow’. I want them to focus on learning and be ready at all times’*” (M1I). The focus group students also indicated that their teacher’s frequent assessment caused them to “*focus on learning*” (S3) and to “*be prepared*” (S5).

Ms Minh knows that “*marks are of crucial importance for students since if they do not achieve satisfactory marks, they will have to pay money to retake the course*” (M1I), so she tended to use marks to motivate learning. She informed students that they needed to attend all lessons and complete all assigned exercises in order to get full participation marks. She also told students that they would be given bonus marks on progress tests if they did mini-tests well although she did not clarify how she would do it. Her purpose of giving bonus marks was “*to provide students with short-term benefits so as to make them feel that they need to study*” (M1I). She did not check students’ completion of exercises in the workbook but warned them that she would collect and mark them all at the end of the semester.

Ms Minh appeared to know about the formative values of assessment (Cauley & McMillan, 2009), the control power of assessment at classroom level (Gipps, 1999), and the positive washback effect of high-stakes testing on students’ learning behaviours (Green, 2013; Perrone, 2010). She also tended to make use of classroom assessment to inform her teaching and utilise summative tests to enhance students’ effort, reflection and management of their learning (Wiliam, 2011). Her knowledge and viewpoints on EFL teaching and learning facilitate the enactment of assessment for learning in her lessons, which will be elaborated in the following section.
5.2.1.2. Assessment-related pedagogical practices

In this section, as well as in Sections 5.2.2.2 and 5.2.3.2, the teacher’s practices of questioning, using pair and group work activities, giving feedback and using English tests will be elaborated. The aims are to explore, from a sociocultural perspective, how these practices may support ELL or align with AfL principles (presented in Section 2.2.4).

Questioning

Ms Minh frequently asked questions of her students. Her questions were mostly in English and students responded in English most of the time. At the beginning of her lesson, she often asked students to express their personal viewpoints on a topic related directly to the lesson. Students generally gave different responses. She reformulated some responses and nominated specific students to elaborate. She often repeated or reformulated individual students’ responses, and explicitly corrected their errors in pronunciation and their comprehension of her questions. The following is a typical example.

T: Do you like going on vacation?
Ss: Yes (one student)
   - No (some students)
T: Why?
Ss: Because no money (one student)
T: Ah, you do not have much money so you don’t like going on vacation. Vu, you said that you like going on vacation, why so?
Vu: I usually go to Ho Chi Minh city. (Other students laugh)
T: (Smiles) I did not ask you where you usually go on vacation. I just asked you why. You like going on vacation because…?
Vu: Ah, because very happy, very comfortable and… I /knɔlɪd/ [knowledge]…
T: /knɔlɪd/? What do you mean by /knɔlɪd/? /nɔldʒ/!
   (Students repeated the pronunciation) Yeah. The sound /k/ is silent, you should not pronounce /knɔlɪd/ [knowledge] or /knou/ [know]. A lot of people pronounce [it like that] …but it is the wrong way. I /nɔu/ [know], my /nɔldʒ/ [knowledge] not…
Vu: And I know a lot of places
T: You know a lot of places. Yes, alright. Thank you! Now, Hung, do you like going on vacation?...

Ms Minh normally nominated about five or six different students to express their ideas. She indicated that her purpose in asking such questions was to “set students’ minds toward the topic of the lesson” (M2I). As a result, she tended to elaborate on the responses which could direct students’ attention toward the targeted topic and referred quickly to others. As illustrated in the following excerpt, when the students’ responses did not seem to lead to the target topic, she adjusted her question slightly to elicit the expected response and elaborated further. Her questioning practice appeared to be effective in activating students’ interest and schema, since the students in the focus group indicated that her questions at the beginning of the lesson make them “think about the topics that were raised” (S1).

T: (Writes the lesson title ‘Smart shopping’ on board and asks) Do you like shopping?
Ss: No

T: Some say ‘no’ some say ‘yes’. Why?
S: No money (many other students express their ideas noisily)
T: Ah the first reason is … you don’t have lots of money. [Are there] any other reasons? Tuan, Do you like shopping?
Tuan: No
T: No, why?
Tuan: I … very … very…
S: I don’t like it. (Other students are talking noisily.)
T: Who likes shopping?
S: No...

T: Ah, Duc, yes, you like shopping. (Students laugh and talk noisily) Why do you like it?
Duc: I like clothes.
T: Ah, because you like clothes. er.. ah. Shopping here means anything not only shopping for clothes. ‘Smart shopping’. Do you know smart? […]Now, Nga, you like shopping too. Why?…. 

Most of other questions that Ms Minh asked her students appeared to aim at focusing students on learning and checking their comprehension or prior knowledge related to the tasks in the course book. She regularly nominated individual students to give answers to comprehension questions and elicited evidence. If the students’ answers were similar and the evidence they gave was correct, she continued. If their
responses were divergent, she nominated other students to explicate their different responses by asking such questions as “who has any different answer?” or “who can help him?”. She then repeated or summarised students’ responses, provided further clues, and offered another opportunity for students’ self-correction before giving the correct answers. As illustrated in the following excerpt, her questions appeared to provide her with significant indicators of students’ understanding to promote it further. In this excerpt, the teacher was checking students’ answers to a listening task in which two people were talking about their recent purchases. Students had to listen and fill in a table indicating what the speakers were talking about, whether the speakers were ‘satisfactory’ or not with the purchases and which adjectives they used to describe the purchases.

T: Number 1, they are talking about?
Ss: A laptop
T: Satisfactory or not?
Ss: Yes/no
T: Some say ‘yes’/some say ‘no’. Linh, please?
Linh: Satisfactory
T: Any key word?
Linh: …
T: Can you hear any key words?
Linh: I forgot.
T: You forgot. Xuan?
Xuan: I think ‘unsatisfactory’
T: Yes, why do you think so? (noisy class, incomprehensible)
...Ah. You heard the word ‘expensive’ so you think it’s unsatisfactory. OK, what about others? Thanh, any idea?
[...]
T: Alright! Listen again. (plays the tape, repeats after each sentence, students also repeat). [...] So now, satisfactory or not?
Ss: No. ‘cut-off’ (repeat the key word)
T: No. Because [...]
(Reads aloud the sentence in the book) Number 4 ‘Do you think I should take the…. train? I know it is much faster but I am not sure if it stops at my station on weekends’. What word or phrase to fill here?

Ss: (no response)

T: She is talking about taking a train. What kind of train? Provide more clues

Ss: (no response)

T: Local or Express train, which one is faster? Use alternative question

Ss: Express.

T: That’s correct! The local train is much slower. Verify correct answer

(5th Ob)

Ms Minh often related the language structures in the tasks to students’ previous lessons elicit their understanding. She often verified correct responses, reformulated incomplete ones and briefly revised the knowledge if not one student seemed to remember. Since students were required to give their answers immediately, sometimes their responses were very funny and Ms Minh sometimes utilised those funny responses “to create a joyful atmosphere in the class” (M2I).

Ms Minh indicated that her main purposes in asking questions were to “lead students’ into lessons” and “check their understanding”. Her practice of nominating different students aimed to “indicate my attention to all students” (M2I), and also control students’ learning behaviours for classroom management.

If I noticed that a student did not pay attention to the lesson but talked with his peers, I would ask him a question about the lesson. Of course, he could not answer and would have to ask peers for help. I would then tell him that I had been looking at him for a long time and knew that he had not been focused. (M2I)

It seemed that Ms Minh could achieve all her expected purposes in asking questions. Moreover, as illustrated in the excerpts above, her questions could also provide students with opportunities to carry out oral communication in English, to recall their prior knowledge, and to demonstrate their own understanding by encouraging their participation in lessons. She tended to use the students’ responses to gain an understanding of students’ learning problems and adjusted her teaching appropriately. Thus, her questions helped inform her teaching, making it more supportive to students’ learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Klenowski, 2009). The focus group students also indicated their belief that the teacher’s questions facilitated their learning and seemed to support them to communicate in English.
All of the teacher’s questions are related to the lessons. The questions enable us to approach and understand lessons. (S3)

I think the teacher wants us to think and use our English vocabulary to give the answer. (S1)

Classroom observations, however, showed that not all the students responded to Ms Minh’s questions and some students even refused to give their answers when they were individually nominated. Ms Minh attributed those students’ minimal involvement to the topic and difficulty level of the tasks: “Students do not respond if they are not interested in the topics or if the tasks are too difficult for them” (M2I). Nevertheless, the main reasons appeared to lie in her use of English as a medium of instruction, her practice of giving students little wait time, and the influence of the educational culture.

Most of Ms Minh’s questions were in English, which caused difficulty for many students in understanding her questions. Students were often observed using Vietnamese to ask peers for help to understand and respond to her questions. Students sometimes misunderstood her questions and their responses did not match the question focus. Their misunderstanding was immediately highlighted by the teacher’s response often in a relaxed attitude as illustrated in the following excerpt.

*T: Where is Shanghai?*
*Ss: Thượng Hải a (Vietnamese name of Shanghai)*
*T: China! I am asking where, I am not asking you to translate [it] into English. This shows that our listening comprehension is problematic (laughs).*
*Ss: (laugh).*
*S1: Tôi hóng hết là không nói gì cả! [We had better not say anything!] (laughs).*

Ms Minh’s dominant use of English as the medium of instruction also put her students under pressure to use English to respond. As illustrated in the following responses, students’ limited vocabulary discouraged them from responding to her questions.

*There are many times we know the answers but could not find suitable words to express.* (S2, S6)

*I kept silent mainly because I did not know how to answer. (S3)*
Ms Minh appeared to sense students’ difficulty in understanding her questions so she often repeated her question more slowly and clearly and explained all the phrases she used to enhance their comprehension. If students still could not respond, she finally translated her questions into Vietnamese. She also demonstrated a relaxed attitude towards errors in students’ responses and helped reformulate the responses, which appeared to encourage students to express their ideas in English. It seemed that Ms Minh’s practices of asking questions in English were consistent with her perspective on English language teaching which placed importance on developing students’ ability to communicate in English. Although the practice helped maximise students’ exposure to English and enhanced their practice of using English to express their own ideas, it could negatively impact students’ participation.

While the focus group students indicated that they often “turned to their peers for help to understand the teacher’s questions” (S5), Ms Minh expected students to give answer immediately. The short wait time inhibited students’ comprehension and their preparation to respond. As illustrated below, when being nominated, two students refused to respond, using Vietnamese and gestures, while another student tried to respond in English but his response was short and incomplete.

*T: Son, could you tell me some reasons for doing exercises and for going on diet!*
*Son: Em chưa nghĩ ra [I haven’t thought out yet]*
*T: Alright. Luc, raise your voice!*
*Luc: (Shakes his head)*
*T: Hoan, what about you?*
*Hoan: I want stay in shape, I want…*
*T: You want to stay in shape. What else?*
*H: I want…. I want… next top model (other students laugh)*
*T: You want to become a top model? (laughs) You are so fun!*  

(2nd Ob)

Under the influence of the traditional education of teacher-centeredness, some students appeared dependent on the teacher for their participation in questioning practice: “if the teacher nominates me, I will ask for her help to find the words I need to give my answer” (S4). Therefore, Ms Minh’s practice of nominating individual students and her relaxed attitude toward students’ errors had the potential to facilitate students’ involvement to demonstrate their understanding and practise using English.
Ms Minh indicated that she did not give students time to discuss with peers before answering her questions since it would take too much time. However, it appeared that her practice of not giving students time to produce responses could be due to the current classroom context. At the beginning of the course, she was observed asking questions to encourage students’ discussion on the lesson topic. However, students did not seriously follow her instruction but talked about unrelated topics. Moreover, some students were very talkative and playful. They often talked freely in the lesson or made fun of peers’ responses. Although their humour sometimes contributed to a relaxed atmosphere in the class, it had the potential to drive students’ attention away from their learning tasks. Therefore, as illustrated in the following excerpt, her practice of giving a short wait time and frequently nominating individual students seemed to demand students’ continuous attention to the lesson and discouraged them from getting side-tracked.

_T: Hung, do you like going on vacation?_  
_Hung: No_  
_T: No. Why?_  
_Hung: I don’t... er... I love HN because ...er..._  
_Sa: I don’t like..._  
_Sb: I am lazy..._  
_T: I did not ask you whether you love HN or not..._  
_Sc: Em yêu Hà Nội nên em chăng muốn đi đâu [I like Hanoi and do not want to go anywhere else!]_  
(Whole class laugh including the teacher)  
_Sd: (Comments on his peer) Chả liên quan! [Not related to the question!]_  
_T: Long, please._  
_Long: ...Because... it’s comfortable._  
_T: OK, it makes you feel comfortable._

(4th Ob)

It is worth noting that students’ classroom behaviours such as talking freely, or publicly commenting on peers’ responses are not common in the Vietnamese educational context where students are generally expected to obey teachers’ instructions and talk only about what is requested (T. H. Nguyen, 2002; Tran & Williamson, 2009). However, such behaviours were found not only in Ms Minh’s class but also in Ms Tam’s class (elaborated in Section 5.2.2), which suggest a change in the educational culture. This change could relate to the institutional context at Non-PU where students play an important role in evaluating teachers. Ms Minh
indicated that when she first started teaching at Non-PU, she “felt uncomfortable about students talking freely in the class” but she became “familiar” with it and thought that “the students do so just because they want to get attention from others and to make fun” (M1I). Thus, it seemed that her practice of giving short wait time resulted from her understanding of students’ learning behaviours and her effort to assist them to focus on learning. This demonstrates the interrelated influences of factors on assessment practices and on the support of assessment for ELL at classroom level.

Some students were observed asking questions of Ms Minh and their peers during lessons. Their questions were about various topics: meanings of new words or phrases, grammatical errors, and whether certain knowledge areas were included in tests. Most of their questions were in Vietnamese and often related directly to the activity they were undertaking. Ms Minh often responded immediately in Vietnamese. She also responded to students’ questions of their peers when the peers could not answer. She generally gave direct answers to students’ questions herself, but when the questions were simple, she invited other students to give their answers before she explained in detail. Her practice of responding to students’ questions could enhance learning since students were provided with the assistance they needed to solve their problems in real time (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004). As illustrated in the following excerpt in a writing session, her practice of forwarding students’ questions to their peers could also increase other students’ attention to the issues raised, trigger deeper thinking of the students who asked questions and provide her with significant indicators of students’ understanding.

T: ‘It help me strong’ Câu này có đúng không cô ơi?[Is this sentence correct?] Ss: No.
Tuan: Thế nói [what’s about] ‘it is help me stronger’ có được không?
T: Now ‘it is help me stronger’. Đây là cách mà bạn Tuan chứa, chúng ta thấy có đúng không? [This is how Tuan corrects the sentence, is it right?] Tuan: ‘strong’!
Ss: (Laugh and talk noisily) Vẫn chưa đúng [Still incorrect!]
T: Vấn đề là ở chỗ có tôi hai động từ trong câu này [The problem is that there are two verbs in this sentence] ‘is’ and ‘help’....

(3rd Ob)
Students sometimes asked questions which were unrelated to the lesson, particularly when they were given time to do individual tasks. Other students in the class often laughed at such questions and some of them responded to the questions by asking other irrelevant questions. In such cases Ms Minh often ignored the question, stopped the students and reminded them to focus on the task, which demonstrated her classroom management strategy of ignoring students’ misbehaviours. The following excerpt is one example.

*S1: Why you keep looking at me, teacher?*
*T: Ui troi! [My goodness!] (smiles)*
(Students laugh)
*Ss: If you don’t look at her, how do you know she is looking at you? (The class becomes noisy)*
*T: Back to your work please!*

(4th Ob)

Students in the focus group indicated that they felt free to ask questions of the teacher whenever they wanted and about whatever they wanted. Thus, there seemed to be a small power distance between Ms Minh and her students, which encouraged students to ask her questions. However, Ms Minh indicated that “only five to seven students who are willing to learn ask questions...those who are shy or lazy or already know a lot often do not ask any questions at all” (M2I). Classroom observations also showed that some students never asked any questions and only gave responses when nominated by the teacher, which suggests possible influences of individual preferences on students’ practice of asking question of the teacher.

**Pair and group work activities**

Ms Minh was observed to require students to discuss in groups once and work in pairs twice. The group work activity was carried out early in the course, and did not seem to be successful since students did not follow her instruction to discuss but had unrelated conversations instead. She ended up nominating individual students to give their opinions. In the two pair work activities, students were required to talk in English about a given topic taken or modified from the course book, such as ‘welcoming a friend returning from a trip’ or ‘what’s the best place to buy computer or electric devices?’ In one activity, students worked with the person sitting next to them, but in the other activity students were given one out of ten topics and they had to find and work with the classmate who was given the same topic. As illustrated in
the following response from the students in the focus group, Ms Minh’s practice of arranging partners for students appeared to enable students to have more interaction with their peers and make their pair work activity more interesting.

*I cannot find a partner since all those sitting next to me have their partners.* (S5)

*It’s boring to talk all the time with the students sitting next to us. Moreover, new partners bring in new ideas.* (S3)

Audio recordings of their work in pairs showed that they often explicated and validated their own understanding, peer-corrected errors and collaborated to complete the task. Pair work activities appeared to enhance students’ active and collaborative learning as illustrated in the following excerpt.

**S1:** What were you going? *(error in question word)*

*Bạn đang đi đâu đấy đúng ko?* [Does this mean where you are going?]

**S2:** ‘What are you going’? er…going to buy tôi đang đi chọn quà.[I am going to buy a gift]

**S1:** Looking for

**S2:** /ɪʊ/ [choose] đúng không? [right?]

**S1:** /ɪʊːz/ /ɪʊːz/ chọn [choose]

**S2:** C-E đúng không?

[The spelling of the word ends with C-E right?] Seek help to verify pronunciation

**S1:** -S-E /ɪʊːz/ chọn [choose] Peer-correct pronunciation error

**S2:** Er.. a gift for her friend..

**S1:** A gift? G-I-F-T chút gì [right]? Verify spelling

**S2:** Ú [Yes]

**S1:** My friend chir her friend gi ? (Laughs)

[It must be ‘my friend’. How can it be ‘her friend’?] Peer-correct grammar

**S2:** Yes, (laughed). I am choosing a gift for my friend. Collaboration and co-construction

*Xong rồi nói gì? [What’s to say next].*

Pair work activities also appeared to provide students with opportunities to practise using English to express their own meaning. In the following excerpt, S3 persuaded S4 to be creative in their practice.

**S3:** …Where were you last week?

**S4:** We were on a cruise

**S3:** Really? How was it?

**S4:** It was feery shut [pretty short]
The work with peers appeared to improve students’ learning motivation. As illustrated below, the students encouraged each other to complete the task with best quality possible.

S1: Coi Như là xong nhé! [Done !]

S2: Phải có một đoạn kết cho hấp dẫn.[We should have an impressive ending.]

S1: Ú, đoạn kết làm sao đây?[Yes, how can we conclude?] (Turns to S3) Sơn, nghĩ hộ đoạn kết nào bỏ cảnh là …[S3, how should we conclude? the context is…]

S3: Nghĩ gì? Ói, hỏi thoại dài thế chú thời !

[Think what? Oh, such a long conversation. I can’t help!]

S2: Hãy là chỉ nói mưa đâu thôi? Minh nên thêm một vài câu lúc đầu.[Should we use only the first half of the conversation? Add some more at the beginning.] 

S1: Ú, thêm một câu cho nó dài… [Yes, add one more sentence to make it longer…] 

However, as can be noticed in the excerpt above, students faced with difficulties while trying to use English to express their own ideas, and the fact that they did not get the assistance they needed, seemed to discourage them from using English creatively. This suggests the need to provide students with support for their work in pairs/groups (Pham, 2014a; Reinders, 2010). Specific suggestions will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Students in the focus group indicated that pair and group work activities enabled them to “learn new words from peers, make learning more enjoyable” (S1) and “develop speaking skills” (S3). However, Ms Minh stated that her purpose of organising students to work in pairs/groups was only to “create a change in the classroom atmosphere, making the lesson less boring” (M2I), which indicated her
main focus on the affective values of pair and group work activities. She pointed out that she did not intend to carry out pair and group work activities very often since “at this level the tests at the end of the course consist only of individual work” (M2I). Students in the focus group also indicated that they were frequently nominated to carry out individual language performance in front of the class: “I have already done about six [individual] presentations in front of the class so far” (S1). Thus, the design of the speaking test exerted considerable influence on Ms Minh’s selection of learning activities in class. Her limited use of pair and group work activities demonstrated the washback of high-stakes testing at the University.

Ms Minh’s practice of requiring students to perform their pair work in front of the class had considerable influences on students’ learning behaviours in pair settings. Two students in the focus group said that they tried their best since they knew that they would have to “perform in front of the class later” (S3). Classroom observations also show that while working in pairs, students often wrote down their conversations to act out later in front of the class. They refused to perform when they were not well-prepared and they indicated explicitly their disappointment if they had prepared well but did not get the chance to perform.

T: S1 & S2, Ready to perform?
S1 & 2: Chưa, chưa xong a. Cô gọi nhóm khác trước đi.
[No, not yet. You nominate other pair first, please.]
…
(S1 &2 finally finish after five other pairs have finished their performances)
T: Thank you. For other pairs, we have some sections to cover today, so we stop the pair work activity here. I will nominate the other pairs to perform in another time.
S1: Hết rồi! [That’s the last pair!]
S2: Minh không lên a? Chán thế. Cô ơi, bọn em làm hết sức! [So we are not going to perform, are we? So sad! Teacher, we have been trying our very best!]
T: OK, OK. I will nominate you two later!

(5th Ob)

As demonstrated in the excerpts above, the students appeared to be highly motivated to work in pairs and to perform their pair work in class. According to Ms Minh, students wanted to perform when they were well-prepared since “they know that I will mark their performances” (M2I). Some students were also observed asking the teacher about the mark she gave for their performances: “what mark do I get,
teacher?” (5th Ob). As evidenced in such attitudes and behaviours, marks played an important role in motivating students’ participation in language performances in class. Here the influence of the institutional context became apparent: the high-stakes nature of tests and marks, and the requirement to follow the prescribed teaching plan in particular impacting on the integration of AfL in pair and group work activities.

Feedback

Ms Minh sometimes gave feedback after students responded to her questions, practised reading aloud and performed language tasks in class. She verified and praised correct responses: “That’s a correct answer! Very good!” (3rd Ob). In her feedback on students’ performances, she identified strengths and weaknesses of the performances and provided suggestions for improvements. She sometimes commented also on the students’ learning process. Her assessment criteria included language accuracy, communicative content, communication or organisation of ideas, and communication manner, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

(Ms Minh’s feedback on students’ pair work)

Thank you, the first pair. Your talks are quite ok; your conversation has lots of ideas. (To the whole class) they have already figured out why they like shopping in each of the places. (5th Ob)

Next time I think it would be much better if you prepare or made some notes on the ideas and speak without looking at the paper all the time like this. You know? You can prepare in advance some of the ideas you have to remember and come here and talk about it. You should not look at the paper all the time. OK? (5th Ob)

(Ms Minh’s feedback on one student’s presentation)

Your talk today is better than yesterday. But it is still not clear enough. You need to make your ideas clearer, [using such signal words as] firstly, secondly… (6th Ob)

The focus group students recalled that the teacher feedback was often on speaking content, fluency, coherence and task completion, which suggested the facilitative impact of teacher feedback on students’ understanding of the learning objectives and the expected learning outcomes. They also said that teacher sometimes gave them suggestions for improvement. However, most of them did not work on her feedback due to lack of time: “I only work on her feedback after I finish all the homework. Until that time I often feel very tired so I just sometimes follow her
suggestions” (S2). Classroom observations showed that Ms Minh did not explicitly require students to work on her feedback. In addition, many students neither paid attention to peers’ performances nor teacher’s feedback, since they were still working with their partners on their own task while others were performing. Such behaviours indicated that many students did not realise the importance of feedback and the need to act on the feedback, which limited the potential support of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008) for learning.

Ms Minh indicated that she sometimes asked students to give comments on peers’ performances to “check if the performing students can make other students understand their ideas and to enable students to learn from one another” (M2I). However, she found that students were not serious in assessing peers, and they generally considered the teacher’s feedback only. Observations of her class showed that although she sometimes invited students to give peer feedback, she did not clarify the assessment criteria. Therefore, students often gave general judgment on peers’ performance. Talkative students often imitated the teacher to praise their peers freely or gave funny unrelated comments, which appeared to cheer up the whole class. The following excerpt in a writing lesson is one example. Both the teacher and students speak in Vietnamese.

*T: What do you think about Thong’s concluding sentence? | Elicit peer-assessment
Ss: (Give individual opinions noisily)  
S_A: Very good! | Imitated teachers
*T: What do you think, Quang?  
Quang: Em nghĩ là đúng nhưng chưa hay [I think it is correct but not interesting.] | General judgement
*T: How do [would] you revise it?  
Quang: (No response)  
*T: (To other students) what do you think of Thong’s sentence?  
S_A: Cố ơi trong chuyện tình cảm với bạn Thống thì không thể rã rời được [It’s difficult to clarify our relationships with Thống…
(The whole class laughs)
*T: Stop saying such unrelated things! (Smiles) I think Thong’s concluding sentence is alright. He restates the topic sentence cleverly without repeating it.
[…]
*T: Now, do you know how to write a concluding sentence?
Ss: Yes
S_B: Just like Thong!

(5th Ob)
As illustrated in the excerpt above, students did not consider giving feedback on their peer’s work as contributing to improvement. They also appeared to be mindful that giving judgments on peers’ work might affect peer relationships. Meanwhile, the focus group students indicated that they had “never given any feedback on peers’ work or performance” (Ss). It seemed that students were unaware of the teacher’s practice of requiring them to carry out peer-assessment and did not seem to understand what they needed to do to assess their peers. This indicated the need to inform students of potential benefits of peer-assessment for their learning (Black et al, 2003), and to prepare and encourage students to carry out peer-assessment to support learning.

**Use of summative tests**

After returning students’ progress test papers, Ms Minh often worked through all the test questions, identified and corrected typical errors, revised the related knowledge and highlighted areas that needed extensive revision. These practices could enable students to reflect on their understanding of important knowledge areas and identify new learning targets from the evidence produced by the test results. She also made her marking criteria transparent and advised them to pay attention to those criteria to avoid losing marks. These practices indicated her effort to share the assessment criteria, and also to help students improve test results. The following excerpts are examples of her instruction in test revising section.

*These are three main types of your writing errors. […] We need to have a subject and a verb in every sentence. Many of you write sentences without a subject. For example you wrote […]. You need to remember these common errors to avoid!*

*The question starts with an auxiliary, but you use the verb ‘to be’ to answer. That’s why you did not get mark for that answer.*

Before progress tests, Ms Minh often gave supplementary exercises to help students prepare for the tests. Before the mid-term and final exams, Ms Minh sped through her mandated lessons and spared time in the last two lessons to revise all the language knowledge that students had covered. She also organised two optional supplementary lessons to help students revise language knowledge for the final
exam, and do a mock speaking test. In all these exam-preparation activities, she used Vietnamese as the medium of instruction, which reflected her utilisation of Vietnamese to facilitate students’ comprehension (Kieu, 2010) and also the wash back of high-stakes testing. She particularly paid attention to low achieving students, identifying the areas they needed to work on and giving the students opportunities to realise and correct their errors.

(In a supplementary lesson)

T: Lam, you still seem to misuse the subject and object pronouns. (Revises briefly the difference)

[...]

(Later in the lesson, the teacher frequently nominates the student to check if he has proper understanding of the grammatical point)

T: What do you fill in here, Lam?

Lam: We [not ‘us’]

T: Why?

Lam: Because after that is a verb!

(7th Ob)

(After a student’s mock speaking test)

T: Speak louder. I have told you many times that you need to speak louder.
When you speak louder and clearly, you can demonstrate your confidence.
You speak so softly!

(6th Ob)

The focus group students indicated that they preferred test preparation to normal lessons. Near the final test, talkative students were observed to talk less and focus more on studying. They also appeared to pay more attention to the teacher’s feedback on what they needed to do to prepare for the test as demonstrated in the following excerpt.

T: You need to state all the reasons first and then elaborate each idea.
S: I have not thought out all
T: But in the speaking test you are given only one to two minutes to think
S: I will have to revise all the ten units.

(6th Ob)

The profound washback effect of high-stakes testing on students’ learning behaviours and on Ms Minh’s teaching and/or assessment practices (Perrone, 2010) is apparent. Although students appeared to pay more attention to passing tests than to the learning quality, the washback effect on their behaviours seemed to facilitate learning. Ms Minh’s practices of revising the progress tests to help students identify
the areas for improvement and encourage their self-study. Her practice of spending more time to assist the students in need in test preparation lessons aligned with her perspective on the potential of assessment result to facilitate students’ independent learning and to inform teaching. These practices also demonstrate the integration of AfL, formative use summative tests in particular (Black, et al., 2003a), in her instructional practices.

According to focus group students, tests make them “have to focus on study” (S3) and their results at the mid-term exam made them “feel worried” (S1, S5) and think that they need to “be more focused during the lesson” (S6) and “study harder” (S5). They also indicated their use of test results to identify areas for improvement: “my reading and listening test results were a bit low so I try to do more practice. I buy and borrow practice books from library to practise listening and reading” (S2). These responses illustrated washback effects of high-stakes testing on ELL and suggests the need to make use of tests to promote ELL (Carless, 2011).

5.2.1.3. Summary

Ms Minh was found to carry out various assessment-related pedagogical practices which could support ELL. Her practices of asking both open and closed questions and expanding on students’ responses enabled students to focus on learning, think deeply and demonstrate their understanding clearly so that the teacher and peers could help develop it (Black, 2009; Fisher, 2013). Her questioning practice also helped engage students in meaningful interactions in English, which facilitated the development of their language ability (Littlewood, 2011). Her practice of demonstrating a humorous attitude towards students’ errors created a relaxed atmosphere in class which encouraged students to ask questions of her. This which could enhance her understanding of students’ learning needs to provide them with timely support. She sometimes organised students to work in pairs and groups, which helped increase their motivation, and provided them with more opportunities to practise oral skills and learn from one another. These practices aligned with her perspective on EFL teaching which focused on developing listening and speaking skills. In addition, she gave feedback on students’ language performances and revised test questions, which could facilitate students’ understanding of the expected learning outcomes, and their capacity to identify, correct, and avoid repeating their errors. Her exam-preparation activities also could assist students to reflect on learning, identify learning problems and undertake necessary actions to achieve the expected learning outcomes.
However, some of her assessment-related practices did not seem to be facilitative to ELL. Her practice of giving little wait time, which seemed to be her strategy to manage the class with misbehaving students, appeared to hinder students’ participation in responding to her questions. Her limited use of pair and group work activities due to her concerns over the speaking test and the mandated teaching plan, also limited students’ opportunities to carry out active and collaborative learning in pair and group settings. These practices indicated the influences of the institutional use of students’ feedback to evaluate teachers and high-stakes testing on the support of assessment for ELL.

5.2.2 Assessment practices in Ms Tam’s class

5.2.2.1. Teacher’s profile

**English language learning and teaching experiences**

Ms Tam graduated from university in 2005 and obtained her Masters Degree in 2009. After graduating from university, she worked as a part-time teacher at another non-public university for two years. She had been working as a full-time teacher at Non-PU since 2007. Like Ms Minh, she indicated her preference for working at Non-PU because she could be more creative in teaching and the pay was higher. She said that she has been trying her best to teach creatively at Non-PU and her creativity is stimulated by “intelligent students”, “sufficient teaching facilities” and EFL programs with “close-to-life topics” (T1I). At the time of this study she had seven years’ experience in teaching English language at tertiary level, so she is regarded as a mid-career teacher. In this study, she taught an elementary course.

**Perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment**

Ms Tam indicated her reliance on the course book to design learning activities: “I often follow the course book. I teach the sections specified in the implementation plan and give students extra practice in the target language knowledge and skills” (T2I). She demonstrated that when designing extra practice tasks for students, she paid attention to the relevance of the topic and difficulty level, ensuring that the extra tasks shared the same topic and were at the same level as tasks in current lessons. She stressed the need to provide students with “ample opportunities to practise listening and speaking in English” (T2I). She also highlighted her strategy of recycling language (Nunan, 2004), which is one important principle of language
teaching, to provide students with various opportunities to revise and practise the target language knowledge.

*I teach one topic after another. For example, with the topic about family, I require students to draw their family trees and talk about their family members. The conversation students carry out in class is about family. The extra listening tasks in class are also about family. The writing task at home is about family, too. That means students can remember the topic clearly and practise with it.* (T2I)

Observations of her class also showed that her teaching depended largely on the course book, and the main focus seemed to be placed on enhancing student acquisition of linguistic knowledge. She spent a large amount of class time explaining and revising vocabulary and structures used in the course book. She often required students to work in pairs to repeat and make a similar conversation to the model conversations in the course book. She also provided students with extra exercises to help them revise the structures and expand their vocabulary of the same topics. She sometimes gave students extra listening tasks with similar topics. Thus, although she indicated that her teaching aimed to meet the institutional objective of EFL education, which is “to develop students’ language ability so that they can use English for studying and communication purposes” (T1I), she seemed to focus mainly on developing students’ knowledge and ability to use a limited set of English language structures through drill practice and rules, which are identified by Sung and Pederson (2012) as common ELT practices in Asia.

Regarding EFL assessment, Ms Tam indicated that the purposes of EFL assessment at Non-PU were to “classify [stream] students according to their proficiency levels” (T1I). However, she emphasised her use of assessment to motivate students to learn. She described her practice of giving students bonus marks to improve learning motivation in class: “I told my students that if their test results are low but they study hard and participate enthusiastically in learning activities in class, I will give them some bonus marks in their progress tests” (T1I). Observations of her lessons showed that she sometimes used marks to encourage students’ learning effort: “listen again, who finds out the answer [for this question] will be rewarded 10 marks in listening” (2nd Ob). She also gave marks for students’ language practice, kept and showed records of their marks on screen to help students be focused and learn hard. Like Ms Minh, Ms Tam used assessment and marks to control learning
behaviours, which reflected her understanding of the control power of assessment at classroom level (Gipps, 1999). She stated:

*I record all results of students’ practices for example, their marks on writing, the number of correct answers in listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar exercises. It is one way to show students that they are being assessed. […] Students at Non-PU seem to like playing more than studying. If I do not record, they might not place importance in doing learning tasks. […] I told students that I will use the highest and the lowest marks so they have to try to learn hard all the time. (T2I)*

Ms Tam acknowledged that her use of marks as a motivational strategy might not be necessary for her current group of students since they were enjoying learning English and trying their best to learn most of the time. However, as evidenced from classroom observations and responses of the focus group students, their enjoyment of learning was not sustained: “I do not always revise the lesson at home. I only study when I feel like it” (S2).

As indicated by focus group students, there could be three other reasons why the teacher’s use of marks was not effective in motivating them to study. First was the lack of clarity in the way the teacher used the recorded results: “Teacher has her own way of using the recorded results to give bonus mark, which is generally subjective” (S3). Second was the small proportion of classroom assessment in the GPA. The students thought the progress tests and assessment carried out by the teacher in class exerted negligible impact on their learning motivation since “the most important is the final exam since it could decrease the GPA of the whole course” (S1 & S2). Third was the students’ understanding of the course objectives. They seemed to consider language learning as acquiring grammatical knowledge. They indicated that they did not need to try hard to study since they had “learnt most of the grammatical knowledge targeted in the course at high schools” (Ss). Such understanding of the course objective seemed to be consistent with Ms Tam’s perspective on EFL teaching which focused exclusively on course book-based language structures.

Ms Tam appeared to use assessment results to monitor students’ learning. She recorded students’ learning results on the computer, and used the results to review students’ learning progress: “for example, today the student got 15 correct answers out of 30 but (s)he only got three out of 30 in previous tests with the same level. Thus, it demonstrates that (s)he has made progress in learning” (T2I). While importing new results, she showed previously recorded results on the screen and
reminded students to reflect on their learning: “Tuan, look at your recorded results. Your listening marks seem to go down” (3rd Ob). However, her practice of recording assessment information to inform teaching and learning seemed to be rather limited since the recording of students’ numeric results did not show details of the progress students had made or identify the learning areas that students needed to work on to improve.

5.2.2.2. Assessment-related pedagogical practices

Questioning

Ms Tam frequently asked questions of her students. Her purposes were to check “if students remember what they have been taught”, to measure their “reading or listening comprehension” and to “make students think during the lesson” (T2I). However, her questions appeared to serve a variety of purposes according to the time and context when the questions were generated.

At the beginning of each lesson or section in the lesson, Ms Tam often asked questions related to direct students’ attention to the targeted topic. For example, before requiring students to listen to people talking about their holidays, she asked such questions as “When do you often have a vacation? What do you often do? Where do you often go?” (4th Ob). She also tended to use questions to provide students with opportunities to practise using English orally since she often reminded students to respond in English and reformulated their responses, which could provide models of English language usage in context. However, as illustrated in the following excerpt, her practice did not seem to be successful in facilitating oral language practice, since students generally gave short answers or responded in Vietnamese, and they kept repeating peers’ errors which she had implicitly corrected in her recast. This might be because her students did not notice her instruction, which was often short and in English, or they did not take her instruction into consideration.

(Before listening to people telling about their fitness habits, Ms Tam asked questions of students to lead them to the lesson topic)

*T:* What do you do to stay in shape?
*S:* I play football

*T:* Can play football, what else?
*S:* Tập thể dục, chạy [Do morning exercises, go running]

*T*: (To S) [Use ]English! You can… - Require students to respond in English - Suggest using model verb ‘can’ to respond
$S_B$: Running

$T$: You can go running | Recast

$S_C$: Walking in the park

$T$: You can go walking in the park. What else can you do in the park? | Recast

$Ss$: Walking/ kissing/ running

$T$: [Use the structure] can + verb! | Specify the target grammatical structure

$Ss$: Jog

$T$: You can go jogging.. | Recast

$S$: Swim | Students continued giving incomplete answers

$T$: You can swim in the lake [in the park] (laughs) | Signal error in meaning

After students completed learning tasks in the course book, Ms Tam often asked questions to check their answers. As illustrated in the following excerpt, she sometimes expanded on students’ responses, which could enable students to demonstrate their comprehension.

(The teacher was checking students’ answers of a gap-filling listening exercise)

$T$: (Reads the sentence and stops at the gap) She goes running and…?

$Ss$: Lift weights

$T$: How often does she lift weights? | T expanded on student’s answers

(Some students respond at the same time)

$S_A$: Hình như là…thứ sáu…[I think… Friday]

$S_B$: Three times a week

$T$: Three times a week, OK. When? | Address the correct response and expand

$S_A$: Monday với cả gì xong đến thứ 6 [and some other day and then Friday]

$S_C$: Wednesday …

$T$: Monday–Wednesday and Friday | Confirm correct answers

$S_A$: 3 ngày đấy, 4 ngày chạy [she lifts weights three days and go running four days a week] | Ss show their listening comprehension

$T$: OK, very good! (moves to the next question)

As illustrated in the following excerpt, her questions sometimes assisted students to realise and self-correct their errors. In this excerpt, students were required to formulate sentences using information illustrated in the pictures in the course book.

Ms Tam was checking their answers.

$T$: What does he hardly ever do? | Check reading comprehension

$Ss$: Eating

$T$: Eat what? How can he live without eating (laughed)? | Elicit self-correction
Ms Tam often asked questions about the previously taught knowledge. If none of the students could remember, she gave information about the context in which they learned the language structures or briefly revised the knowledge. Her practices appeared to help students recall the knowledge they had learned and demonstrate their understanding.

(Teacher is checking students’ answers for a grammar exercises)

T: Do you remember the meaning of ‘mustn’t’?

Ss: (respond noisily but none of the responses are correct)

T: Còn nhớ lần trước chúng ta sử dụng trợ động từ này để nói về buôn bán ma túy không? [Remember last time I used this modal verb to talk about drug trafficking?]

Ss: Có, cái đây có nghĩa là cấm [Yes, it means prohibition] not allow to do

[...]

T: ‘Will’ and ‘Be+Ving’, still remember?

Ss: Quên rồi a. [I forget.] (Other students are talking noisily)

T: The monitor says... ‘I am getting married’ (student stop talking and listen) that means he has booked the wedding place and sent the wedding invitation. However, if he says ‘I will get married’, he may not have a girlfriend at the moment.

Monitor: I already have my girlfriend, teacher! (Whole class laugh)

T: See the difference? (Explains the difference in Vietnamese)

Ms Tam’s questions sometimes aimed to control students’ learning behaviours. During lessons, some students in her class often talked freely and loudly about issues which might relate marginally to the lesson at first, and then became totally irrelevant. Such conversations appeared to direct other students’ attention away from the task since they kept adding or giving comments to one another, which were all in Vietnamese. In such cases, Ms Tam often made such comments as “This class is as noisy as a market today!” and asked such questions as “Have you finished your talk?” in a loud voice. If students did not stop talking, she called out names of...
specific students who were still talking to require them to stop. If the students kept
talking, she opened the ‘attendance’ file on the desktop computer, and marked those
students as ‘absent’. She projected the computer screen so the whole class could see
her activities and the talkative students then stopped talking. After she had applied
the rule to punish talkative students several times, her questions appeared to help
students stop their side-tracked talks to focus on learning.

Ms Tam often asked questions of the whole class and students responded in
chorus. They also commented on their peers’ responses. Ms Tam allowed students to
talk freely in this way and only stopped them when their talk turned to irrelevant
topics. Her practice appeared to encourage students’ participation in responding to
her questions and facilitate discussion among students. However, since students often
gave short responses, which were mostly in Vietnamese, and their discussion
sometimes turned to focus on unrelated topics, their participation provided limited
information about their ELL for scaffolding by the teacher and peers (Murphy,
2008).

Regarding her practices of responding to students’ responses, for questions
which have a single correct answer, Ms Tam often repeated and verified the correct
answer and quickly turned to the next question. When students had no answers or
gave different answers she allowed them to listen to the tape or read the text again,
provided them with clues to enable them to find the correct answers. Her strategies
appeared to be helpful in assisting some responsive students to find the correct
answers. However, she often turned to another question right after the correct answer
was found, sometimes by only one student, without checking if all students
understood the correct answer or expanding on students’ incorrect answers. Audio
recordings of her lessons also revealed that some students could not keep pace with
the teacher and peers, and asked what the correct answers were. Ms Tam appeared to
focus on showing students correct answers to the task questions rather than using the
task questions to gain information about students’ understanding, which seemed to
align with the traditional knowledge transmission pedagogy. Her practices of not
checking if other students understood properly before moving on to a new question,
and her tendency to ignore incorrect responses inhibited her from gaining an
understanding of students’ learning to promote it further (Black, 2010).
According to the focus group students, Ms Tam’s questioning practices helped them “understand the lesson” (S1), “practise listening in English” (S5), and “learn new vocabulary” (S2). They also pointed out that participating in responding to the teacher’s question assisted them to “practise English pronunciation” (S6), and “practise expressing ideas in English” (S4). However, it was observed that some students did not respond to the teachers’ questions, particularly those quiet and shy students sitting in the back rows. Ms Tam seemed to notice that, so she sometimes nominated those silent students to give their responses. Nevertheless, other responsive and loud students often intervened by explaining the questions in Vietnamese, suggesting possible answers or even giving their own responses. She sometimes named and stopped the most talkative or loudest student to give less responsive ones the opportunity to express their own ideas: “Vu, stop! I will ask you later!” (3rd Ob). However, the silent students often took longer to give their answers and during that time other loud students often began chatting noisily. In such cases, Ms Tam often abandoned her effort to work with the silent students to return to those loud ones. It seemed that the classroom context with the presence of good-natured but talkative and disobedient students inhibited Ms Tam from facilitating less responsive students’ participation.

Students in Ms Tam’s class frequently asked questions in Vietnamese. Most their questions were about new vocabulary or how to express their ideas in English. Students sometimes addressed the teacher in their questions but sometimes they just asked questions loudly. Ms Tam often responded to students’ questions immediately. Other students also responded if they knew the answers. Ms Tam sometimes repeated the question to ask the whole class, which allowed students opportunities to share their knowledge with peers, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

\[ S_A: \text{What does ‘dairy’ mean, Teacher?} \]
\[ T: \text{Whole class, what does ‘dairy’ mean?} \]
\[ Ss: \text{Products from milk.} \]

(1st Ob)

She sometimes responded by giving a comment which indicated her expectation that students should have understood or remembered the word. Although she often smiled when giving such comments, she seemed to make students feel embarrassed. The following excerpt is one example.
Sometimes students’ questions were not related to the lesson but Ms Tam still responded, sharing with them her knowledge and personal opinion about issues.

The focus group students stated that they often asked questions of their teachers (in Vietnamese) whenever they wanted. There seemed to be a small power distance between Ms Tam and her students, which enabled them to ask questions of her to demonstrate their current learning problems and seek help. Her practices of giving direct answers to students’ questions or directing the questions to their peers could facilitate their learning by providing the assistance they need in a timely manner (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004) and facilitated their collaborative learning. However, given students’ face-saving concerns (T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002), her practice of commenting on their questions might discourage students, particularly low achieving students, from asking for her help with their learning. Although her practice of sharing her knowledge and opinions on issues unrelated to the lesson could help her develop a relationship with students and encourage students to ask questions of her, the practice might not be facilitative to ELL since it deflected students’ attention from the lesson.

**Pair and group work activities**

Ms Tam indicated that she sometimes required students in the elementary course to work in pairs but not in groups since “the topics and the tasks designed in the course book were quite simple, just daily conversation in pairs” (T2I). Observations of her class also showed that she generally implemented pair work activities in the course book. She indicated that her purpose of asking students to work in pairs was to “practise speaking in English” (T2I). Audio recordings of students’ talk while working in pairs showed that pair work activities could provide students with opportunities to not only practise using English to express ideas, but also to collaborate with and learn from peers, which could promote their ELL (McDonough, 2004). The following excerpt is one example. Here, students were required to work
in pairs to discuss their favourite vacation tour, following the model conversation in the course book.

\[S_A: \text{Mày hỏi tôi đi để tôi nói [You ask me first]!}\]
\[S_B: \text{What kind of tour do you choose?}\]
\[S_A: \text{Oh yes, I like to.. er ..the sea. I think I choose the Caribbean cruise.}\]
\[\text{Ông hỏi tôi tại sao đi [Ask me ‘why’!]}\]
\[S_B: \text{Why?}\]
\[S_A: \text{Oh, because I like sea and I want to go to the beach...}\]
\[\text{What kind of tour do you choose for your vacation?}\]
\[S_B: \text{Ông hỏi tôi đi! [Now you ask me, please!]}\]
\[S_A: \text{Tôi hỏi ông đấy. [I have already asked you] What kind of tour do you choose for your vacation?}\]
\[S_B: \text{I... Trả lời gì? [How should I answer?] Ask for peer for help with ideas}\]
\[S_A: \text{Trả lời à? Mày chọn gì thì trả lời đấy! [How to answer? Just say what you choose! ]}\]
\[S_B: \text{I think ...I [choose the] tour [to] European in... 10 days Opportunity to speak English}\]
\[S_A: \text{Yeah, what.. Where do you go? (Translates the question in to L1) Self-correct question word}\]
\[S_B: \text{I am going to Rome and Paris Opportunity to speak English}\]
\[S_A: \text{It’s very famous! And what.. ah Where do you go in Paris? Self-correct}\]
\[S_B: \text{I... visit Eiffel tower. Meaningful communication in English}\]
\[S_A: \text{Eiffel tower ?Oh. And ...Italy? (4th Ob)}\]

The focus group students indicated that the pair work activities were aimed at helping students to ‘get familiar with communicating in English” (S6) and “memorise the functional language structures to apply in real communication situations after graduating” (S3). However, the focus group students did not show any significant preference for pair work activities, in contrast to students in other focus groups. Audio recordings of students’ talks while working in pairs also showed that many pairs did not seem to make an effort to practise speaking English. For example, in the following excerpt, students were required to ask and answer questions about their vacations. Student G seemed to encourage his peers to make the shortest conversation possible for the task. Rather than elaborating on their reasons for choosing to stay at home on vacation, student E and F stopped their conversation immediately after their first turn and started chatting about an unrelated topic. It
seemed that these students focused more on completing the pair work task than using the pair work opportunity to improve their English.

\[ S_E: \text{Where do you usually go on your vacation?} \]
\[ S_F: \text{I stay at home.} \]
\[ S_G: \text{Thế thôi [That’s all]. I stay at home. (Translates into Vietnamese)} \]

(4\textsuperscript{th} Ob)

There could be several reasons for students’ perfunctory manner in carrying out pair work activities in Ms Tam’s class. One reason could be lack of preparation for the pair work. Before requiring students to work in pairs, Ms Tam gave short instructions which generally required students to read the task requirement in the course book and carry out the task, for example “Now, work in pairs, ask and answer three questions in exercise D!” (4\textsuperscript{th} Ob). She did not clarify the intended objectives or the expected learning outcomes, which might affect students’ ability to take control of their learning (Black, 2010). That is, students might not understand properly what they were required to do in pairs and they might not know if their work was satisfactory.

The second reason might lie in the way students’ work was assessed. When students finished their pair work activities, Ms Tam often asked questions of individual students. She seemed to consider students’ work in pairs as preparatory activity for their later performances when they were nominated to provide meaningful answers to the teacher’s questions. Although the teacher’s questions were on the same topic, the questions were often different from those questions that students were discussing in pairs, so the pair work activity did not seem to be helpful for the later checking by the teacher. This lack of alignment between the assessment and the learning activity, together with the fact that Ms Tam did not mark their performances, appeared to discourage students from investing effort in pair work tasks.

Ms Tam’s use of assessment to control students’ behaviours for classroom management purposes, which did not seem to be effective, could be another reason for the students’ lack of effort in pair work tasks. She sometimes nominated specific students or pairs to to answer her questions, or to perform their pair work because they were misbehaving. She aimed to stop their misbehaviours by putting them in the spotlight and identifying their wrong answers (Skidmore, 2006), which might contribute to their face-saving concerns (Ashwill & Diep, 2004). Her strategy did not
seem to be effective since the nominated students appeared to be under no pressure to perform the task well. They did not seem to be negatively affected when their errors were publicly highlighted by the teacher and their peers.

It seemed that Ms Tam’s practice of organising pair work activities had the potential to provide students with opportunities to practise using English, to reflect on their language performance for improvement or to seek help from peers to improve learning. However, the potential was utilised to a limited extent due to the classroom context and the inclusion of disobedient and lackadaisical students. The lack of clarity regarding task requirements, objectives and expected learning outcomes, and the lack of alignment between student learning in pairs and assessment of their work constitute other contributory factors.

**Feedback**

Ms Tam rarely gave oral feedback on students’ language performances in class. She stated “students really like praises” so she often praised students for their “learning progress” or “good task performance” (T2I). She was also seen sometimes giving students such praises as “That’s right!” and “Exactly!” “Excellent!” to verify students’ correct responses, and commented “Very good!” and “Excellent” on students’ writing with high marks. According to the findings of the study carried out by T. C. L. Nguyen (2009); Pham and Renshaw (2013), in the cultural context in Vietnam, Ms Tam’s practice using such praises could positively affect learning motivation.

Ms Tam sometimes gave written feedback on student writing. Her feedback focused mainly on language forms. She ticked correct use of words, phrases or structures. She underlined, circled, and crossed out incorrect word choice, word forms or expressions, and sometimes corrected the errors. She gave marks and sometimes wrote a short comment about particular errors in the writing such as “Pay attention to S+ Vs/es” or “present simple → habit”. However, when returning the writing, she did not give any oral feedback but just asked students to read their marks aloud for her to record. This practice suggests that she did not put adequate importance on giving feedback.

The focus group students indicated that the teacher’s written feedback enabled them to avoid repeating errors in spelling and plural forms. One student said
that she often revised her writing following the teacher’s feedback, and found out that she “should not try to write complicated sentences but simple ones” (S2). However, another student indicated that he sometimes had difficulties in understanding the teacher’s feedback: “She crossed my sentences but I did not understand why they were wrong” (S5), but he did not ask the teacher for help. Another student stated that he got the teacher’s feedback and realised that he needed to “be more fluent” (S3). It seemed that Ms Tam’s feedback had the potential to encourage students to reflect on learning, identify their specific errors and inform them about expected learning outcomes (Black, et al., 2003a). However, the potential was limited by the quality of feedback and the lack of “assessment dialogues” (Carless, 2007) between the teachers and students to help them understand the feedback.

Use of summative tests

Before progress tests, the mid-term and final exam, Ms Tam often reminded students of the topics, and main areas of language knowledge that they had learned. She also drilled students in those knowledge areas, gave additional reading and listening exercises, and extra practice in speaking and writing in mock tests before the final exam. Her practice of preparing students for the tests and exams reflected the washback of the high-stakes testing at the University.

In the period from the mid-term exam to the final exam, students in Ms Tam’s class appeared to be more focused on learning. They talked less and attended more to the teacher’s instruction. Their questions also focused more on the lessons. The changes in students’ learning attitudes and behaviours reflected positive washback effects of the high-stakes testing (Perrone, 2010). The improvement in students’ learning attitudes and behaviours facilitated the integration of AfL in teachers’ pedagogical practices. In particular, she gave more detailed instructions on learning tasks and paid more attention to expand on students’ questions. The changes in Ms Tam’s instructional practices indicated the influences of the classroom context, students’ attitudes and behaviours in particular, on the implementation of AfL.

As indicated by the focus group students, the results of the mid-term exam enabled them to reflect on learning. Some of them found that they needed to “learn
“harder” (S3, S4, S6) but they seemed to face with difficulties in finding effective ways to improve learning. For example, one student stated:

> My listening marks were very low. I know that I am not good at listening. I have invested in practising listening. I nearly learnt by heart the listening tracks of units 1 and 2 in the course book. I also practise doing listening exercises in other listening books, but they speak really fast so I can hear only some words. (S3)

The students also predict about whether they could pass the final exam. Four out of six students thought that they would pass. One student indicated his uncertainty: “I do not know yet. It depends!” (S6). Another student predicted failure in the final exam: “My English is not good. I know that I will not pass the exam!” (S5). It appeared that high-stakes exams make students invest more effort in learning, but they need further assistance, especially with methods and direction, to learn effectively.

5.2.2.3. Summary

Ms Tam carried out some assessment-related pedagogical practices which facilitated ELL. She frequently asked questions which could help students focus on learning, recall prior knowledge, reflect and demonstrate understanding. Her practices of giving immediate answers to students’ questions or forwarding the questions to peers provided students with the assistance they needed in real time, and facilitated collaborative learning. She organised students to work in pairs, which also facilitated their demonstration and reflection on their learning. Her practice of giving praises could enhance learning motivation and her written feedback assisted students to realise errors, gain some understanding of the learning objectives, and reflect on their learning for self-improvement.

However, some of Ms Tam’s assessment-related practices did not seem to facilitate ELL. Her practices of not nominating specific students or expanding on students’ correct responses, paying little attention to incorrect answers or judging some of students’ questions inhibited students’ involvement in questioning practice. Her limited instruction on pair work and the lack of alignment between her assessment of students’ pair work and their learning appeared to inhibit students’ participation in pair work activities. Her limited feedback on language performances
in class hindered students’ understanding of the learning objectives to control and improve learning (Wiliam, 2011).

Ms Tam’s assessment practices reflected the influences of her limited knowledge of the potential for assessment for learning, and the educational culture characterised by teacher-centeredness and knowledge transmission. The practices also illustrated the influences of the classroom context with talkative and disobedient students, and the washback effects of high-stakes testing which focused considerably on language knowledge and limitedly on language sub-skills and strategies, particularly in listening (Ling & Kettle, 2011).

5.2.3 Assessment practices in Ms Van’s class

5.2.3.1. Teacher’s profile

English language learning and teaching experiences

Ms Van graduated from university in 2008. She obtained her Masters Degree in 2011. After graduating from university, she worked as a part-time English teacher at two public universities at the same time for more than a year. She had been working as an English teacher at Non-PU since 2009. She is considered an early career teacher in this study since at the data collection time she had had less than five years’ English teaching experience. In this study, she taught an intermediate course. The students in her class were placed at pre-intermediate level when they started learning English at Non-PU. After the first seven weeks of studying they had successfully completed their pre-intermediate course. Thus, the intermediate course with Ms Van was their second English course at Non-PU. The students did not know all of their classmates since they were randomly grouped after the first course.

With her experience of working at two public universities and Non-PU, Ms Van indicated her preferences for working at Non-PU. Like Ms Minh and Ms Tam, she valued the working conditions at Non-PU including the availability and use of “designed package materials”, the well-equipped classrooms, small class size, photocopy service, and the “acceptable salary” (V1I). She thought that the working conditions enabled her to be creative in teaching and have successful lessons.
Ms Van indicated that the institutional practice of using students’ feedback to evaluate teachers caused her emotional stress when she started working at Non-PU: “Since I had been really responsible and tried my best to teach, the negative feedback I got from students [on my practices] made me feel disappointed” (VII). However, later she became familiar with this practice and felt less stressed about students’ negative feedback. She also became “less strict” with students: “Previously, if a student did not complete his homework, I would give him a bad mark on learning attitude immediately but now I give him one more chance to complete it” (VII). As illustrated in the following excerpt, the reasons for the change in her strategy to deal with students’ misbehaviours seemed to originate from negative feedback from low achieving students:

I give students more chances to correct their mistakes [in learning behaviour] since I do not want them to say ‘no’ to learning English. Their negative feedback means they do not like the lessons. If I insist on applying strict rules of behaviour, they may be demotivated completely since they themselves are already not good at English. (VII)

The institutional practice of collecting students’ feedback seemed to cause Ms Van to adjust her teaching practices from punishing students’ misbehaviours towards encouraging their learning effort by providing them with opportunities to realise and correct errors in their learning behaviours. The adjustment seemed to facilitate the integration of AfL in her teaching since, as specified by ARG (2002a), principles of AfL included “foster motivation” and “helps learners know how to improve” (p.2). Details of her pedagogical practices are presented in Section 5.2.3.2.

**Perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment**

Ms Van thought that EFL education needed to focus on developing students’ ability to communicate their own ideas in English since it is “the ultimate purpose of language learning” (VII). She was observed frequently asking students to apply the newly taught language structures to produce meaningful communication in English. She used English as the medium of instruction and encouraged students to use English to demonstrate their knowledge and opinions in class. She tried to understand students’ ideas and helped them communicate the ideas in English appropriately. Her practice of engaging students in using English to express their own ideas enhanced their demonstration of their existing ELL for scaffolding by the
teacher and peers. Illustrative examples of her practices are presented in Section 5.2.3.2.

Ms Van appeared to have contradictory beliefs about the need to inform students of the learning objectives. From her own ELL experience, she believed that students should be informed about the overall objectives of the lesson.

*My teacher did not tell me why I needed to learn certain things in certain lessons. For example, why I had to learn about past tense in the lesson about vacation?...* Thus, I could not relate the content to learn effectively. (V2I)

However, she thought that students did not need to know the pedagogical purposes of individual tasks but “*just need to listen and carry out the learning tasks as required by the teacher*” (V2I). Her limited knowledge of the importance of students’ understanding of learning objectives in directing and engaging them in the learning process (Lantolf, 2000) was apparent.

Ms Van indicated her tendency to exercise control over students’ behaviours in class. She used the institutional requirement for class attendance to stop students misbehaving. She called out students’ names whenever she observed off-task behaviours, such as using laptops to play games or check social media sites, or talking with peers, and warned them: “*Remember, if I call your names three times in a lesson, I will mark you as absent even though you are in class*” (Obs). She also used marks to encourage language performances in class.

*If we volunteer to perform in class or participate enthusiastically in class activities, we will get bonus marks. If we refuse to perform when asked by the teacher, we will be given a ‘minus’ mark. (S4)*

She indicated that she did not want to develop a rapport with students for fear of losing control of their activities in class: “*There is a fine line between a relaxed and an overexcited atmosphere in class. If I do not stick to the rules, students will not be able to learn*” (V2I). Her pedagogy seemed to be characterised by teacher-centeredness although it seemed to be more lenient to reduce the possibility of students giving negative feedback. She utilised the high-stakes nature of English marks at the University to control and assist students to focus on learning.

Regarding EFL assessment, Ms Van indicated that “*the only purpose of assessment*” was to check students’ comprehension of what had been taught and their development of language skills for classification purposes: “*a teacher needs to set standards to decide whether the level of students’ language development is*
acceptable. If their levels are a lot lower than the standard, they certainly fail and they need to retake the exam or repeat the course” (V1I). She indicated her use of assessment results to check her own judgment of students’ learning: “I do not place importance on whether students' test results are high or low. The important thing is whether their results are the same as what I expected” (V1I). As evident in her responses, M Van focused mainly on using assessment for summative purposes of measuring learning achievement and classifying students. She appeared to have limited understanding of formative purposes of assessment such as to inform teaching, to engage students in learning, and to develop students’ ability to manage their own learning (Black, 2013; Brookhart, 2011)

In common with the other two teachers at Non-PU, Ms Van used assessment and marks as tools to motivate students’ learning. She often checked students’ homework and performances in class and gave bonus or minus marks to “create additional motivation for their learning, which hopefully will become their habit of learning later” (V1I). Different from Ms Minh and Ms Tam, Ms Van clarified her approach of giving bonus and minus marks. The bonus marks were added directly to students’ progress test results: “if students got three plus points, they could have one additional mark on their coming progress test” (V1I). Minus marks were taken into consideration when deciding students’ participation marks. Ms Van often publicly displayed students’ minus and bonus marks, projecting them onto the screen as she imported them in the computer. Classroom observations showed that students paid attention to the bonus and minus marks and asked questions if there were any errors in the recording of the marks. Table 5.1 is a copy of her mark list early in the course. As can be seen in the table, those students who got the most bonus marks were often high achieving students as evidenced in their results of progress test 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Bonus</th>
<th>Minus</th>
<th>participation</th>
<th>presentation</th>
<th>Progress test1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hung</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trong</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuan</td>
<td>++++++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ms Van’s practice of giving bonus marks facilitated some students’ participation in language performances. Four out of six students in the focus group indicated that bonus marks motivated them to participate in classroom learning activities. However, the practice did not seem to encourage low achieving students’ participation: “I hardly volunteer since it is difficult for me to get bonus marks although I would like to get them” (S6). Her use of marks as a motivational strategy exerted considerable impact on classroom interactions, which will be elaborated in the following analysis of her assessment practices.

5.2.3.2. Assessment-related pedagogical practices

Questioning

Ms Van frequently asked questions of her students and almost all of her questions were in English. At the beginning of the lesson, her questions appeared to aim to check students’ understanding of the previous lesson or to direct students’ attention to the lesson as evident in the following excerpts.

In the previous lesson we learned about noun clauses. Now tell me where can we put a noun clause?

The topic of unit 4 is about reading. Now tell me how many hours do you spend reading every day and what do you read, Hung?

(3rd Ob)

Her questions sometimes aimed to gradually introduce the objectives of the lesson. As illustrated in Section 5.2.3.1, she believed that students needed to know the overall objectives of the lesson and the connection between different sections of the lessons. However, she thought that if she always stated the objectives directly, students might get bored and would not pay attention. Thus, she intentionally asked questions which she knew that students could not answer to “draw their attention to the objectives of the lesson” (V2I). The following is one example.

Could you tell me about a time when you made a wrong decision? [...] How did you feel about that? [...] OK, you felt regret so if you want to express your regret what language in English do you use? [...] What other structures would you use to express regret..? You don’t know? OK, that’s why this lesson is for you. In this lesson you are going to learn about Modal Perfect.

(4th Ob)

As indicated by the focus group students, such questions helped them “focus on learning”, made them “pay attention” to the issue raised (S3) and “remember[ed] the knowledge” (S5).
Before teaching new grammatical structures, she often asked questions to examine students’ knowledge about the target structures, since she had required students to self-study at home and she thought that “students had learned all those structures at high school” (V2I). She said that she needed to know “what students know in order to teach them” (V2I), which indicated her purposeful use of questions to collect information about students’ existing understanding to design her teaching accordingly (Black, 2010). However, her practice of asking questions dominantly in English resulted in only some high achieving students who were sitting in the front row to respond. Many students were observed to remain silent. The minimal participation of many students inhibited her from gaining a comprehensive understanding of students’ learning to support them.

During her presentation of new vocabulary and grammatical structures, Ms Van asked numerous questions to check students’ comprehension of her instruction that was mostly in English. Ms Van believed that her use of English as the medium of instruction “allows students opportunities to learn language in a natural way” (V2I). She tried not to use Vietnamese in her teaching and employed different strategies to facilitate students’ comprehension, such as giving numerous examples, writing examples on the board, frequently checking students’ understanding and elaborating on students’ responses to provide detailed explanation. However, classroom observation showed that most students did not respond to her comprehension checking questions, and her explanation sometimes became really lengthy and complicated as illustrated in the following excerpt. This excerpt was in a vocabulary session about disease symptoms. Ms Van was eliciting and explaining the meaning of the verb ‘cough’ using a picture in the course book.

_The first picture, who can describe the first picture for me? Tuan, can you? The first picture, how does she feel?...(repeated one student’s response) Pain in the head? No no. What’s the matter with him? You know? What’s it? You know he is pushing air from the lungs with a sudden sound (some students acted out) pushing the air from the lungs with a sudden sound. It means that you yourself don’t know that you are going to do that. What is it? When you push the air from the lungs with a sudden sound? (2nd Ob)Class observations showed that many students did not appear to concentrate on listening to her explanation. The less responsive students in the focus group indicated their dissatisfaction with her use of English as the medium of instruction since it caused them difficulties in understanding the lesson. For example, one student said:
I do not find the teacher’s use of English suitable for me. Maybe my friends learn better than me and can understand more. Personally, I am not satisfied because when she explains new words, she explains in English most of the time and I cannot understand thoroughly. The grammar is also very difficult to understand. She needs to explain in Vietnamese to make it comprehensible.

(S6)

Ms Van’s use of English as medium of instruction hindered students’ comprehension and their participation.

In reading and listening lessons, Ms Van often asked questions to check students’ understanding of the overall ideas and then expanded on their answers to elicit detailed demonstration of their comprehension. As illustrated in the following excerpt, her practice provided her with significant indicators of the students’ understanding and enabled the students to reflect on their answers and recall their prior knowledge. In this excerpt, Ms Van was checking students’ comprehension after listening to short news items about disasters.

T: (to the whole class) What’s the damage of the disaster?

S_{A,B}: Property

T: ‘Property’ but I did not hear the word ‘property damage’ here. What word did you hear?

S_A: ‘Economic impact’

T: Yes, very good. Remember the word ‘impact’?

S_A: Ảnh hưởng (meaning of ‘impact’ in Vietnamese)

T: OK, here ‘huge economic impact’ (types the phase and shows on the screen)

(4th Ob)

When a student’s response was incorrect in terms of meaning, pronunciation or grammar, she often asked questions to signal the error. Some students often joined her to help their peer recognise and correct the error. If the student still could not recognise the error, she often explained the error in detail to help the student self-correct. The following excerpt is one example. In this excerpt, the student was acting as a doctor, giving advice on his peer’s health problems.

S: When you feel nauseous, you must very tired…

T: You must?  |  Questions to signal error

S: You must very tired  |  The student did not recognise his error

Ss: ‘be’  |  Peer-correction
Ms Van’s practice of asking questions to draw students’ attention to their errors, elicit students’ self-correction and revision of the related knowledge, demonstrated the enactment of AfL in her questioning practice. Her questions enhanced students’ demonstration of their understanding for scaffolding by the teacher and peers (Murphy, 2008; Wood, et al., 1976).

Ms Van was observed asking students to express their opinions about issues related to the lesson since she wanted to “get to know their background knowledge and check students’ ability to express their ideas since it is the aim of teaching language” (V2I). For example, after the reading lesson about etiquette and table manners in the United States, she asked students to talk about “Vietnamese table manners” and identify “differences between table manners in Vietnam and in other countries” (1st Ob). After learning about different therapies to treat diseases, she required students to ask and answer about how to treat diseases. During students’ performance, Ms Van asked questions to elicit clarification of the ideas. She provided model answers if the ones given by the students were not satisfactory. As illustrated in the following excerpt, her practice appeared to help the student to focus on the meaning of the interactions and provided her with significant indicators of the student’s understanding to support it.

\[SA: \text{I have been sneezing, what should I do?}\]

(T repeats S_A’s question)

\[SB: \text{I think you should go out and buy some medicine like Tiffy or Panadol (other students laugh)}\]

\[T: \text{OK, why should I buy that medicine?} \quad \text{Elicit clarification}\]

\[S: \text{Er… I watch it on TV}\]

(Whole class laugh)

\[T: \text{(laughs) OK, everyone, listen! Sneezing is the symptom for having flu or cold so we should take that medicine.} \quad \text{Provide a model answer}\]

(2nd Ob)
Ms Van often directed her questions to the whole class. Only some students sitting in the front row responded to her questions, and their responses were often rather quiet but seemed to be loud enough to be heard by the teacher. Ms Van often repeated the correct answer, or nominated a specific student who seemed to have correct answers to officially give his answer. She elaborated on the response and reformulated it to make it comprehensible for other students. Since she aimed to use students’ “responses to teach their peers” (V2I), she often called on “high achieving students to give their answers since the low achieving ones could not provide any additional knowledge” (V2I). Her tendency to use or reformulate a high achieving student’s response to provide a model answer for others did not encourage the low achieving and less responsive students to participate in the interactions with teachers and peers to demonstrate their understanding and seek help with their learning (Lantolf, 2000).

Although all the focus group students indicated that Ms Van’s questions helped them to understand the lessons, there seemed to be a considerable difference between the extent to which her practices support the learning of English by high achieving and by less responsive and low achieving students. The high achieving and responsive students in the focus group thought that her questioning practices provided them with enhanced learning opportunities:

*I like responding to the teachers’ questions. I respond even when I am not sure if my answer is correct. If I am wrong, I will have the chance to learn from my wrong answer. (S1)*

*I do not often respond to her questions but I listen to everything she says carefully. I believe if my friends listen carefully, they will understand the lesson since she talks about all the important things that we need to know. I also think that I can improve my listening ability too. (S2)*

Meanwhile, the less responsive and low achieving students stated that they did not often respond to the teacher’s questions. Their reasons include uncertainty about the correctness of their answers, their limited ability to express ideas in English, their face saving concerns, as illustrated by S5, and respect for harmony, as indicated by S3.

*I only respond when I know the correct answer since I do not want to give wrong ones. (S5)*

*I am not certain about my answers. I am not interested in giving answers, either. Sometimes I knew the answer but I saw not many of my friends volunteered to answer so I did not volunteer. (S3)*
I am rather quiet in the class. Sometimes I wanted to express my opinion but my English is not good so I just give my answer when being nominated by the teacher. If I cannot find suitable English words I responded in Vietnamese. If I do not know the answer, I stand still and keep silent. After a while, the teacher will ask another. (S6)

Ms Van’s questioning practices had the potential to improve high achieving students’ learning by enhancing their focus on learning, providing them with opportunities to be involved in assessment-related activities, and practise listening and speaking in English. However, the support of her questioning practice for low achieving students was limited by her use of English as a medium of instruction and her nomination of only high achieving students to answer her questions.

Classroom observations showed that students rarely asked questions of the teacher. However, the high achieving students in the focus group indicated that they asked questions of the teacher whenever they needed her help with new vocabulary or grammatical structures: “I am sitting in the front row, near the teacher’s desk so if I meet new words or structure, I often ask her. She responds enthusiastically” (S1 & S2). Other students in the focus group stated that they “often ask peers rather than the teacher” (S4) and “rarely ask question of the teacher” (S6). It seemed that Ms Van’s unwillingness to establish a relationship with students (refer to Section 5.2.3.1) hindered many students from overcoming the power distance between them and the teacher to ask for her help. Meanwhile, her practice of frequently nominating high achieving students seemed to enable those students to approach her for further support in learning.

**Pair and group work activity**

Ms Van often organised students to work in pairs and groups. She indicated specific purposes for pair work and group work activities. Her purpose of using pair work was to enhance students’ oral practice: “I just want them to speak [in English]” (V2I). However, she did not place much importance on the work that students carried out in pairs but aimed to use the activity to help students prepare better for their performance as illustrated in the following excerpt.

All the questions for pair work can be used to ask individual students while they are carrying out language performances. However, if I asked those questions immediately, students might not be able to prepare since their English ability is not good and they can’t be ready to perform all the time.
Moreover, it is easier for them to speak with their peers. Generally, pair and group work activities are just to prepare for class performance. (V2I)

Like Ms Minh and Ms Tam, Ms Van seemed to place more focus on the students’ performance in class than their work at their seats, which indicated their limited attention to enhancing students’ interactions with peers. Such practice did not seem to be effective in utilising the potential of pair work activities for ELL, since the value of the activities lies in its potential to create a supportive or less risky environment to enhance students’ engagement, collaborative learning and language practice (Ellis, 2012).

Ms Van thought that ‘group work activities do not require much use of English language” so she used the activity to enable students “to share their ideas” (V2I). Observations of her class showed that the tasks she designed for students’ pair work did not differ from those for group work. Students were required to work together to create new conversations in English based on the model of target language structures as given in the course book. In addition, students were required to work together to relate what they were studying in the class with real situations outside the class. The tasks she designed for students’ pair and group work indicated her focus on both form and meaning of language use (Brandl, 2008; Ellis, 2005). The following are examples of the tasks she designed for students’ pair and groups work.

*Now you work in pairs, make similar conversation using at least two of the phrases for ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ (typed her instructions, showed on screen and explained again). I will give you four minutes to do that. (3rd Ob)*

*So now everyone, let’s look at this one: Table manners or polite behaviours when you eat with someone. Now tell me some dos and don’ts of table manners in Vietnam. OK. I will give you four to five minutes to discuss this in groups. (1st Ob)*

Ms Van indicated that not all of her pair and group work activities were successful and that the success of the activities depended “on the topic and level of complexity of the language required” (V2I). She believed that the proficiency levels of the pair members also contributed to the success of the activity.

*Students tend to sit with the ones of the same level. If both of them are high achieving students, they work well in pairs. However, if both of them are low achieving students, they will say nothing. In such cases, I have to rearrange their partners. (V2I)*

Observations of her classes showed that she arranged partners only for those students who appeared to have difficulties finding partners nearby. Most of the other
students automatically worked with the students sitting around them. Sometimes the task required them to work in pairs but they still worked in groups, which might be because they “gather[ed] together at convenience” (S1) as indicated by the focus group students. It seemed that Ms Van could identify some barriers to the quality of students’ pair work. However, she did not seem to be effective in removing the barriers. It was observed that she did not prepare students for the pair work tasks. For example, she did not share assessment criteria, demonstrate expected outcomes, define the roles of pair members or encourage the whole class to briefly discuss the focus (Pham, 2014a).

Ms Van often required two to three pairs to perform after allowing them to work at their seats for about four or five minutes. She encouraged students to volunteer to perform by referring to the bonus marks she would give if they performed well. Some students volunteered frequently and so often received bonus marks. Sometimes she nominated specific pairs to perform. Some pairs refused to perform when asked by the teacher. Their refusal appeared to relate to their lack of time to prepare for the performance, as illustrated in the following excerpt of students’ talk while working in groups. In this excerpt, four were working together to create a conversation about their opinions on different kinds of books. They were required to use at least two phrases that they had learned in the lesson to express their likes or dislikes such as ‘I can’t get enough of them; ‘it put me to sleep’ or ‘I can’t seem to get into it’.

*T: Now, work in pairs, create situation similar to the one in the model conversation and make conversation, incorporating two of ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ phrases. You have four minutes! (Types the requirement and shows on the screen)*

(Four students decide to work in a group. They do not start until Ms Van starts circulating around the class. Except for the required phrases, their talk is in Vietnamese)

*S1: What kind of book to choose?*

*S2: Let’s choose fiction since it has high entertainment value. ‘much more entertainment’*

*S3: In fiction type, I will choose mystery.*

*S4: I read only novel. Choose one kind to include these phrases, don’t we?*

*S1: Yes.*

*S4: I choose novel since it makes me feel sleepy.*
S1: For me, ‘I can’t get enough of them’.

S3: I will say that I like it and you will say that it puts you to sleep.

(Laughs)

S1: I can’t get enough of them.

S2: (Laughs) OK, I will give you some. Do you read until the end? […]

(S1 and S2 continue talking Vietnamese about how they read novels)

S1: Oh, but if I said so, I would have to explain about how interesting it was. I had better say ‘I can’t seem to get into it’!

S2: We all choose to sleep so who likes the book? I don’t like it. Someone should like it but I will choose ‘put me to sleep’

S3: Alright, I like mystery since I like logical thinking but how to say that?

S1: Suy luan logic’? So difficult. How to say that S2?

T: (Toward the whole class) Ready? Are you ready?

Some students: No!

T: How many minutes do you need?

S: (Speaks humorously and softly, the teacher does not hear him) One hour!

T: Two more minutes!

S2: I suddenly forget [the word].

S3: That is difficult, should we say ‘surprise’ instead?

S1: Let’s write it down, how to spell it, S3.]

[…]

T: (To the whole class) Time is up! Everyone, stop talking!

S1: Already ‘stop talking’!

S3: Do we need to be ‘ready’ now?

(3rd Ob)

As illustrated in the above excerpt, the activity had the potential to facilitate students’ collaborative learning and language practice as the students asked peers for help to find words to express their ideas, tried to incorporate newly learnt language structures in their sentences, and collaborated with one another to do the task. The activity could also provide students with the opportunity to verify their understanding of the task requirement and improve their learning engagement. However, the students could not complete the task within the allocated time, which partly resulted from the fact that they worked in a group of four while the task was designed for pair work. The students also appeared to be unsure about the task objectives and
assessment criteria to manage the task within the allocated time. This indicated the negative influences of the lack of preparation for pair and group work activities on support of the activities for ELL.

Five out of six students in the focus group indicated that they enjoyed pair and group work activities and that the activities provided them with opportunities for “oral communication” (S1) and “helping one another to study” (S3) and “improving confidence when performing since the whole group is there” (S5). The following was the response of one student in the focus group:

_The most effective activity for me is to perform frequently in class. I was a bit shy at first but I am now much more confident. Moreover, since speaking in class, I have to prepare more carefully._ (S1)

However, one focus group student indicated that he did not like pair and group work since he did not have suitable partners. He stated:

_The two peers sitting next to me were not interested in learning. They did not have enough vocabulary to express themselves, either. I want to help them but I cannot help much. When we perform in class, they could not say anything so it is difficult for me to speak… I cannot change partners since everyone has a partner. Moreover, we lived in the same room in the hostel._ (S2)

The above response by S2 indicated the influences of students’ levels of proficiency and their attitudes towards pair and group activities on the support of the activity for ELL. This highlights the importance of teachers’ support and preparation for students’ work in pair and group settings.

**Feedback**

*Feedback from peers*

Before and while students performed language tasks in class, Ms Van often required other students to pay attention to the performances to take notes on the target language structures used and “anything unclear [in meaning of the interaction]” (Obs). After the performances, she always asked other students to report the language structures that had been used and she also asked the performing students to confirm if the peer’s report was correct. The following except is one example.

_T: OK, Thank you. (Toward the class) Now questions from you. [Is there] anything [that you find] unclear? Er.. Kien you, please._

_Kien_: …

_T: Can tell me what vocabulary, what kind of book?_  
_Kien_: Travel_
According to the focus group students, Ms Van’s practice of asking students to report the language structures used in peers’ language performances helped them “focus on learning” (S1) and “remember the target language structures” (S3). Sometimes Ms Van required students to give feedback on other aspects of the performances but students appeared to have difficulties in giving peer feedback as illustrated in the following excerpt.

There can be two reasons for students’ difficulties in giving peer feedback. The first reason was the teacher’s use of English as the medium of instruction, which was also highlighted by one student in the focus group: “our vocabulary is limited so it is difficult to express ideas” (S6). Another reason could be the lack of clarity in
assessment criteria. Students were asked to give comments about peers’ performances without being informed in advance what aspects to focus on. As illustrated in the above excerpt, they mostly answered the teacher’s questions to give feedback that was also found to be similar to the teacher’s feedback on the previous performance: “You need to include more topics and speak louder!” (Obs).

Similar to Ms Minh’s students, one student in the focus group also indicated that he did not like to “have his errors identified by peers while standing at the front of the class” (S5). This provided further evidence of the influences of face-saving concerns on students’ attitude toward peer-assessment, which is consistent to the findings of the study carried out by Pham (2014b) the implementation of peer-assessment in the Vietnamese context.

Ms Van sometimes asked students to self-assess their performance, and reflect on their preparation process to see what they could have done to improve their performance. However, she did not clarify the assessment criteria. Similar to the feedback from peers, students’ self-assessment appeared to be very general such as ‘I need to spend more time preparing’ (2nd Ob), which was also similar to the feedback previously given by the teacher. Students’ tendency to imitate the teacher’s feedback indicates the need to provide students with further support and training on self- and peer-assessment to promote their ELL.

**Feedback from teachers**

Ms Van always gave feedback on students’ language performances in class. Her feedback was on students’ creativity, meaningful use of target language structures, meaningful interactions, choice of vocabulary and grammar structures, pronunciation, fluency, and performing manners. She highlighted and analysed in detail both the strengths and weaknesses the performances. The following excerpt is one example:

*You had a good start, quite a good start and you know you are quite creative when acting like you knew Sawatdekhrab- the greeting type in Thai ...So good greeting. But the time when you changed into talking about customs, you want to ask about some customs huh? I feel that it was not very natural. For example Tuan you said to Ha ‘I have some questions for your culture’ (Smiles), it sounded so*
Ms Van’s feedback appeared to enhance students’ understanding of learning objectives. For example, one student said: “This morning the teacher commented on my friends’ performances that they spoke fluently and used their own ideas not those in the course book” (S3). The feedback also appeared to stimulate reflection, enabling students to identify aspects for improvements: “I think the teacher’s comments were really accurate, which helps me realise my weaknesses” (S2). However, sometimes the feedback incorporated too limited suggestions for improvement to help students achieve the expected progress, as evidenced in the following excerpt.

The teachers’ comments helped me realise my errors. I can avoid some of them but sometimes it takes a long time to fix the errors. For example, she often reminds me that my word choice is so Vietnamese. I have been trying to improve but I have not made much progress. (S1)

Ms Van sometimes gave presentation marks and explained her marking in detail. As illustrated in the following excerpt, her explanation of her marking approach could inform students of the learning outcomes and learning behaviours expected from them.

Huan and Tung, I give you a 6, just 6. I considered between 6 and 6.5 but do you know why? I don’t want you to take the book along with you. The thing that I really hate from students, as you know, is sticking your eyes either on your notes or books because you look very unnatural, while in conversation you need to be more natural. You know for example, using notes is OK but I need to check your notes, it should be just some ideas because some students write the full conversation with long sentences and that’s not speaking. I don’t like that. OK, you used the books and you spoke unnaturally. Not very well prepared. OK?

Use of summative tests

In contrast to her two colleagues, Ms Van did not revise previous lessons before delivering progress tests. She also indicated that she had no intention to prepare students for the mid-term and final exams because “students should have the ability to prepare for the test themselves since they are now at intermediate level” (V2I). Due to unexpected changes in her teaching plan in the course, no observation data was collected about Ms Van’s use of progress tests. However, the focus group
students recalled that after returning the progress tests, Ms Van worked through all the test questions but students could not use the test results to inform their learning since “the teacher revised the progress tests so quickly and we did not have test questions but only the answer sheet. Thus, we did not know what was wrong. We may make the same errors in our next tests” (S2). It seemed that Ms Van made limited use of summative tests to assist students to revise important knowledge areas or to realise and learn from their errors in the tests (Harlen, 2005). This seems to result from her perspective which regards summative tests as tools for measuring learning achievement (refer to Section 5.2.3.1).

Ms Van, however, indicated her use of test results to reflect on her teaching for improvement: “I cannot do anything after the final test since it is at the end of the course. However, I often use mid-term test results to reconsider my prior teaching and carry out necessary adjustments” (V1I). She indicated that she mostly adjusted students’ homework tasks, and she could not adjust her teaching in class since she needed to follow the teaching plan. The focus group students also indicated that “after the first two progress tests, the teacher found our listening marks were too low, so she tends to give us more listening exercises to practise at home” (S4). Ms Van tended to use test results to inform her teaching (Black, et al., 2003a). However, her use was impeded by the institutional context which required teachers to follow the prescribed teaching plan. The way she adjusted her teaching of listening also indicated her focus on using drill and practice to improve students’ listening skills. Like the other two teachers in this case study, Ms Van seemed to pay limited attention to listening strategies which are also important for the development of students’ ability to listen in English (Ling & Kettle, 2011).

The focus group students indicated that they used test results to “know where my learning is in relation to the course requirement” (S2). They also use test results for norm referencing: “if my test result is higher than the norm, I will feel happy and enjoy learning more. Otherwise, I will feel less confident but I will have to try more” (S6). The students’ responses indicated their use of test results to gain understanding of their learning. The responses also demonstrated the importance of summative tests and test results in students’ learning motivation.
5.2.3.3. Summary

Ms Van carried out some assessment-related pedagogical practices which could facilitate ELL. She frequently asked questions of students which provided them with opportunities to practise listening and speaking in English, which aligned with her perspective on ELT that focused on developing students’ ability to use English to express meaning. Her questions could also help students recall and revise their prior knowledge and engage in learning. She organised students to work and carry out language performances in pairs and groups, which had the potential to engage students in self- and peer-assessment and provided them with opportunities to practise using the language to express their own ideas, improve their learning motivation and enhance learning collaboration. She required students to carry out self- and peer-assessment, which could enhance students’ reflection and engagement. Her practice of giving feedback on students’ language performances could enhance students’ understanding of learning objectives and their own errors to avoid. Her practice of giving students bonus and minus marks also appeared to enhance the involvement of high achieving students in assessment, and informed students of the learning behaviours expected from them.

However, her use of English as the medium of instruction appeared to hinder students’ comprehension of her instruction. Her frequent use of bonus marks to reward students’ successful learning effort and her practice of nominating only high achieving students to answer her questions might inhibit the participation of low achieving students, which prevented her from gaining a comprehensive understanding of those students’ learning to promote it. Additionally, her practice of providing little preparation for students’ pair and group work activities, self- and peer-assessment of language performance limited the support of the activities for students’ ELL. Ms Van’s practices reflected the influences of the teacher-centred educational tradition, the high-stakes testing context, the institutional mandate of prescribed teaching plan, and the institutional use of students’ feedback to evaluate teachers.

5.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the institutional context and current assessment practices carried out by three teachers at Non-PU. The analysis of current assessment
practices indicates the potential of assessment to engage students in learning, to facilitate their understanding of the learning objectives, and to enhance their reflection on their own learning. However, the potential is utilised to a limited extent due to various contextual factors. Similarities and differences in the institutional contexts, assessment practices, and their support for ELL at the two universities will be analysed and discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 6: Cross-case analysis and discussion

This chapter provides a cross-case analysis of the two case studies of the Public University (PU) and the Non-Public University (Non-PU) and discusses the research findings. The focus of this research is the support of assessment for ELL, and analysis of the influences of the sociocultural and institutional contexts on practices of assessment for learning. The first section (Section 6.1) compares, synthesises and discusses the key themes that emerge from the analyses of the two cases. This comparative analysis involves identification of assessment for learning practices currently carried out at the two universities and the identification and analysis of factors impeding or facilitating the practices and the potential of assessment for learning in these contexts. The next section (Section 6.2) discusses the findings from the cross-case analysis in relation to the three research questions to demonstrate the support of current assessment practices for ELL and to identify factors influencing such support. A summary of the research findings is presented in the last section (Section 6.3).

6.1 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

A sociocultural perspective of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and principles of Assessment for Learning (ARG, 2002a; Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 2009) have been adopted as the analytical principles in this study. Assessment for learning (AfL) is interpreted as “part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers” which collects information about a student’s learning; interprets the evidence to find out the next action for the student to take; and assists the student to carry out the action to make progress toward the desired outcome (Klenowski, 2009, p. 246). As learning is situated, social and interactive in nature (Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978), AfL is contextually constructed and integral to teachers’ pedagogical practices, which are influenced by institutional contexts, individual teachers’ perspectives on teaching, learning and assessment, and the specific classroom context co-constructed by students and teachers in the class.
In order to analyse the support of current assessment practices for ELL and influential factors, this section begins by comparing the contexts of EFL education at the two universities (Section 6.1.1). Then, the similarities and differences in the teachers’ perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment are considered (Section 6.1.2). The next section (Section 6.1.3) compares and contrasts the teachers’ assessment-related pedagogical practices across the two cases to identity current practices which incorporate, facilitate or inhibit AfL and the factors affecting the practices and the support of AfL in this context.

6.1.1 Institutional contexts

The institutional context was found to exert profound influences on the integration of AfL in the teachers’ instructional practices. In this section, the institutional contexts at the two universities are compared in terms of (1) administration of teachers’ practices and working conditions; (2) the organisation of EFL education and (3) institutional regulations and practices regarding the assessment of students’ ELL. The comparative results are analysed in terms of the influences of those institutional factors on the integration of AfL in the teachers’ instructional practices.

6.1.1.1. Administration of teachers’ practices and working conditions

There are significant differences in the administration of teacher’ practices and working conditions at the two universities. In terms of administration, PU follows a top-down approach, with the administration carried out mainly by institutional supervisors focusing on teachers’ punctuality, adherence to the pre-scribed teaching plan, and paper work. Although PU collects students’ feedback on teachers’ practices, the feedback is collected at the end of the course and the results are not disclosed to the teachers unless fewer than 75 percent of students indicate that they are satisfied with the course. The ways teachers’ practices are administered and evaluated at PU indicate minimum focus on encouraging teachers to maximise their support for students’ ELL, which inhibits the integration of AfL in their instructional practices.

In contrast, Non-PU adopts a bottom-up management approach, relying mainly on students’ formal and informal feedback on teachers’ practices with a primary focus on students’ subjective evaluation. Together with the criteria of punctuality, adherence to pre-scribed teaching plan, students’ formal feedback focuses specifically on teaching skills, responses to students in class and support for
students’ learning beyond class. Negative feedback from students can result in termination of teacher employment. As evidenced in the teachers’ responses and practices, this management approach causes them to pay attention to their interactions with students in order to avoid creating a negative impression and receiving negative feedback from students. The teachers’ attention to their interactions with students has the potential to facilitate the integration of AfL into their instructional practices. That is because in order to interact well with students teachers have to try to understand the students and be flexible in teaching/interactions. Meanwhile, the implementation of AfL requires teachers to gain knowledge about the students’ existing learning, and to use that knowledge to design their teaching to align with the students’ needs to promote their learning. However, AfL is integrated only to a limited extent into the teachers’ current practices because of their concern to maintain a harmonious relationship with students rather than to diagnose and responding to their learning needs.

With regards to working conditions, Non-PU offers teachers better teaching and learning facilities, smaller sized classes and higher salaries. Three teachers at Non-PU indicated that the favourable working conditions, particularly high income, enabled them to devote effort to teaching creatively to promote student learning. For example, Ms Tam said: “My salary here is much better. Instead of teaching two days in the former university, I just need to teach one day here and devote my full attention to preparing and giving interesting lessons” (T1I). The three teachers also indicated that they stopped teaching extra classes in other universities soon after they started teaching at Non-PU.

In contrast, the teachers at PU indicated that the low salary inhibited them from investing time on preparing for their lessons. For example, Ms Lan said: “Teachers have to take on heavy workload to secure their income. Long teaching hours affect the teaching quality negatively. For example, we spend less time preparing lessons” (L1I). The class size of over 40 students prevented Ms Yen from monitoring student learning and providing support: “There are many students in the class. It is difficult to nominate every student for their response or language performance once in each lesson, let alone to follow up if they work on my feedback” (Y2I). As evident in the teachers’ responses, the working conditions at Non-PU are facilitative to AfL practices, whereas the low salary, heavy workload and large sized class at PU are inhibitive to the implementation of AfL.
6.1.1.2. English language education programs

The English language education programs at the two universities differ in terms of educational objectives, the allocation of teaching time and the provision of teaching and learning resources. With regards to educational objectives, English language is considered as a general subject at PU and the EFL programs primarily aim to develop students’ English ability for personal and professional communication after graduation which, for first year students, will occur in four years. In Non-PU, English language is the medium of instruction in the students’ main study stage and the EFL courses in preparation programs aim to develop students’ ability to use English for study purposes. As ELL objectives are more direct and essential for students, EFL courses at Non-PU are more intensive, which requires students to invest more effort, than at PU. In terms of time, each English course at Non-PU lasts for seven weeks and is allocated 140 teaching periods. Meanwhile, English courses at PU take place over 15 weeks with 60 teaching periods for a regular class and 150 teaching periods for an advanced class. Due to the short and intensive nature of the English courses at Non-PU, teachers have more frequent interactions with students than the teachers at PU. With regard to resources, teachers and students at Non-PU are provided with a wide range of sources of teaching and learning materials to supplement the core course books. Meanwhile, no supplementary materials are readily available for teachers and students at PU.

Frequent interactions, sufficient teaching time and an extensive range of resources for teaching and learning in Non-PU facilitate teachers’ AfL practices. First, daily interactions with students support the teachers at Non-PU to gain an understanding of individual students and their learning. Interestingly, similar support is also found in the advanced class at PU where the teacher met students three times a week over 15 weeks. In contrast, the teachers of regular courses at PU, who teach different groups of students and meet each group once a week, indicated difficulty in remembering students’ names and monitoring students’ learning progress. Second, the extensive teaching time at Non-PU allows teachers to adjust their teaching to promote learning. All three teachers at Non-PU and the teacher of the advanced class at PU frequently designed additional learning tasks to promote student learning. Meanwhile, the two teachers of the regular English courses at PU claimed that they did not have “enough time to create more activities” (Y11) and undertook only the
activities in the course book. Third, the availability of supplementary materials assists the teachers at Non-PU to provide students with additional support to their learning. All three teachers gave students additional exercises to do at home to consolidate or prepare for the lesson in the class and they indicated that they did not have to spend time looking for those extra learning materials since they were readily available.

Despite the differences in teaching time and resources, both universities require teachers to follow the prescribed and course book-based teaching plan, which is identified as a common English Language Teaching (ELT) practice in Asia (Sung, 2012). The use of course book as a mandatory syllabus hinders teachers’ practices of AfL. Teachers in both universities closely followed the course book for the selection of teaching content, resulting in difficulties in tailoring teaching content to address individual students’ learning needs.

It is also noted that the selection of the course books used in English programs at PU is influenced by the tests students take to certify their completion of EFL education for graduation. Specifically, the series International Express by Oxford University Press is used in the English courses investigated in this study since the textbooks are believed to help prepare students for the TOEIC, which students take at the end of English programs at PU. The use of the TOEIC to assess students’ English proficiency for graduation originated from the recent requirement for Higher Education quality assurance (MOET, 2007b): “The use of international standardised English tests [such as TOEIC] to assess students’ ELL is the tendency now. The Ministry also requires that universities develop intensive English programs and announce the educational outcomes …” (Executive Officer). Consequently, all English tests used in the English courses are designed following the TOEIC format to “help students to get familiar” with the test (Executive Officer). This reflects the washback effects of the use of standardised English test results for institutional accountability at PU. Such washback effects inhibit the implementation of AfL practices due to the misalignment between the TOEIC-oriented tests and the teaching and learning of English (details are presented in Section 6.1.2.2).

In contrast, the employment of systematic and comprehensive textbooks at Non-PU enhanced the teachers’ AfL practices. In particular, the course books are designed as parts of resource packages with a spiral curriculum and a variety of
learning activities. As the learning tasks are interrelated and the topics are revisited, it is easier for the teachers to incorporate AFL in their instructional practices to gather information of students’ prior learning and adjust their teaching accordingly to develop student learning.

6.1.1.3. Assessment of student English language learning

Both universities rely on tests to assess students’ learning, which reflects the strong influences of the testing culture on EFL assessment. However, the assessment framework in the two universities differs in the frequency and weighting of summative tests, and the impact of test results on students and teachers.

In terms of frequency, students at PU take two progress tests, one mid-term and one final test over the period of 15 weeks, with the final test result accounting for 67 percent of the total mark for the course. Meanwhile, students at Non-PU are given five progress tests, one mid-term and one final exam within seven weeks with the final exam contributing 40 percent to the total mark. That is, Non-PU delivers summative tests more frequently and allocates more weight to the progress and mid-term tests than PU. Consequently, the teachers at Non-PU carried out test preparation activities almost every week whereas, the teachers at PU spend only one or two lessons at the end of the course to prepare students for the final tests.

With regards to the impact of test results, at Non-PU, unsatisfactory results lead to more tuition fees and lengthen the time students spend in the preparation stage. Meanwhile, at PU, the results of English tests are used to calculate students’ accumulated General Point Average (GPA), which contributes to determining whether the students are awarded an Honour or ordinary degree at graduation. Unsatisfactory results also require students at PU to spend more money and time to repeat the English course. However, the tuition fee is much lower at PU than at Non-PU and it is less likely that unsatisfactory English results would lengthen the total time at PU since students normally continue studying other subjects while retaking the English course. As such, although the impact of test results on students is strong in both universities, the impact is more direct at Non-PU than at PU.

The influences of test frequency and weighting on the implementation of AFL practices differ according to individual teachers’ use of summative tests (refer to Section 6.3.4). However, high-stakes testing at both universities exerts strong washback effects which generally inhibit effective practices of AFL (Herman, 2010).
Near the final tests at PU, the three teachers spend less time on learning tasks which could involve AfL practices, such as conducting pair and group work activities, requiring students to perform language tasks in front of the class, and giving feedback on student language performances. Students in the focus groups at PU indicated preferences for test preparation lessons and expressed the desire for teachers to focus more on what would be tested so that they could achieve high marks on the final test. Similarly, at Non-PU, teachers of elementary courses do not make frequent use of pair and group work activities since the oral tests do not require students to perform in pairs or groups. However, it is noted that high-stakes testing plays an important role in motivating student learning at Non-PU. This beneficial washback (Alderson & Wall, 1992; Perrone, 2010) is facilitative to the implementation of AfL in the sense that it helped change some students’ attitudes to become more focused and collaborative in learning. The improvement in students’ attitudes and behaviours enhances the implementation of AfL as evident in Ms Minh’s students’ practice of paying more attention to work on the teacher’s feedback and Ms Tam’s practices of expanding on student-initiated questions to support their learning.

There are considerable similarities in the design of English tests at the two universities. First, about 40 to 50 percent of test questions are on English vocabulary and grammar, most of which are derived from the course book. Second, a speaking test is included only in the final exam. Third, listening and reading tests tend to focus primarily on checking students’ comprehension rather than on their development of language sub-skills and strategies. Additionally, English tests are designed without detailed specifications of knowledge areas or language sub-skills. Finally, test questions are generally selected and adapted from published testing books.

The design of English tests has a mixed influence on the support of assessment for learning at both universities. Given the high-stakes nature of English tests, the alignment between the tests and the teaching and learning in terms of language knowledge appears to help students realise the need to develop their knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. However, the considerable proportion of test questions on language knowledge, the inclusion of a speaking test only at the end of the course, and the lack of clarification of the language sub-skills and strategies tested, could result in students’ misunderstanding of the objectives of ELL, focusing on acquiring language knowledge rather than developing the ability to
use English to express their own ideas. This misunderstanding of the learning objectives is particularly evident in Ms Tam’s students’ opinion that they did not need to work hard in the elementary English course since they had learned all the grammatical structures at high school and they “just need to remember to put the verbs in correct tenses and learn new vocabulary” (S3). Moreover, the lack of test specifications not only makes the creation of parallel tests problematic in terms of both validity and reliability but also inhibits teachers and students from using the test results to inform teaching and learning (refer to section 6.3.4).

To sum up, comparison of the institutional contexts at the two universities reveals the influences of a number of contextual factors. The key facilitative factors for the implementation of AfL include (a) the favourable working conditions with high income, good teaching and learning facilities and small class size at Non-PU; (b) the EFL education program with extensive teaching time, frequent interactions with students and a wide range of resources for teaching and learning at Non-PU, and (c) the alignment between the testing, teaching and learning in terms of language knowledge at both universities. The main inhibitive factors for the implementation of AfL which were found in both universities include (a) the design of English tests with considerable proportion of test questions on language knowledge and a lack of specifications of language sub-skills and strategies; and (b) the mandatory course book-based syllabus. High stakes testing was found to exert considerable influences on the implementation of AfL in both universities. At PU, washback of high-stakes tests was generally inhibitive to AfL practices due to the considerable lack of alignment between testing, teaching and learning, and ELL objectives. At Non-PU, high-stakes testing exerted mixed influences. Negative washback was evident due to the lack of alignment between testing and ELL objectives. However, high-stakes testing helped improve students’ learning attitudes and behaviours, which enhanced the integration of AfL in the teachers’ instructional practices.

6.1.2 Teachers’ perspectives on language teaching, learning and assessment

This section presents a comparative analysis of the teachers’ perspectives on English language teaching pedagogy (Section 6.1.2.1), and their knowledge of English language assessment (Section 6.1.2.2). The comparative results are analysed in terms of the influences of the teachers’ perspectives on AfL practices.
6.1.2.1. English language teaching pedagogy

Teachers at both universities point out that the aim of ELT is to develop students’ ability to communicate in English by providing them with ample opportunities to practise using English in class. They are also in agreement about the importance of students’ independent learning and tend to apply the similar strategies to promote student independent learning. However, there are considerable differences in their opinions regarding the design of teaching and learning activities, and the importance of students’ understanding of learning objectives. These similarities and differences are now discussed.

Teachers at the two universities differed in the way they create opportunities for students to practise using English in class. Teachers at PU tended to focus on providing students with controlled practice of the formulaic expressions and functional structures in the course book in pairs and groups in the class. Meanwhile, the teachers at Non-PU combined different activities. They asked students to express their opinions on issues related to lessons and make individual presentations in English, organised pair and group work activities, and assigned extra listening exercises for students to do in the class and at home. The way teachers at Non-PU designed teaching and learning activities for students in their classes facilitated AfL practices since such activities promoted students’ involvement in demonstrating their understanding for scaffolding by the teacher and peers. The way teachers in Non-PU designed teaching learning activities reflected the facilitative influences of the availability of teaching time and supplementary materials (refer to section 6.1.1.2) for AfL practices.

Regarding the importance of students’ understanding of the learning objectives, there is a significant difference between early career and mid-career teachers. Three early career teachers, Ms Hong, Ms Minh and Ms Van, particularly highlighted the need to facilitate students’ understanding of the learning objectives of specific lessons or learning tasks to enhance attention. Meanwhile, the mid-career teachers appeared to pay less attention to facilitating students’ understanding of objectives of the learning tasks, which reflected the influence of the educational tradition characterised by teacher-centeredness and knowledge-transmission. These differences between early and mid-career teachers resulted, at least in part, from the recent changes in the EFL teacher training program (refer to Section 3.3.2). The early
career teachers’ understanding of the need to enhance students’ understanding of learning objectives facilitated their practices of AfL. As specified by the Assessment Reform Group (2002a), promoting understanding of learning goals is one of the ten principles of AfL.

With regard to their perspectives on students’ independent learning, teachers in both universities emphasised that “it is crucial for students to be responsible for their own learning and carry out self-study” (Y1I). However, they all seem to consider student independent learning as the learning which takes place beyond the classroom context: “students learn basic things in the class and they have to self-study at home” (L1I). The key strategies they employ to promote student independent learning are assigning specific tasks for students to do at home and frequent checking of students’ completion of the assigned tasks in class. The teachers’ perspectives and practices of supporting student independent learning indicate the influences of the teacher-centred educational tradition. As a result, their understanding of student active learning and of pedagogical strategies to scaffold students’ active learning is limited. This hindered their practices of AfL to engage students in the learning process and enable them to make productive decisions about their own learning (Brookhart, 2011).

6.1.2.2. Knowledge of English language assessment

There are similarities and differences in the teachers’ knowledge of English language assessment. In this section, their understanding of the purposes and potential of assessment is presented, followed by their perspectives on the development and administration of English tests at their universities.

Regarding assessment purposes and potential, teachers in both universities indicated their understanding of the summative purposes of assessment, including measuring students’ comprehension for streaming purposes, checking the effectiveness of previous teaching and learning, and assessing the achievement of learning objectives. Four of the teachers indicated some degree of understanding about the potential of assessment to inform subsequent teaching. This potential, as mentioned by the teachers, includes reconsidering the selection of learning activities to encourage students’ participation, identifying students in need to provide extra assistance, and diagnosing problematic areas in students’ language knowledge and skills for corrective instruction or adjustment in homework assignments. Only two
teachers, Ms Lan and Ms Hong, indicated their understanding that assessment is integrated in everyday teaching and learning, whereas the other four tended to consider assessment as checking students’ homework and tests, which was separate from teaching and learning activities.

The fact that all the teachers understand the summative purposes of assessment but only some know about its formative values reflects the influences of the local educational context in which priority is placed on summative assessment (Broadfoot, 2009; Carless, 2011). The teachers’ lack of awareness that assessment is integral to teaching and learning further demonstrates their limited understanding of the formative value of assessment which, according to Black (2010), promotes students’ active engagement and develops their ability to take control of their own learning. The teachers’ limited understanding about the formative purposes of assessment exerts a negative impact on the teachers’ AfL practices (elaborated further in Section 6.3).

Teachers in both universities particularly referred to the potential of assessment to motivate students’ learning. However, their practices of utilising assessment to motivate students’ learning are slightly different. Teachers at PU generally referred to tests and marks to encourage students to devote more effort to study. They also reminded students that their participation in learning activities would be taken into account when teachers considered their attendance marks at the end of the semester. At Non-PU, the use of assessment to influence student’s learning attitudes and behaviours was more obvious. Teachers gave bonus marks to reward students’ effort to supply the correct answers to teachers’ questions, or to perform language tasks successfully in front of the class. The bonus marks are added to students’ marks in progress tests, which is more direct, explicit and visible to the students. Ms Van also gave low marks or ‘minus’ marks to punish those students who did not complete homework assignments or who refused to perform language tasks in front of the class when requested. In addition, Ms Tam and Ms Van marked talkative and off-task students as ‘absent’ from the class if they did not change their behaviours. According to the institutional regulations, if students were absent form more than 20 percent of the lessons, they were not allowed to take the final tests. Therefore, this punishment is another way of using high-stakes tests to help student focus on learning. The ways teachers at the two universities use tests and marks to encourage students’ learning effort or discourage inappropriate learning behaviours
indicate their understanding of the impact of assessment on classroom practices (Herman, 2010). Although these practices could help students focus on learning and encourage their language performances in class, it was not effective for all students. The predominant use of tests and marks to influence student learning attitudes and behaviours at Non-PU are likely to encourage students to focus on gaining high marks rather than on genuine learning.

Regarding the development and administration of English tests, teachers at both universities indicated concerns regarding the reliability and validity of English tests. All the teachers at PU were concerned over the design of English tests although they focused on different issues. Ms Lan pointed to problems in the reliability of parallel tests or the extent to which parallel tests are really testing the same knowledge or skills in the same way. She also questioned the test validity since test items were written by teachers who were not certain if the test items accurately measured what they purported to measure. Ms Yen, expressed concerns about the lack of alignment between the testing and the teaching of listening: “It’s so strange to require first year students to listen to descriptions of pictures in the tests. Students do not know anything about picture description” (Y1I). She also pointed to the mismatch between the EFL education objective of developing students’ communicative ability and the test design, which focused exclusively on language knowledge. She also asserted that there was a lack of representative samples of students’ speaking ability elicited through the tests currently used. Ms Hong expressed concerns over the mismatch between teaching and testing since this might decrease students’ motivation to learn.

The concerns of teachers at Non-PU relate to the administration of the midterm and final examination, and the perceived misalignment between the test and the objectives of EFL education. Ms Minh questioned the test reliability since students had to take computer-based tests and their results might be affected by technical problems or their digital literacy. Ms Van was concerned about the validity of the use of final tests to measure students’ language communicative competence due to the inclusion of test items on language knowledge: “the final test should include items to test students’ ability to use the language knowledge rather than their memorisation of the knowledge like it is now” (V1I). In contrast to her two colleagues, Ms Tam stated that “the current English tests are OK” (T1I).
Significant variations can be seen from the teachers’ perspectives on the current construction and administration of English tests. The variations resulted from inadequate training in language assessment since all the teachers indicated that they had limited training in testing and assessment, and their knowledge was obtained mostly in the practicum experience. Notably, the teachers’ concerns over the reliability and validity of English tests are found to impact on their use of test results to inform teaching and learning (more details are presented in Section 6.3.4).

In short, the comparison of teachers’ perspectives on English language teaching, learning and assessment at the two universities reveals the teachers’ limited understanding about students’ active learning, the integration of assessment in teaching and learning, the potential of assessment to promote learning, and the development of valid and reliable English tests. These knowledge areas are considered as essential elements of language assessment literacy (Inbar-Louire, 2013). The teachers’ limited language assessment literacy, due to limited training in English language assessment and the misalignment between the system priorities and AfL (DeLuca, et al., 2012), inhibited their AfL practices. The comparison, however, shows that (a) the employment of different learning activities to develop students’ language ability at Non-PU and (b) the early career teachers’ understanding of the need to enhance students’ understanding of the objectives of their learning tasks, could facilitate practices of AfL in this context.

6.1.3 Assessment-related pedagogical practices

6.1.3.1. Questioning

Two main similarities are found in the questioning practices carried out by teachers at the two universities. First, teachers at both universities frequently asked questions of students during lessons. Second, all the teachers employed strategies of repeating and simplifying questions as well as providing additional clues to enhance students’ comprehension of the questions. The teachers’ questioning practices could assist students to recall prior knowledge, demonstrate their understanding, and direct their attention to the lesson objectives. As indicated by the students in the focus groups, the teachers’ questioning practices could also facilitate the development of their listening skills since many of the teachers’ questions were in English. The employment of questioning strategies was helpful in increasing students’ participation in responding to teachers’ questions.
There is a considerable difference in the types of questions asked by the teachers in the two universities. Except for the questions inviting students’ participation such as “Who got the answer for this question...?”, or “Does anyone have another idea?”, most of the questions generated by teachers at PU were closed or pseudo-open questions with only one correct answer known by the teachers in advance. The teachers in Non-PU asked more open questions, which allowed students to express their opinions and knowledge related to current lessons. Specifically, at the beginning of each lesson, teachers often asked students to give opinions about topics which were going to be covered in the lessons, for example “What do you do to stay in shape?” or “Could you tell me about a time when you made a wrong decision? How do you feel about that experience?”. In particular, Ms Van often asked students to apply the language knowledge learned in the lesson to express their own understanding of related issues in English. For example, in the lesson about different medical therapies, she asked students to talk about the therapies that they or their relatives used to treat diseases. In addition, teachers at Non-PU often asked questions to assist students to recall knowledge from previous lessons more frequently than the teachers at PU.

The differences between the teachers at two universities in terms of question types and the frequency of asking knowledge-recall questions relate to the time allocation and the course book used in each university. Specifically, at Non-PU, the lesson in class coincides with each lesson in the course book with a clear identification of lesson objectives. At PU, teachers have to complete five units in the course book within 15 lessons in class. The resulting mismatch between new lessons in class and new lesson in the course book inhibited teachers from asking questions to elicit students’ opinions about a new learning topic at the beginning of the lessons since the general topic could be the same for three consecutive lessons. The limited teaching time in the regular course could also encourage teachers to focus on presenting the course book-based knowledge rather than asking questions to help students reflect and express opinions about issues related to the lessons. In addition, the course book used at Non-PU is designed to follow a spiral curriculum. In other words, learning aspects are designed to be recycled and developed from one lesson to another. This design of the course book facilitates teachers’ practice of asking questions about knowledge learned in previous lessons. Thus, the organisation of the
EFL education program and the course book used at Non-PU seemed to facilitate teachers’ questioning practices. Ms Van’s practice of asking questions to enhance students’ use of previously learned language knowledge to express their own ideas relates to her views and values that the ultimate goal of ELT is to develop students’ ability to communicate ideas in English. Her questioning practice has the potential to enable students to not only demonstrate but also develop their ELL.

However, many students in both universities did not actively respond to teachers’ questions or initiate questions to teachers. As indicated by students in the six focus groups, their main reasons for not responding included not knowing the answer or feeling unsure about the correctness of their responses. Those reasons reflect the influence of cultural face-saving concerns on the students’ learning behaviours, which has been pointed out by Ashwill and Diep (2004). Given this cultural influence, it is noted that teachers’ relaxed attitude toward errors in students’ responses, as demonstrated by Ms Lan, Ms Minh and Ms Tam, helps encourage more students to actively take part in answering questions.

Students in the focus group indicated that their minimal participation was also caused by the lack of opportunities to respond (since other students were more responsive than them), their unfamiliarity with answering teachers’ questions, and their willingness to give opportunities to their peers who were less responsive. The responses of the students in the focus groups show that students’ involvement in responding to teachers’ questions can be negatively influenced by the composition of classes with students of different levels of English proficiency, their learning experiences in schools which were predominantly teacher-centred, and the cultural respect for harmony. Given the influences of such sociocultural factors, teachers’ practice of nominating both high and low achieving students, as demonstrated by Ms Minh and Ms Yen, enhanced the participation of more students. In contrast, the practices of not nominating any specific students as carried out by Ms Lan, or nominating mostly high achieving students as carried out by Ms Hong and Ms Van, resulted in negligible participation by silent and less responsive students.

The language of instruction used by the teachers was found to exert significant impact on students’ participation in responding to teachers’ questions. The mid-career teachers used Vietnamese more often. Their questions in English were relatively short and direct. When students appeared to have difficulties
understanding the questions, those teachers often switched to use Vietnamese to explain. In contrast, the early career teachers generally used English as the medium of instruction so their questions were mostly in English. Although these teachers employed various strategies to enhance students’ understanding of their questions, such as repeating questions, giving examples, writing questions on the board and explaining words and phrases used, many students still had difficulties in understanding the questions, which inhibited them from responding and demonstrating their understanding. Moreover, because of the teachers’ use of English in teaching and in asking questions, students were under pressure to provide their answers in English, the inadequate wait time and their limited English vocabulary prevented them from responding to the questions. The early career teachers indicated their aim to use English as the medium of instruction to maximise students’ exposure to English, which seemed to be helpful since their students were found to be more familiar with communicating in English near the end of the course. However, their avoidance of using Vietnamese during lessons sometimes inhibited students’ comprehension of and participation in the lesson. This finding highlights the role of language as one of the most important tools that teachers use to mediate and scaffold students’ learning (Lantolf, 2000), and supports prior studies which point to the need for second or foreign language teachers to make judicious use of students’ first language to facilitate their learning of a new language (Ghorbani, 2011; Kieu, 2010).

There is a significant difference in the way early career and mid-career teachers respond to students’ answers to comprehension questions. The three early career teachers often elaborated on students’ answers and elicited students’ demonstration of their comprehension, which allowed them to understand the students’ learning and develop it further. In contrast, the three mid-career teachers often did not elaborate on students’ responses. Ms Lan asked questions of the whole class, allowed students to respond in chorus and then explained the correct answers herself. Ms Yen and Ms Tam often repeated or praised students’ correct responses, and ignored or explicitly refused incorrect responses without asking students to explain the reasons for their responses. The way the mid-career teachers responded to students’ answers to comprehension questions seems to indicate that the main focus is on identifying the correct answers to comprehension questions. That focus reflects the influence of traditional knowledge-transmission pedagogy, the exam-oriented
practice and the teachers’ lack of understanding of the formative value of students’ responses and the potential for their feedback. The teachers’ practice of not expanding on the students’ responses prevented them from gaining an understanding of the students’ current level and how to provide them with the necessary support in order to improve.

Some students initiated questions, which were often about the meaning of new words and phrases, learning methods, English tests and test results. However, the frequency and the time of students’ questions varied considerably. In classes taught by Ms Lan, Ms Minh and Ms Tam, where teachers had frequent interactions with students and established a close rapport with them, students frequently initiated questions of their teachers and peers. In contrast, although Ms Van met her students daily, she did not want to establish a close rapport with students for fear of losing control of their behaviour in class. Her students barely asked questions during lessons. In Ms Hong’s class, where the teacher met students once a week, the students did not ask questions during lessons. However, since Ms Hong often used break time to talk with students in class, some students approached her to ask questions then. Ms Yen also met students once a week but she spent time during lessons at the beginning of the course to establish a rapport with students. Her students sometimes asked questions in the lessons. Thus, it can be said that the teachers’ practices of establishing a close rapport with students and their frequent interactions with students encouraged them to ask questions to seek help with their learning.

It is also noted that four teachers who received questions from students in class often responded to students’ questions immediately, which helped provide students with the assistance they needed in a timely manner and encouraged them to ask questions when they need help (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004). Ms Minh sometimes redirected students’ questions to their peers for further discussion and elaboration of the issues, which had the potential to focus students’ attention on the issues and to enhance their collaboration in learning. All the four teachers focused primarily on whether they could answer students’ questions rather than using the questions as a source of information about students’ learning: “I told my student that I am not a perfect person so if I know the answers to their questions, I will reply instantly. Otherwise, I will find out the answers for them later” (T2I). None of the teachers
referred to the students’ questions in their subsequent teaching or indicated an intention to follow up with the students to provide further assistance. The teachers’ main focus on providing correct answer to students’ questions reflected the influences of cultural respect for teachers who are supposed to have knowledge authority (Tran & Williamson, 2009). As a result, the teachers tended to view students’ questions as potential challenges to their expertise rather than a source of information about students’ learning needs to address. The teachers’ limited use of students’ questions to inform their subsequent teaching related to their limited understanding of the formative values of assessment and the integration of assessment in everyday teaching and learning practice.

In elementary classes, there were significant differences between the two universities regarding students’ practices of asking and responding to questions. Students at PU always addressed teachers in their questions, and they did not say anything loudly without the teacher’s initial request. Such behaviours illustrate the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students that is dominant in Vietnamese educational culture. Meanwhile, at Non-PU some students in Ms Minh’s and Ms Tam’s classes often asked questions loudly without addressing anyone to respond, and some of their questions were not related to the lesson. Students also responded to their peers’ questions freely when they knew the answers and commented on their peers’ questions and responses loudly. These interactions had the potential to facilitate class discussion which encouraged students’ involvement in demonstrating their understanding for scaffolding by teachers and peers. However, the potential was limited since students often used Vietnamese and their irrelevant questions and responses sometimes diverted class attention away from the lesson. To prevent or minimise students’ side-tracked talks, Ms Minh tended to give a shorter wait time and Ms Tam often asked questions to remind students to focus on learning. The classroom contexts at Non-PU illustrate the changing relationship between teachers and students, where students take some control of classroom interactions and the teachers perform the role of facilitators who orientate classroom interactions toward supporting learning. The impetus for this change comes mainly from the institutional practice of collecting students’ feedback to evaluate teachers, resulting in teachers’ paying more attention to students in teaching.
6.1.3.2. Pair and group work activities

Teachers in both universities employed pair and group work activities, which had the potential to enhance students’ peer- and self-assessment. That is because the activities encouraged students to demonstrate and validate their own and peers’ understanding and seek help from peers to develop their understanding.

Two similarities were found in the way teachers at the two universities carried out pair and group activities. First, teachers in both universities mostly organised students to work in pairs rather than in groups. The main reason for this practice lies in their reliance on the course book for the design of learning activities: “there are fewer situations for group work activity in the course book” (H2I). Other reasons include concern over the time constraints: “it often takes longer when students work in groups” (H2I), and the difficulty in managing students’ work in groups particularly in Non-PU, since students did not always follow teachers’ instructions. The second similarity in the teachers’ practice is that they often required students to create a new conversation based on the model in the course book. Thus, there is considerable influence of the course book, the time constraints and classroom management issues on teachers’ use of pair and group work activities.

The main difference between the two universities is the washback effect of high-stakes testing on the teachers’ use of pair and group work activities. Three teachers at PU frequently organised students to work in pairs/groups although students are required to perform individually in the speaking test at the end of the semester. Meanwhile, the frequency varied according to the levels of the English courses at Non-PU. Teachers of elementary courses sometimes used pair work tasks, while the teacher of the intermediate course used pair work tasks more frequently. The reason for the difference in the teachers’ use of pair/ group work activities at Non-PU lies in the design of speaking tests which differ according to the proficiency levels: “students at the elementary level carry out individual performance at speaking tests but students at higher levels take speaking tests in pairs and groups” (T2I). High-stakes testing at Non-PU seems to exert a strong washback effect on the teachers’ use of pair work activities.

Considerable differences are found in the teachers’ purposes for using pair and group work tasks. Ms Lan, Ms Tam, and Ms Van emphasised the purpose of providing students with opportunities to practise using English. Ms Yen aimed to
assist students to learn from peers and to “save the teacher’s energy” (Y2I). Ms Hong intended to enhance students’ use of English and to help her “finish the section more quickly” (H2I). Ms Minh underlined her purposes of “creating a change in the classroom atmosphere and making the lesson less boring” (M2I). Despite their divergent purposes, none of the teachers mentioned the intention of using pair work activities to enhance students’ practices of self- and peer-assessment, which has been found to have the potential to promote students’ learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

Considerable differences are also found in the way teachers manage students’ pair and group work tasks. While students were working in pairs, the teachers carried out different activities. Ms Yen and Ms Minh stayed at their desks to do their own work, Ms Tam and Ms Van circulated around the class but rarely said anything, and Ms Lan and Ms Hong circulated and provided students with additional help. It was noted that some students, in Ms Tam and Ms Hong’s classes, only started working when the teachers approached them and students tended to ask for the teachers’ help with the task when the teachers were near them. Ms Lan’s support for students’ work was also highly appreciated by her students. The students’ attitudes and behaviours illustrate their need for further assistance to work in pairs and groups, and the teachers’ practices of monitoring and providing students with further instructions could help facilitate students’ participation and engagement in pair and group work tasks.

The teachers’ practices of assessing students’ pair and group work tasks are slightly different. Ms Yen, Ms Hong, and Ms Tam often required students to stand up and perform the tasks at their seats. Ms Minh and Ms Van often required students to perform the tasks in front of the class without interrupting in their performances. Ms Lan also required students to perform in front of the class, but she often assisted students during their performances. Ms Minh’s and Ms Van’s students explained that they made a greater effort when they performed in front of the class, partly because of their face-saving concerns and partly because of the fact that their performances were marked by the teachers. However, these concerns also discouraged some students from performing when they were not well prepared. Ms Lan did not give marks for students’ language performances which helped reduce students’ anxiety. Her support during students’ performance helped them gain confidence in performing language tasks. The practices of requiring students to perform pair work
tasks in front of the class and supporting them to perform the tasks had the potential to enhance students’ learning effort and to assist student to overcome the barrier of face-saving concerns to participate in language performances in class.

Most students in the focus groups expressed their preference for pair work activities for three main reasons. First, they enjoyed working with peers. Second, they had the opportunity to seek help and learn from peers, which was less stressful. Third, they could practise using English to express their ideas. The students’ responses suggest the potential of pair and group work activities to encourage students to demonstrate their understanding for scaffolding by peers, and enable them to carry out necessary actions to promote their learning (Klenowski, 2009). This finding is consistent with results from prior study carried out by Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, et al. (2012) which identifies students’ enthusiasm for group learning as an important factor to take into account when integrating innovative pedagogical practices to support learning.

However, it is noted that students in Ms Tam’s class did not indicate any preference for pair and group work activities. The reasons for the students’ attitude seemed to relate to the way Ms Tam prepared, managed and assessed students’ pair and group work. First, Ms Tam did not provide detailed instruction for the tasks, which inhibited students’ understanding of the objectives or the assessment criteria for the tasks. Second, she did not ask students to perform their pair work task with peers but asked them questions, resulting in considerable misalignment between the assessment and the students’ learning experiences in pair and group settings which discouraged students from engaging in pair and group work activities. Third, she used assessment to control misbehaving students but her strategy was not effective. It was also noted that one student in the Ms Van’s focus group indicated that he did not favour pair work activities due to his difficulty in finding a suitable partner. In addition, analysis of students’ talk in pairs revealed that students sometimes did not pay attention to helping their peers or utilising the activities to practise using English, which further illustrates the need to prepare students for the tasks. To enhance AfL practice via students’ pair and group activities, more attention to issues related to task preparation and assessment such as pairing and grouping students, informing them of task objectives, facilitating collaborative learning, and sharing assessment criteria are needed.
6.1.3.3. Feedback

There is no significant difference between the two universities regarding the practice of giving feedback. Instead, major differences were between mid-career and early career teachers’ practices, indicating possible influences of recent changes in English language teachers training in Vietnam.

There are significant differences between mid-career and early career teachers in their practices of giving feedback. The early career teachers often gave feedback on students’ task performances. The criteria they used to give feedback were consistent across students’ performances. Additionally, they all required students to give feedback on their peers’ performances: Ms Van required students to take notes on their peers’ oral performances; Ms Minh asked students to give opinions on their peers’ writing of concluding sentences; and Ms Hong required students to give written feedback on peers’ writing.

The mid-career teachers, on the other hand, did not often give feedback on students’ performances. Specifically, Ms Tam praised students’ correct answers to her questions but scarcely gave feedback on students’ task performances. Although she commented on, identified and corrected errors in students’ writing, she did not give any feedback when returning the writing to students. Ms Lan sometimes gave feedback on students’ oral language performances, but she indicated that she would not give feedback if she ran out of time. Ms Yen gave feedback when she checked students’ homework but she did not often give feedback on other language performances in class. Regarding peer feedback, Ms Tam did not require students to give feedback on peers’ performances. Meanwhile, Ms Lan and Ms Yen sometimes invited students to give feedback to their peers but they did not nominate any specific students to do so. Consequently, their students did not receive any feedback from peers. Since feedback plays an important role in enabling student to understand learning objectives to reflect on their learning and undertake necessary actions to progress to achieve the learning objectives (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the mid-career teachers’ limited feedback inhibit the support of assessment for learning.

The differences between mid-career and early career teachers’ practices of giving feedback indicated that the early career teachers gave more attention to providing feedback on student learning, which might relate to their perspectives on the need to inform students of their learning objectives. The early career teachers’
practice of nominating specific students to give feedback to their peers assisted students’ involvement in these practices. However, none of the teachers specified the criteria or provided students with training in giving peer feedback, which negatively affected the success of the activity.

There are similarities and differences in the teachers’ feedback criteria and content. All the teachers gave feedback on students’ use of language accuracy and meaning, such as pronunciation and grammar, and meaning of the communication. Five teachers emphasised the need for students to carry out meaningful interactions rather than reading their notes or the model conversations in the course book. Three teachers highlighted the criteria of language fluency. Two teachers emphasised the performance manner, encouraging students to speak confidently and clearly. Two teachers stressed the importance of coherent organisation of ideas. Two teachers expected students to use the target language creatively to express their own ideas. The differences in the teachers’ feedback criteria reflect the differences in their understanding of the objectives of language teaching and learning.

Significantly, teachers’ feedback was found to provide students with limited suggestions for improvement, which resulted in students’ difficulties in improving their learning. Only two out of six teachers provided students with some suggestions about what to do to improve their performances. In the interviews, all the teachers demonstrated little attention to provide suggestions for improvement since they aimed to give feedback to help students realise errors to avoid and learn from one another’s strengths to improve their learning. The teachers’ responses and practices indicated their limited understanding of the need to give feedback to assist students to undertake necessary actions to achieve desired learning outcomes (Black, et al., 2003a).

Students in both universities often acted on teachers’ explicit feedback on language form immediately. Responses from students in the focus groups showed that teachers’ feedback could help them identify and correct their errors and gain some understanding of the learning objectives. Students in the focus group also indicated that they worked on teachers’ feedback to improve their learning: “When the teacher identifies strengths of my friends’ performances I often check if I can do the same. If cannot, I will try to improve my performance so that I can receive the same positive feedback as my peers” (Ms Lan’s S1) These findings demonstrate the
potential of teachers’ feedback for enhancing students’ reflection on their learning and facilitating their understanding of the learning objectives to direct their own learning to attain the objectives (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, students also indicated difficulties in solving problems identified by their teachers: “The teacher often reminds me that my word choice is so Vietnamese, I have been trying to improve but I have not made much progress” (Ms Van’s S1). Such responses pointed to the limited helpfulness of teachers’ feedback for assisting students to find out what they needed to do to improve their language performance, which is also reported by Havnes, et al. (2012). Additionally, students sometimes did not pay attention to teachers’ feedback on their own or peers’ language performance because they were busy preparing for their own performances or off-task and involved in chatting with peers. Some students in the focus groups indicated difficulties in understanding teachers’ written feedback on their writing and some other students stated that they did not work on teachers’ feedback because they had “lots of homework to do” (Ms Minh’s S2). These students’ responses and behaviours illustrated their limited understanding of the importance of feedback for learning, which impedes the support of assessment for learning (Sadler, 2010).

6.1.3.4. Use of summative tests

The summative tests referred to in this study include progress tests; mid-term tests, and final tests. Limited data were collected about Ms Van’s practices of using summative tests due to unexpected changes in her teaching time and plans. The comparative analysis of the other five teachers’ practices showed that they all made use of summative tests to assist students to revise the knowledge of English language that they had learned. It was also noted that the teachers switched to Vietnamese in the lessons that prepared students for the final tests. These practices illustrate their use of the students’ first language to enhance comprehension. These practices also reflect the influences of a testing culture and the washback of high-stakes testing on teaching at both universities. Due to the misalignment between testing and ELL objectives, the practices focused more on developing students’ test-oriented knowledge rather than their English proficiency.

There are, however, significant differences in the teachers’ use of progress tests at the two universities. At PU, the teachers made similar use of progress tests. They informed students about the test time and advised them to revise previous
lessons to prepare for the tests. When returning test papers to students, teachers worked through the test questions, revised related knowledge, identified and corrected students’ typical errors and taught new knowledge which was included in the tests but not covered in previous lessons. They also pointed out the specific test questions which were derived from the course book to encourage students to pay attention to classroom learning. Since students were not familiar with the types of test questions in the writing and listening sections, teachers explained clearly the task requirements and test-taking strategies.

At Non-PU, individual teachers used progress tests differently. Before delivering progress tests, Ms Minh and Ms Tam provided students with extra exercises to revise language knowledge and to provide extra listening and reading practice. Meanwhile, Ms Van indicated that she did not “help students prepare for the progress tests since at their [intermediate] level of English, students can prepare for the test themselves” (V2I). When returning test papers, Ms Minh worked through the questions, identifying and correcting students’ common errors, revising related knowledge and informing students of the marking criteria. Ms Tam also worked through the multiple choice test questions but she allowed students to cross-mark each other’s test papers at the same time. As a result, most attention seemed to be paid to informing students of the correct answers rather than checking students’ understanding to promote it further: “[I read the answers] again 36 C, 37 D, 38 E, 39 A” (T1O). As indicated by the students in the focus group, Ms Van worked quickly through the test questions but she did not return the test questions so students could not identify their errors to avoid repeating them in the future.

The differences in the ways teachers at the two universities used progress tests to promote learning indicate the washback effects and influences of the institutional contexts and teachers’ perspectives on language teaching, learning and assessment. The similarity in the way teachers at PU used the tests reflects the norms of practices at the University, whereas the differences in the teachers’ practices at Non-PU indicates teachers’ freedom in their practices. The teachers’ practices of revising before delivering progress tests were influenced by the increased weighting of those tests at Non-PU, and by the fact that the test results have more direct impact on students than at PU. The PU teachers’ practices of teaching new knowledge
included in the tests, explaining requirements of writing and listening tasks, and developing students’ test-taking strategies resulted from the lack of alignment between testing and learning at the university. Nevertheless, the teachers’ practices of identifying and correcting students’ common errors in the tests, revising related knowledge and informing students of marking criteria, indicate their formative use of summative test results to diagnose and address students’ learning problems, and enhance students’ understanding of learning objectives and learning reflection (Carless, 2011).

Students in the focus groups indicated their preference for test preparation lessons. Classroom observations also showed that in test preparation lessons, students appeared to focus more on learning. For example, students in Ms Minh’s and Ms Hong’s classes paid more attention to teachers’ feedback on their mock performance for the speaking tests, responded to the feedback and focused on the action they needed to take to prepare for the test: “I will practise these topics with my roommates” (Ms Hong’s 6th Ob). Students in Ms Tam’s classes asked for her help to revise the writing they prepared for the writing tests. Some previously reticent students in Ms Minh’s class also asked questions about the grammatical structures that they had difficulty with when doing grammar exercises. Thus, the teachers’ test preparation practices have the potential to encourage students to focus on learning, enhance their understanding and facilitate their attainment of learning objectives (Carless, 2011). However, lack of alignment between ELL objectives and English tests, which focus largely on language knowledge inhibited the support of test preparation practices for students’ ELL.

The teachers differed considerably in their use of test results to inform teaching. Ms Yen had no intention of using test results to reflect on her teaching or adjust her subsequent teaching since she had taught students all the necessary things and she had to “follow the teaching plan” (YII). Ms Tam encountered difficulties in interpreting test results: “When students achieve low marks at a listening test, I may consider providing them with additional listening practice but it depends. Maybe the test was too difficult or students were not focused” (TII). In contrast, Ms Lan indicated her use of test results to identify students in need to provide additional support to improve their learning. However, she had no intention of adjusting her
teaching objectives which were defined by the course book. These responses from the three mid-career teachers demonstrate the inhibitive influences of traditional education practices, characterised by knowledge transmission, the mandated prescribed teaching plan, and the limited diagnostic value of test results to inform teaching and learning.

In contrast to the mid-career teachers, the early career teachers tended to pay more attention to making use of test results to inform their subsequent teaching but their practices still differed. Ms Hong and Ms Minh used test results to diagnose students’ learning problems to address in their subsequent teaching. However, Ms Minh did not use the mid-term and final examination results since students took the exams on computers and thus she believed that the results might not be accurate. Similarly, due to the practice of delivering the same progress tests to the students of the same cohorts at PU, Ms Hong found test results sometimes did not provide her with information she needed about students’ learning. She also pointed out that the limited teaching time prevented her from providing help to students in need to promote their learning. Ms Van indicated that she used test results to reflect on her previous teaching and to adjust her subsequent teaching approaches and the homework assigned for students but she stated that “I surely have no time to revise the related knowledge” (V11). Consistent with the mid-career teachers, the early career teachers’ responses indicate the inhibitive influences of the institutional requirement to follow prescribed teaching plans which encourage teachers to pay more attention to their accountability to cover the teaching plan than to support student learning. In addition, the responses also illustrate the negative impact of the development and administration practices resulting in the lack of validity of the test results to inform teaching.

Students in the focus groups indicated their use of test results to inform their learning. Most of them used the results to reflect on their learning and identify learning areas to improve; some used the results to find more competent peers to learn with. Some used the results to evaluate their learning and predict the possibility of passing the coming tests, which can be considered as measuring the distance from their existing level to the learning target. However, the students’ use of test results did not appear to be effective. Some students could not identify their problems or
find effective ways to solve their learning problems. It is also noted that students in the focus groups often complained about problems with their listening comprehension but their common solution was to spend more time on practising listening. The focus on drill practice with little attention to developing listening strategies or sub-skills impedes students’ progress, which could decrease their motivation for learning as evident in Ms Lan’s students’ response. The students’ difficulties in using test results underline the need to improve the diagnostic value of English tests, and to provide students with further support to make use of test results to improve learning.

In short, the analysis revealed the incorporation of AfL in the current practices of questioning, pair and group work activities, feedback and use of summative tests by teachers and students at both universities. Three main differences between the two universities were noted. First, at Non-PU, teachers asked more open questions and in elementary courses more students participated in questioning practices than at PU. Second, teachers of elementary courses at Non-PU organised students to work in pairs/groups less frequently than their colleagues at PU. Additionally, teachers of elementary courses at Non-PU prepared students for all mandated summative tests including progress tests, whereas teachers at PU prepared students only for the final test. The reasons for the differences in the assessment practices lay in the differences in the institutional contexts including the institutional use of students’ feedback to evaluate teachers, the time allocation for EFL education, the textbooks used in EFL courses, the weighting and frequency of English tests, and the particular use of tests and marks to influence students’ learning attitude and behaviours at Non-PU. The comparative analysis also revealed significant differences between early mid-career and teachers’ AfL practices. In particular, the early career teachers in this study seemed to have more understanding and made better use of the potential of assessment for learning than their mid-career colleagues. This finding suggests the positive impact of the incorporation of assessment courses and the recent changes in the education of English language teacher education in Vietnam following the changes in ELT all over the world (Brown, 2000). In the next section, the support of assessment for ELL in the context of Vietnamese HE and influential factors will be further analysed and discussed.
6.2 DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, research findings from the cross case analysis are discussed in relation to the three research questions focusing on students’ involvement in the assessment process (Section 6.2.1), the alignment of teacher feedback and AfL principles (Section 6.2.2) and the use of assessment data to promote learning (Section 6.2.3). The aim is to demonstrate the potential of assessment for the learning of English language and identify factors facilitating and inhibiting the potential of assessment for ELL in the Vietnamese higher education context.

6.2.1 Students’ involvement in the assessment process

Fundamental characteristics of effective learning, as pointed out by Black (2010), consist of students’ engagement and the development of their ability to take control of their own learning. In order to promote learning, assessment must be integrated in teaching and learning (Klenowski, 2009) and must involve students in the assessment process (Brookhart, 2011) to demonstrate and validate their own learning, to gain understanding of the learning objectives and to make interpretations of their existing learning in relation to the objectives so as to identify their next actions to achieve the objectives.

The analysis of current assessment practices at the two universities reveals that the following assessment-related pedagogical practices have the potential to enhance students’ involvement in the assessment processes for the support of their learning. First, the teachers’ practice of frequently asking questions during lessons: teachers’ questions, particularly the open-ended questions which require students to express their own ideas about issues related to the lessons in English, could help activate students’ schemata for learning, recall their prior knowledge, demonstrate their learning and develop their ability to use English to express their own ideas. Second is the teachers’ practice of expanding on students’ responses to their questions, carried out by early career teachers in the two universities: the elaboration on students’ responses was found to enable students to explicate, reflect and validate their understanding and provide teachers with detailed information on student learning to promote it. Third are the students’ practice of initiating questions to the teachers and the teachers’ practice of responding immediately to the students’ questions or forwarding to their peers. These practices had the potential to enhance students’ participation to demonstrate their learning. Fourth is the practice of
requiring students to give peer feedback, which was carried out by early career teachers in both universities. The requirement to give feedback on peers’ oral performance assisted students to focus on learning, and the feedback on peers’ writing could enhance students’ learning reflection and error correction. Last is the practice of organising students to work in pairs and groups, which has the potential to facilitate students’ involvement in demonstration, reflection on own learning, validation of their own and peers’ understanding, and seeking help from peers or collaborating to improve own learning. Significantly, most students indicated a preference for pair and group work activities.

Despite the potential of the above practices by teachers and students, students’ involvement in the assessment process was rather limited. First, not many students actively responded to teachers’ questions or initiated questions to teachers. Their participation largely depended on teachers’ nomination. However, two teachers did not often nominate specific students to give their responses and two other teachers often nominated high achieving students only. Two teachers, Ms Yen and Ms Minh, often nominated both high and low achieving students to respond to their questions, but their practice was negatively affected by the time restrictions and students’ cooperation. Reasons given by students for their minimal participation in questioning practices revealed the inhibitive influences of a number of sociocultural factors. Those included the cultural values of face-saving and respect for harmony, the teacher-centred educational tradition, and the mixed-ability classes. Under the influence of such sociocultural factors, the teachers’ practice of demonstrating a relaxed attitude towards errors in students’ responses, nominating both high and low achieving students to give their answers and establishing a rapport with students facilitated students’ involvement. Another reason for students’ limited involvement in questioning practice lie in the teachers’ use of English as the medium of instruction. Although the practice could assist students to get familiar with communicating ideas in English, the early career teachers’ dominant use of English as a medium of instruction was found to inhibit students’ participation to questioning practices due to their difficulties in comprehending teachers’ questions and producing their responses in English. This finding is consistent with the results of the study conducted by Kieu (2010) to emphasise the teachers’ need to make judicious use of Vietnamese to support students’ ELL.
Second, students were not often required to give formal feedback to their peers. Their feedback on peers’ oral performances was often short and fragmented. Some students in Ms Hong’s class did not give any feedback on their peers’ writing. In addition, students are rarely required to carry out self-assessment. Specifically, mid-career teachers did not use self- and peer-assessment in teaching. Although the early career teachers required students to assess their peers, they did not specify the criteria for assessment or provide any training to assist students to provide formative feedback to their peers. The influence of the traditional teacher-centred education, and teachers’ limited understanding about students’ active learning and the potential of assessment for developing students’ management of their own learning could be the possible reasons for students’ minimal involvement in the practices of peer- and self-assessment.

Third, students’ involvement in the assessment process via pair and group work activities seemed to be inhibited by the teachers’ limited knowledge and skills in organising, managing and accessing the activities. Teachers often required students to create a new conversation based on the model in the course book without giving sufficient instructions on assessment criteria, task objectives or expected learning attitudes and manner while working in pairs and groups. Consequently, students sometimes did not make use of pair and group work tasks to develop their English ability or engage in collaboration with peers to promote their English language learning. Given the inadequate preparation for students’ work in pairs and groups, it was noted that some of the teachers’ existing practices could encourage students’ participation in the activities. These include circulating around the class and providing students with additional help during their work in pairs and groups, requiring students to perform their work in front of the class instead of standing at their seats, and providing students with further support during their performances in front of the class.

Significant differences were noted between the teachers’ and their students’ viewpoints about students’ involvement in the assessment process. The teachers indicated their views that that students did not ask questions because they were “not interested in the topics” (Ms Hong) and “understand everything in the lesson” (Ms Yen); they carried out pair and group work activities since they were required by teachers but “do not know about the [pedagogical] purpose of facilitating the
development of their English ability” (Ms Van); they “care only about their marks at the tests” (Ms Minh); and they “always like marking peers’ test papers” (Ms Tam). These were different from the responses given by their students in the focus groups interviews: Ms Hong’s students had difficulties in understanding her questions in order to respond due to her frequent use of English as the medium of instruction; Ms Yen’s students were too shy to ask questions of the teacher; students in the focus groups indicated their understanding of their teachers’ rationale about using pair and group work activities to facilitate their use of English in class; students in the focus indicated their use of test results to diagnose their learning problems for improvements; and Ms Tam’s students stated that “the progress tests should be marked by the teacher to assure the fairness” (S3). Significantly, some students indicated their readiness and willingness to actively take part in the assessment-related activities. For example, Ms Lan’s students demonstrated their desire to demonstrate their own understanding and give feedback to their peers: “if she requires, we will give our comments [on our peers’ performance]” (S3). Some students’ in Ms Van’s class showed their understanding that they could learn from their incorrect responses to the teacher’s questions. The mismatch between the teachers’ and their students’ perceptions about students’ learning behaviours in class, also revealed in other studies on EFL education in Vietnam (Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004), constitutes a contributory factor to students’ minimal involvement in the assessment process. This points to the need for the teachers to pay more attention to understand their students, particularly, their activeness and agency in learning, in order to teach effectively (Murphy, 2008).

6.2.2 Alignment of teacher feedback and AFL principles

To support learning, teacher feedback needs to assist students to interpret their existing learning in relation to the learning objectives and to aid students to undertake necessary actions to make progress towards desired outcomes (Black, et al., 2003a; Shute, 2008). Analysis of the feedback practices in both universities shows that the feedback given to students focused on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of students’ performances, which had the potential to facilitate students’ understanding of the learning objectives. Those include accurate use of language form (pronunciation, grammar, word choice and spelling), meaningful interactions, fluency, coherent organisation of ideas and creative use of English language to
express their own ideas. As indicated by some students in the focus group, the understanding of the learning objectives seemed to enable them to reflect on their own learning and direct their subsequent learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, the feedback given to students in both universities had limited value in helping students to identify strategies and the next actions they needed to take to bridge the gap between their current level of performance and the desired level of performance. This lack of scaffolding resulted in students’ difficulties in improving their learning based on teachers’ feedback: “It is difficult to change to speak with the correct pronunciation and intonation” (Ms Lan’s S5).

The comparative analysis of feedback practices at the two universities reveals three key factors affecting the practice of giving feedback and the helpfulness of feedback. First, a noted difference is found between the mid-career and early career teachers’ attitudes towards the practice of giving feedback. Specifically, early career teachers paid more attention to giving feedback, which appears to relate to their understanding of the need to inform students of their learning objectives. Second, there are considerable variations in the feedback criteria used by the teachers, which seems to reflect their divergent understandings of the objectives of English language teaching and learning. Third, teachers appeared to be unaware of the need to provide students with helpful information to assist them to carry out necessary actions to make progress in their learning, which seemed to result from their limited understanding of the formative values of assessment. Thus, to utilise the potential of feedback and improve the value of feedback for learning, teachers will need to be provided with professional development to improve their knowledge and skills of giving formative feedback to promote learning.

6.2.3 Use of assessment data

Assessment data is understood as information about student learning which can be gathered from “dialogue, demonstration and observation” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 246). In this study, assessment data include students’ responses to teachers’ questions, students’ questions to teachers, students’ communication during pair and group work activities, students’ language performances, teachers’ and peers’ feedback and students’ summative test results. In order to support learning, assessment data need to be used by both teachers and students to reflect on their previous practices and inform their subsequent teaching and learning (Wiliam, 2011). The following section
presents a comparative analysis of the use of assessment data by teachers and students at the two universities.

**Teachers’ use of assessment data**

Only two teachers, Ms Hong and Ms Van, indicated their intention to use assessment data to reflect on their teaching. Ms Hong reflected on her questioning practices when few students responded to her questions. She also indicated her expectation that the progress test results would provide her with information about students’ learning before the tests. Similarly, when Ms Van found that students could not use the new words and phrases from previous lessons, she reflected on her previous teaching of the words and phrases. Both of these teachers indicated the need to understand students’ learning and attributed part of students’ poor performances to their teaching: “teachers sometimes do not understand students to help them make progress in learning” (H1). Meanwhile, the other four teachers did not seem to use assessment results to reflect on their previous teaching: “I had taught everything. If students could not do the test well, it was because they did not study” (Y1). These teachers often attributed poor performances to students’ lack of concentration or effort in learning. The influences of the traditional knowledge-transmission teaching pedagogy and the teachers’ lack of understanding of the formative value of assessment seemed to be the main reasons for not using the assessment data to reflect on their prior teaching.

All the teachers were found to make use of assessment data to inform subsequent teaching and learning to some extent. The teachers spent more time or provided more instruction when students could not answer the teacher’s questions or did not perform the learning task well. Some teachers used their observation of students’ work in pairs and groups to give additional task instructions or to correct students’ typical errors. Some provided feedback on students’ task performances, which included suggestions for what the students needed to do to improve their performances. One teacher, Ms Lan, observed students’ participation in learning tasks to reconsider her selection of learning activities, making the activities more appropriate to students’ preferences. Most of them also spent time identifying and correcting students’ errors in the tests. One teacher, Ms Van, used test results to adjust the tasks she assigned for homework.

However, the teachers’ use of assessment data to inform their subsequent teaching was rather limited. Their selection of the teaching content and learning
activities was largely dependent on the course book as a result of the institutional requirement to follow the course book-based teaching plan. Their identification and correction of students’ errors in the tests related mainly to the specific test questions. Their use of test results was inhibited by the lack of and concerns about the validity, reliability and diagnostic value of the test results. None of the teachers referred to the students’ questions in their subsequent teaching due to their primary attention on answering students’ questions rather than using the questions as sources of information about students’ learning to inform subsequent teaching, which further demonstrated the inhibitive influences of teachers’ limited understanding of the formative value of assessment on their AfL practices.

Students’ use of assessment data

Students in both universities appeared to make some use of assessment data to inform their learning. For example, students were found to take up teachers’ feedback on pronunciation and intonation to improve their oral performances. Students also worked on peers’ feedback on their writing to correct errors in spelling, subject-verb agreement and sometimes revise the ideas communicated. In addition, they used test results to reflect on their previous learning, identify areas for improvement and source new means to improve their learning. However, their use of feedback to improve their learning was curtailed by the limited feedback they received from teachers and peers, particularly in assisting them to undertake necessary actions to progress toward the learning objectives. Their use of test results to adjust their learning was also hindered by the lack of diagnostic value of the results and their ability to interpret the results to find out the next steps to take to improve their learning.

In short, teachers and students in both universities made use of assessment data to a limited extent to improve the learning of English language. Their limited use reflects the influences of the traditional knowledge-transmission teaching pedagogy, the mandated course book-based teaching plan, and the design of English tests and the teachers’ lack of understanding of the formative value of assessment.

6.3 SUMMARY

The above analysis revealed the potential of assessment for ELL in Vietnamese universities. Specifically, assessment has the potential to engage students in learning, to enhance their understanding of the learning objectives, and to facilitate their
reflections and management of their own learning (Wiliam, 2011). However, the comparative analysis of current assessment practices of the two universities showed the limited support of current assessment practices for ELL due to the minimal involvement of students in the assessment process and the limited values of assessment information, such as feedback and summative test results, in assisting students to undertake necessary actions to attain the learning objectives.

A number of factors were found to function together to influence the productive enactment of AfL in EFL education in the two universities. At the higher education system level, influential factors included educational tradition characterised by teacher-centeredness and knowledge transmission, the cultural values of face-saving, respect for harmony and respect for teachers’ knowledge, the examination culture, the ministerial requirement for assuring educational quality in HE, and the context of EFL education with a heavy reliance on the course book and mixed-ability classes.

At the institutional level, the institutional administration approach, the working conditions, the organisation of EFL education in terms of time allocation and course book used, and the institutional regulations on EFL assessment exerted impact on teachers’ AfL practices. Specifically, the favourable working condition, the extensive teaching time, the use of course book series with a spiral curricular design, the availability of wide ranges of teaching and learning materials, and the allocation of more weight to progress tests at Non-PU enhanced the teachers’ AfL practices. By contrast, the teachers’ heavy workload, the limited teaching time in regular English courses and the use of TOEIC tests to certify accomplishment and accredit the quality of EFL education, resulting in considerable misalignment between testing, teaching and learning, and ELL objectives at PU inhibited teachers from incorporating AfL in their practices. Significantly, it was noted that the practice of collecting students’ feedback on teachers’ practices and the use of test and marks to influence students’ learning attitudes and behaviours at Non-PU had the potential to facilitate students’ involvement in the assessment-related activities.

At the classroom level, the teachers’ language assessment literacy, the language used by teachers as the medium of instruction, the relationship between teachers and students, and the teachers’ misinterpretation about students’ learning behaviours profoundly influenced the AfL practices of both teachers and students.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This final chapter starts with a brief overview of the study (Section 7.1), and then presents the implications for policy and practice (Section 7.2). Following this, the original contributions (Section 7.3), the limitations of the study (section 7.4) and the directions for further research (section 7.5) are outlined. Lastly, a conclusion is drawn from my reflection of my own learning experience (Section 7.6).

7.1 AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study investigated, from a sociocultural perspective, the current EFL assessment practices at two universities in Vietnam for the purposes of improving the effectiveness of English Language Learning (ELL) in Vietnamese HE. The study was inspired by HE reform in Vietnam, which, among various objectives, aims to develop students’ learning skills and English ability for communicative and professional purposes (Government, 2005). Specifically, it was stimulated by the pressing need to improve the quality of EFL education at tertiary level (Vu, 2008) and the research findings on the potential of assessment for promoting effective learning (Black, 2010; Black & Wiliam, 1998a) including ELL (Matsuno, 2009; Nezakatgoo, 2011). It has been recognised that assessment has the potential to support learning (ARG, 2002b; Black & Wiliam, 1998b). Since learning and/or assessment are social activities which are culturally contextualized and constructed (Gipps, 1999; Rogoff, 2003), the way assessment supports learning may vary according to the educational context in which it takes place. However, in the context of Vietnamese HE, limited research has been conducted on EFL assessment practices and on the support of assessment for ELL. Hence, this study adopted a sociocultural perspective to investigate current assessment practices to explore the support of assessment for ELL in the Vietnamese HE context.

This study adopted a case study design and addressed the research problem by ethnographically documenting the assessment-related practices at one Public University (PU) and one Non-Public University (Non-PU) in Vietnam. The universities were purposefully selected to represent the two main HE institutional contexts given the rapid growth of HE institutions in Vietnam. PU shares key
characteristics with other institutions in the public sector (currently accounting for 80 per cent of institutions in Vietnamese HE system), whereas Non-PU represents an emerging trend in the non-public sector (currently accounting for 20 per cent but this is planned to rise to 40 per cent of institutions in Vietnamese HE system). In each university, participants included one Executive officer who is responsible for managing EFL education and assessment at the university, three EFL teachers and 18 students in three focus groups. Data were collected from classroom observations, interviews and artefacts including relevant policy and curriculum documents, course books, test papers and students’ writing with feedback from teachers and peers. The data were analysed through the interactional and relational dimensions both within and across the two cases. A sociocultural perspective of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and AfL principles (ARG, 2002a; Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 2009) were employed as the analytical principles for the data analysis.

The individual case analyses in Chapter 4 and 5 and the cross-case analysis in Chapter 6 revealed the incorporation of aspects of AfL in the current practices of questioning, pair and group work activities, feedback and the use of summative tests by teachers and students in both universities. The incorporation of AfL in such practices could engage students in learning, enhance their understanding of learning objectives and facilitate their reflections and management of their own learning, which was highlighted by Black and Wiliam (1998a) and affirmed by an increasing number of studies on assessment and classroom learning (Wiliam, 2011). The analysis, however, showed the limited support of current assessment practices for ELL due to the minimal involvement of students in the assessment process, and the limited value of test results and feedback on student performance in assisting students to undertake necessary actions to attain learning objectives. Numerous contextual factors were identified that co-constructed the enactment of AfL in the two universities. These key factors include educational tradition, students’ face-saving concerns and respect for teacher, the institutional administration of teachers’ practices, the mandated course book-based teaching plan, the time allocated for EFL education, the impact of high-stakes testing and the design of English tests, the teachers’ limited language assessment literacy, the language used by teachers as the medium of instruction, and the relationship between teachers and students in class.
7.2 IMPLICATIONS

From this exploratory inquiry, the following implications are identified for the policy and practice of EFL education at Vietnamese universities. In accordance with the implications, practical recommendations are also proposed to improve EFL education in Vietnamese HE in general and in PU and Non-PU in particular.

7.2.1 National level policy

Current practices of English language assessment at tertiary level, as evidenced in the two cases, place too little attention on the formative purposes of assessment, which can inhibit necessary adjustments in EFL education programs to develop students’ English language ability. Certain AfL practices are already currently integrated in the English language teaching and learning at the two universities. However, such practices as questioning, giving feedback and using test results to inform teaching and learning are carried out by teachers and students without sufficient theoretical knowledge and understanding of AfL. Hence, this study proposes that professional development and promotion of AfL in EFL education are possible solutions to improve the effectiveness of ELL at the tertiary level, which is one important objective of HE reform in Vietnam. As one key aspect of AfL is the active involvement of students in the learning and assessment process (Brookhart, 2011), the integration of AfL in EFL education can facilitate the development of students’ learning skills and their lifelong learning ability which is another objective of HE reform (Government, 2005).

Teachers play a central role in integrating AfL in teaching and enhancing students’ AfL practices (Greenstein, 2010) to promote ELL. Hence, in order to facilitate the integration of AfL in EFL education, it is crucial to develop EFL teachers’ language assessment literacy (DeLuca, et al., 2012) which includes knowledge on second language acquisition and learning theories related to the assessment process, competency in employing classroom-based assessment to provide feedback on student learning, knowledge of language test development and evaluation, and understanding of the inherently social role of language assessment, the power of tests and consequences of high-stakes tests (Inbar-Louire, 2013). As the participating teachers at both universities indicated having had insufficient formal training in assessment, this study proposes that English language teachers should be provided with in-service professional development to improve their language
assessment literacy. More importantly, English language teacher education programs at EFL teacher training universities need to incorporate language assessment literacy. Particularly, educators of pre-service English language teachers need to integrate AfL in their teaching practices to provide a role model for pre-service English language teachers.

Based on the findings of the teachers’ current knowledge and expertise in English language assessment, this study proposes that EFL teachers particularly need to be assisted to develop the following elements of language assessment literacy: (a) scaffolding student active learning; (b) employing pair and group work activities in English language teaching; (c) involving students in and preparing students for peer- and self-assessment; (d) constructing and administering English tests, and ensuring test quality; (e) analysing and interpreting English test results to evaluate and inform teaching and learning; and (f) utilising classroom-based assessment tools to gather evidence of students’ learning and provide students with constructive feedback to promote their learning.

7.2.2 Institutional level policy

Institutional administration and working conditions, as evidenced in the two universities, exert strong influences on the integration of AfL in teachers’ instructional practices. At PU, the institutional administration, which focuses on teachers’ paperwork and adherence to a mandated teaching plan, the payment of a relatively low salaries, limited teaching time, lack of teaching materials, and large classes were found to constrain teachers from implementing AfL. In contrast, the practice of collecting students’ feedback to evaluate teachers, the payment of high salaries, the provision of extensive teaching time, the small sized classes, and the availability of supplementary materials at Non-PU facilitate the integration of AfL in the teachers’ instructional practices. This finding suggests that more attention should be paid to improving EFL teachers’ working conditions, including their income, to enable teachers to more effectively focus on teaching and supporting student learning. Significantly, the practice of informing teachers of students’ evaluation and feedback on their practices, as carried out in Non-PU, can alleviate the influences of teacher-centred educational tradition by encouraging teachers to pay more attention to individual students, thus promoting learning. However, in order to be effective, evaluation criteria need to focus more explicitly on teaching practices to assist
teachers in gaining a deeper understanding of their students and adjusting their practices accordingly to address students’ learning needs.

Teachers at both universities referred to the institutional requirement to follow the prescribed course book-based teaching plan as one of the key reasons for their difficulties in responding to students’ learning needs. Therefore, it is suggested that universities reduce their reliance on English course books for teaching plans and administration of teachers’ practices. More emphasis should be placed on aiding students to achieve the target learning objectives and teachers should be encouraged to use the course book as a resource rather than a script to follow (Tomlinson, 2010). Teachers and students also need to be provided with access to a variety of resources of English language teaching and learning materials.

High-stakes tests were found to exert considerable washback effects at both universities. At PU, the design of English tests, which aims to help familiarise students with the standardised test that they will take to graduate, resulted in considerable misalignment between testing and teaching and learning, particularly in the macro-skills of listening and writing. Consequently, English tests had a negative washback at PU, as evidenced in teachers’ practice of teaching test-taking strategies and test-oriented language knowledge. At Non-PU, together with the impact of test results on students’ tuition fees and studying time at preparation stage, the allocation of more weighting to progress and mid-term tests and the use of ‘bonus’ and ‘minus’ marks had positive influences on students’ learning attitude and behaviours. However, analyses of English tests at both universities indicated considerable misalignment between English tests, which focus largely on assessing students’ language knowledge, and the objectives of EFL education, which aim to develop students’ ability to use English for communicative and professional purposes. This misalignment, which is also reported by Hoang (2009) and Le (2011), poses possible threats to the test validity and inhibited teachers from using the data to inform their teaching and enhance students’ learning. Hence, this study suggests that universities reconsider the content of English tests, focusing more on assessing students’ communicative skills and their ability to comprehend and express ideas and effectively interact in English. Particular attention needs to be placed on assessing the development of students’ language strategies and sub-skills such as predicting, selecting and inferring in listening (Ling & Kettle, 2011) and questioning, summarising, and analysing text structure in reading (Anderson, 2012). Test
specifications need to be developed to ensure the reliability of parallel tests and to assist the formative use of test results.

7.2.3 EFL Teachers and teaching practices

The findings of this study implied some principles and strategies that EFL teachers can take up in their assessment and teaching practices to promote students’ learning.

**Involving students in the assessment process**

Teachers need to facilitate students’ involvement in classroom assessment to enhance their learning engagement and the development of their ability to manage their own learning (Black, 2010). Given the mismatch between teachers’ and students’ perception about students’ involvement in the assessment-related activities, it is suggested that teachers should be encouraged to do a need analysis survey with students at the beginning of the course to help design their instruction. Teachers should be encouraged to employ strategies to facilitate classroom interactions to encourage students’ involvement. Based on the research findings on factors influencing students’ involvement, the suggested strategies include: (a) asking questions to focus students’ attention, sustain dialogue, and explore students’ understanding; (b) nominating specific students who have different levels of English proficiency to give their responses; (c) demonstrating a relaxed attitude towards errors in students’ responses and expanding on students’ responses to enable students to demonstrate their own understanding; (d) establishing a close rapport with students and encouraging students to ask questions when they need help in learning; (e) preparing and organising students to work in pairs and groups; (f) sharing assessment criteria and facilitating students’ peer- and self-assessment of their own learning; (g) supporting students to perform language tasks and giving constructive feedback to promote their ELL; and (h) assisting students to interpret their test results to identify the next actions they need to undertake to progress toward desired outcomes.

**Using assessment data to inform teaching and provide feedback on students’ learning**

An important purpose of assessment is to inform teaching and learning (ARG, 2002b; Newton, 2007). Teachers need to use information of students’ learning from classroom assessment and summative tests to reflect on the effectiveness of their prior teaching and to adjust subsequent teaching to support students’ learning. Since
feedback on students’ learning can facilitate their understanding of the learning objectives and direct their subsequent learning, teachers also should pay attention to providing students with relevant feedback in a timely manner to scaffold students’ learning. Feedback given to students needs to not only show the weaknesses and strengths in their learning or language performances, but also provide students with suggestions for improvement or assist students to undertake necessary actions to attain the objectives (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Additionally, attention is also needed to inform students of the importance of feedback for their learning, require them to act on the feedback and assure that teacher feedback is fully understood by students (Sadler, 2010).

**Professional development**

The findings on the significant differences between the early career and mid-career teachers’ knowledge and practices of AfL suggests the need to encourage teachers to collaborate to develop their knowledge and expertise in English language teaching and assessment. Mid-career teachers can learn from their early career colleagues’ knowledge and expertise in integrating AfL. The early career teachers, on the other hand, should reconsider their use of English as the medium of instruction with students of all levels, and understand the affordances and make judicious use of Vietnamese to facilitate students’ comprehension of the instruction.

### 7.2.4 Students and English language learning practice

The findings also hold implications for students and their approaches to ELL practice. First, students need to take responsibility for their own learning and actively participate in assessment and/or learning activities in class: (a) responding to teachers’ questions, (b) initiating questions to teachers and peers when they need help in learning, and (c) making use of pair and group work activities to demonstrate and validate their own learning, seeking help from peers to learn and practice using English in class. Second, students need to understand that engaging in pair and group work tasks and collaborating with less competent peers is also beneficial to their learning (Storch & Aldosari, 2013) because their participation in interactions with peers helps trigger their own learning process (Lantolf, 2000), which further develops their English learning. Third, students need to realise the importance of feedback for their learning and pay attention to working on the feedback to improve their learning. Finally, students need to understand that their attitudes and behaviours
in class influence teaching practices and co-construct the learning environment. Open communication of their own understanding and cooperative and respectful attitudes towards teachers’ instruction and peers’ opinions will facilitate effective learning experiences to develop their English ability.

7.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study relates to the practical implications of its findings and the methodological and theoretical contributions to research on AfL.

First, this study is significant in addressing a timely research agenda prompted by HE reform to improve the quality of EFL education at Vietnamese universities and developing students’ lifelong learning skills to serve the national socioeconomic development. Specifically, the study has examined and identified the potential of integrating AfL in EFL education to improve the effectiveness of ELL at tertiary level. The study has also highlighted the need to assist English language teachers to develop their language assessment literacy to improve the effectiveness of their English language teaching and has identified the key elements of knowledge and expertise that EFL teachers need to acquire. Additionally, the study has specifically identified the administrative and pedagogical practices currently carried out at the two universities which can enhance and constrain effective ELL. These findings can be taken into consideration by other universities in the Vietnamese and Asian sociocultural context in their search for ways to improve the quality of EFL education.

Second, this study highlights the relevance of employing qualitative case study design and ethnographic tools in research on AfL. As learning and assessment are social activities which are culturally contextualised and constructed (Gipps, 1999; Rogoff, 2003), the employment of case study design and ethnographic tools help to portray the actual interactions between teachers and students and among students in class and to identify numerous factors influencing the interactions. The in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and the uniqueness (Simons, 2009) of assessment-related practices by teachers and students in real-life classroom contexts enable researchers to gain insights about the potential of assessment for ELL in this context and to provide practical recommendations to integrate AfL in EFL education to promote students’ ELL.
Last, by examining current EFL assessment practices in two Vietnamese universities which are the representatives of the HE system in Vietnam, the study provides a nuanced interpretation of the current context of EFL education and the Vietnamese HE landscape. By analysing and illustrating the potential and enactment of AfL at the two universities, the study contributes to bridging the gap in the literature on AfL in the Vietnamese HE context. The study also contributes to developing further understanding of AfL which has recently been considered as one of the most promising pedagogical approaches for enhancing student learning (DeLuca, et al., 2012).

7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this study relate to the selection of research sites and unexpected changes in teachers’ teaching schedules. Due to the restriction time in data collection, I needed to carry out field work in two universities during the same semester. Hence, the selection of the two universities, which are both located in a big city centre in Vietnam, does not fully illustrate the influence of local contexts on EFL assessment practices. As the two universities selected are both newly established, the information obtained from the study may not reveal the historical impacts of institutional cultures, which might influence practices of EFL assessment. Additionally, limited data were collected about the use summative tests by one teacher in Non-PU due to unexpected changes in her teaching time and plans. Thus, these limitations can restrict the research findings on the potential of AfL for improving the quality of EFL education at Vietnamese universities.

7.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory study on the current EFL assessment practices at two universities has highlighted the potential of integrating AfL in EFL education to improve students’ ELL and identified teachers’ limited language assessment literacy as one of the key barriers for the integration of AfL in the context of Vietnamese HE. One suggestion for further study that emerged from this research is to develop professional development programs for in-service EFL teachers to enhance their AfL practices to promote students’ learning. Further research also needs to be conducted to examine, revise and develop the current English language teacher educational programs in foreign language teachers training universities. This study has also found that the practice of organising students to work in pairs and groups has the
potential to enhance students’ involvement in the ELL and/or assessment process and these activities are particularly favoured by most students in this local context. Hence, another possible direction for further research can be to further examine how to effectively integrate AfL in students’ pair and group work activities to support their learning.

7.6 CONCLUDING PERSONAL REFLECTION

My experience of conducting this study has enabled me to reconceptualise my view of learning and of my own life. Before starting my PhD study, my understanding of learning related mainly to the accumulation of knowledge transmitted by teachers or written in books which was always true. I used to view every phenomenon in the same way via the lenses of my own experience and understanding without taking into account differences in the context. However, my learning experience during my PhD study, particularly my understanding of sociocultural theories, has enabled me to realise that learning involves more than the acquisition of new knowledge and includes the development of a variety of skills and personal identity. Now I understand that learning arises from interactions with others so teachers and course books are important but are not the only sources of knowledge. I also appreciate how important it is to be active in learning, demonstrating existing understanding, reflecting and seeking help from others to develop one’s own understanding. I also understand the strong influences of contextual factors on people’s attitudes, behaviours and practices and realise the importance of researching a phenomenon in its own context to understand it. The awareness of contextual influences has assisted me to have a comprehensive understanding of the situation and the phenomena to behave appropriately.

The learning experience of the doctoral programme also enabled me to realise the role of scaffolding in learning development. In my PhD study, I have had the privilege to have frequent interactions with my supervisors who have actually carried out various AfL practices to scaffold my learning, by for example assisting me to demonstrate my own understanding, giving timely feedback on my work, communicating high expectations of my study, and encouraging me to participate in various social and professional events to network with other Higher Degree Research students and researchers within and outside the university. My supervisors’ support has played an important role in facilitating my understanding and fostering my development which is beneficial not only for my study but also for my whole life.
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Appendices

Appendix 1

Teacher Interview schedule (pre-observation)

Section A. English language teaching experience
How long have you been working at this university? What do you like (or dislike) about teaching EFL at this university?
Have you ever taught English at any educational institution other than this one? Can you tell me about your teaching experiences there?

Section B. Understanding and practice of EFL assessment
1. Purposes and qualities of assessment: Do you think it is necessary to assess students’ learning of EFL? Why (not)? What are the qualities of good EFL assessment? How did you get to know about these qualities?

   Possible questions for elaboration of responses: In what forms do you assess them? What is the learning assessed? What do you take into consideration when designing EFL assessment? Do you share such information as assessment purposes, time, assessment content, assessment method, assessment criteria with your students? Is there a role for students in making such decisions?

3. Use of assessment results: How important are the assessment results to you? How do you use the results? Do the results influence your teaching? How?

4. Students’ use of assessment results: How important are the assessment results to your students? To their learning?

5. Impacts of current assessment practice: What do you think of the current English language assessment practices at the university? What impact do these practices have on your teaching and your students’ learning? How does the assessment practice support students’ learning of EFL?

6. Suggestions for improvement: How can the EFL assessment be improved to further support learning?
Appendix 2

Teacher Interview schedule (post-observation)

**Pedagogical approach:** What do you think are qualities of effective teaching of EFL at universities?

**Questioning:** Do you often ask questions during the lesson? What is the focus of your questions? How often do your students initiate questions to you? What are their questions about? How do you respond to their questions?

**Possible questions for elaboration on responses:** How long do you often wait before asking the students for their answer? How do your students respond to your questions? Can they discuss with friends before answering your questions? What do you often do with your students’ answers?

**Group work and pair work:** How often do you ask your students to work in groups/pairs? What tasks do you often ask them to do in groups/pairs? Why? Do you think they like working in groups/pairs? Why (not)?

**Students’ peer - assessment:** How often do you ask students to assess each other’s work? What do they assess?

**Possible question for elaboration on responses:** What are your purposes of asking students to assess each other? Do you achieve the purposes? Do your students give feedback on each other’s work or presentation? If yes, what is the feedback about? Do you think the feedback is helpful for students’ learning? How? How do students respond to peers’ feedback? Do your students like assessing each other’s work or presentation?

**Students’ self – assessment:** How often do you ask students to assess themselves? What do they assess? What are your purposes for asking students to assess themselves? Do you think these purposes are achieved?

**Your feedback to students:** Do you often give feedback on your students’ individual work? Pair work? Group work? In what form (written or spoken)? What does the feedback focus on? Why? Do you ask students to act on your feedback? How do your students respond to your feedback?
Appendix 3

Student Interview schedule

Section 1. Experience of language learning and assessment
1. Why do you learn English? How long have you been learning English?
2. What kinds of English standardised tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS have you undertaken? Why?

Section 2. Views on the current assessment practice

Questioning: How useful are the questions asked by your teacher during English lessons to your learning of EFL? How often do you initiate questions to your teacher?

Group work and pair work: How often do you work in groups/pairs? What do you often do in groups/pairs? Do you like working in group/pairs? Why (not)?

Assessment frequency, method, content and procedures: What do you think of the frequency, method, content and procedures of current assessment practices of EFL in the university?

Possible questions to elicit students’ responses: How often do you undertake EFL assessment? In what forms? What (language skills or knowledge) is the focus EFL assessment? What do you know about the assessment process at the university? How do you get to know about it? Do students play any role in designing the process?

Peer - assessment: How often do you assess your peers? What are the benefits of assessing or being assessed by others?

Self - assessment: Have you ever assessed your own English performance? What is the usefulness of self assessment?

Teacher’s feedback: How useful is the teacher’s feedback to your learning of EFL?

Use of assessment results: How do your teachers and you use the results of EFL assessment? How do the results affect the teaching and learning of EFL?

Improvement of current assessment practices: How can the current assessment practices be improved to support your English language learning?
Appendix 4

Managerial staff interview schedule

Section 1. Working experience
1. How long have you been working at the university?
2. How long have you been working in the current position?
3. Have you ever worked in any other universities? Could you please tell me about your teaching and managing experience?

Section 2. View about the current assessment practice of EFL at the university
1. Can you describe the procedures of EFL assessment carried out at the university?
2. How are the assessment results used?
3. What are the purposes of the current assessment practice?
4. Do you think the purposes are achieved? Why?
5. How do you think the current assessment practice affects the teaching and learning of EFL?
6. Would you like to make any changes to the current EFL assessment practice at the university? If yes, what changes?
Appendix 5

Classroom observation schedule

Site: 
Date: 
Class: 
Session No: 
Number of lesson: 
Teaching material: 
Objectives of the lesson:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Language used</th>
<th>Students involvement</th>
<th>Patterns of interactions</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Whole class</td>
<td></td>
<td>How</td>
<td>Who</td>
<td>T&gt;S</td>
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<td>group/ pair</td>
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<td>S&gt;S</td>
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<td>individual</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
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</table>

Adapted from COLT observation scheme (Allen, Frohlich, & Spada, 1983)
## Appendix 6

### Timeline for pilot study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Research site</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Piloting phase</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
<td>Ms Ha</td>
<td>PU</td>
<td>13&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms An</td>
<td>Non-PU</td>
<td>14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
<td>schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interview</td>
<td>Six students</td>
<td>PU</td>
<td>20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
<td>Students focus group interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Six students</td>
<td>Non-PU</td>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
<td>schedule</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive Officer interview</td>
<td>Ms Huyen</td>
<td>PU</td>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
<td>Executive Officer interview schedule</td>
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<td>Ms Ha’s class</td>
<td>PU</td>
<td>13&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
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<td>Non-PU</td>
<td>14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Nov, 2012</td>
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## Appendix 7

### Timeline and procedures for data collection in main study

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<th>Methods</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
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<td><strong>Public University (PU)</strong></td>
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<td>Ms Lan’s class</td>
<td>26(^{th}) Nov; 8(^{th}), 15(^{th}), 24(^{th}) &amp; 27(^{th}) Dec 2012; 10(^{th}), 17(^{th}), 21(^{st}), 31(^{st}) Jan 2013</td>
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<td>Ms Yen</td>
<td>21(^{st}) &amp; 28(^{th}) Nov; 2(^{nd}) Dec 2012 16(^{th}) &amp; 25(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Hong</td>
<td>23(^{rd}) Nov 2012 8(^{th}), 14(^{th}) &amp; 28(^{th}) Dec 2012 18(^{th}) &amp; 25(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Teacher interview</td>
<td>Ms Lan’s 1(^{st}) interview</td>
<td>5(^{th}) Dec 2012</td>
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<td>23(^{rd}) Nov 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ms Lan’s 2(^{nd}) interview</td>
<td>17(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Post-observation)</td>
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<td>Ms Yen’s 2(^{nd}) interview</td>
<td>23(^{rd}) Jan 2013</td>
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<td>17(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
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<td>Ms Hong’s students</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Ms Tam’s class</td>
<td>22(^{nd}) &amp; 30(^{th}) Nov; 3(^{rd}), 4(^{th}) 13(^{th}), 17(^{th}), 18(^{th}) &amp; 21(^{st}) Dec 2012</td>
<td>Class observation schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Van’s class</td>
<td>8(^{th}), 9(^{th}), 14(^{th}), 22(^{nd}), 30(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Class observation schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
<td>Ms Minh’s 1(^{st}) interview</td>
<td>19(^{th}) Nov 2012</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Pre-observation)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>Ms Tam’s 1(^{st}) interview</td>
<td>19(^{th}) Nov 2012</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Pre-observation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Van’s 1(^{st}) interview</td>
<td>9(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Pre-observation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Ms Minh’s 2(^{nd}) interview</td>
<td>20(^{th}) Dec 2012</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Post-observation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Tam’s 2(^{nd}) interview</td>
<td>28(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Post-observation)</td>
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<td>Ms Van’s 2(^{nd}) interview</td>
<td>30(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Teacher interview schedule (Post-observation)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Students interview</td>
<td>Ms Minh’s students</td>
<td>17(^{th}) Dec 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Tam’s students</td>
<td>17(^{th}) Dec 2012</td>
<td>Students interview schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Van’s students</td>
<td>24(^{th}) Jan 2013</td>
<td>Students interview schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive interview</td>
<td>Ms Hanh</td>
<td>28(^{th}) Nov 2012</td>
<td>Executive officer interview schedule</td>
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## Appendix 8

Data collected for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>PU</th>
<th>Non-PU</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio recordings of interviews with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (6)</td>
<td>302 min</td>
<td>308 min</td>
<td>610 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (36)</td>
<td>184 min</td>
<td>196 min</td>
<td>280 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Officers (2)</td>
<td>64 min</td>
<td>62 min</td>
<td>126 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video recordings of class activities (29 lessons)</td>
<td>2700 min</td>
<td>1890 min</td>
<td>2299 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio recordings of class activities (11 lessons)</td>
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<td>720 min</td>
<td>1170 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio recordings of students’ pair/group work</td>
<td>135 min</td>
<td>93 min</td>
<td>228 min</td>
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<td>Artefacts</td>
<td>2 course implementation plans, 7 English tests, 25 pieces of students’ writing in Ms Hong’s class.</td>
<td>2 Course implementation plans, 7 English tests, 24 pieces of writing of five students in Ms Tam’s focus group, teachers’ handouts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>