

**‘Sink or Swim?’ The Relationship between Vietnamese  
Postgraduate Students’ Identities and their L2 Experiences  
in the UK**

**Dung Tong**

**PhD**

**University of York  
Education**

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## **Abstract**

Advancing the ‘social turn’ in Second Language Acquisition research requires further research exploring the relationship between identity and L2 acquisition in different contexts and with different groups of L2 learners. Identities considered most relevant to L2 learning and communication are identified. A mixed methods approach – combining focus group interviews and self-completed diaries - is endorsed as an effective strategy for capturing and understanding the relationships.

Data was collected from fourteen postgraduate Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments over a period of twelve weeks. Participants were required to keep daily structured diaries and attend monthly focus group interviews. This study utilises Norton’s definition of social identity, Barna’s definition of communicative competence and Giles and Byrne’s Intergroup Model to understand how ‘identity’ is implicated in shaping participants’ L2 interaction experiences and their L2 communicative competence. The findings confirm the relationship between ‘identity’ and both the patterning of social interactions and communicative competence. Each of the three main theories engaged with offers explanations for participants’ L2 experiences. However, few exceptional cases, and the ‘between-subject’ variation and ‘within subject’ routinisation are not yet fully explained by the key theories.

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## **Abbreviations**

ESL	English as Second Language
IELTS	International English Testing System
L2	Second Language
NS	Native speakers
NNS	Non-native speakers
OM/OT	Opportunity Maker/Opportunity Taker
SA	Study Abroad
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TL	Target Language
VM/VT	Value Matcher/Value Taker

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## **Author's Declaration**

I confirm that this thesis is original and based on my own work. Parts of the thesis, in shorter versions have been presented in Department of Education's ERG when I started the study. Since then I also presented the study in August 2010 in a seminar at the Department of Education of Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

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This chapter aims to set the context for this study. The chapter is divided into five parts. It begins with telling the readers what inspired me to initiate a study on the possible influences of the identities of Vietnamese students on their communication experiences in English language in the UK context. It follows by presenting the research aims, then the significance of the study. In the next part, research questions that the study seeks to answer are discussed. Finally, it outlines the structure of the thesis.

#### **1.1 My inspiration to start this study**

My interest in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) developed from my own positive and negative experiences as a language learner. When I studied MA TESOL in Vietnam I was exposed to SLA theory and was able to reflect on my own experiences as a learner. However, I did not pay much attention to the terms ‘identity’, ‘intercultural communication’ during the time. Later as a teacher of English in Vietnam the majority of my peers were also Vietnamese and, of course, my students were all young Vietnamese nationals. However, several fellow teachers were from other countries, including the UK, Australia and America, and were native English speakers. I became close friends with them and watched as they attempted to learn Vietnamese in Vietnam, in mainly naturalistic settings. Some were more interested in learning Vietnamese than others; some were better at doing so than others; some immersed themselves in Vietnamese culture whilst others remained distant and largely restricted their relationships and socialising to other westerners and native English speakers. My western friends used to come to me for advice and possible explanations when they met any puzzles regarding the cultural practices and norms of communication. And each time I received any questions from my friends, I was trying my best to help them to adjust and understand more about Vietnamese culture and the language. On many occasions, I did not succeed. In retrospect, I simply was not able

to give my friends any sensible answers because I could not see their ‘problems’ from their own perspectives. However, this was when I began to vaguely understand the significance of culture and identity to processes of second language acquisition and communication. I already suspected then that the contribution of identity and culture to second language acquisition may be magnified in study abroad contexts.

Enrolling at the University of York was my first visit to an English-speaking country, which was a long dream for me since I started learning English at 12 years old. I was quite confident about my English level, having passed IELTS with high scores, been teaching English and been complemented by my students and colleagues, including native speakers. It was a shock when my own perceived strength - English language - suddenly became a weakness in a native environment. I experienced, directly, the status of ‘other’ – of being culturally dissonant. I felt York was too ‘white’ and I found myself as an Asian woman to stand out when I walked around in the city centre for example. I remember during my first days, I used to check around and feel happier and more secure when I saw another Asian person. Within a short period of time I found myself in the situation that my western friends experienced in Vietnam. Even though my English proficiency was much better than their Vietnamese, I still had difficulties in communication. The issues of identity and cultural orientation once again loomed large, and appeared to be shared among many international students that I acquainted at the University of York.

My original idea (which was also related to my background as an IELTS teacher) was to conduct an international investigation of Vietnamese English language learners’ attainment in the IELTS test, comparing the scores of those who had studied English in a Vietnamese classroom with those who had studied abroad (in Australia; the United States; Canada and the UK). However, within a year and a half of arriving in the UK to do my PhD, I experienced problems accessing international IELTS data and was forced to reconfigure my research.

My own experience as an English language learner, teacher and now an international student in the UK inspired me to draw more attention to the communication in TL language in TL country. Forced to reconfigure my research proposal and drawing on my interest in learning contexts I therefore turned to focus on the contribution of

culture, identity and social roles to language learners' communication experience in a naturalistic and study abroad setting. I understand that I should not interpret accounts of the participants through my personal experiences, which shall only function as a source of motivation for me, and may help to inform the study.

## **1.2 The research aims**

The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore the contribution of second language (L2) learners' identity in their experience of L2 communication: in particular, how language learners' identities and social roles impact their efforts to access opportunities to improve their L2 in a native environment. Improvements in L2 speaking and listening skills are measured according to how successful participants judge their communication in the English language to be - how competent participants believe they are as communicators in an intercultural context. Therefore, investigating the impact of identities on SLA proficiency also means investigating the impact of identities on intercultural communicative competence.

The social turn in SLA theory is of growing importance (see below) and in addition to the personal motivations/experiences described above this research can be understood as a response to Block's (2007) call for further research on the importance of identity to the L2 acquisition process, in different contexts and with different groups of L2 learners (Vietnamese L2 learners are an under-researched group). Much of contemporary SLA literature emphasises the importance of identity as an explanatory tool – there has been a 'social turn' in SLA theorising. However, there is widespread confusion in terms of defining what is meant by 'identity' and identifying those types of identity that are most likely to impact on SLA. Overall, significantly more research on identity is needed to establish its explanatory power, and to evaluate this *vis-à-vis* other (perhaps more traditional) factors assumed to affect the SLA process. This research can therefore be positioned as part of a steadily growing body of literature seeking to 'nudge' the social turn along and is focused on the SLA experiences of a small cohort of postgraduate Vietnamese students in two cities in the North of England, UK. It is hoped that findings from the research will benefit Vietnamese

students in the UK or international students in SA context to be better at their communication experiences in the TL environment.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Research Strategies**

My research questions flowed from my literature survey (Chapter 2) following which I began to develop an informed proposition: that identity/culture/social roles and context are concatenated and will influence the extent and types of target language interactions that L2 learners will have and therefore their L2 communicative competence. For example, L2 learners who are curious to learn about UK culture and/or able to exercise their curiosity by accessing intercultural opportunities will be exposed to larger amounts of L2 learning opportunities compared to L2 learners who are less curious and who restrict their L2 communication to a bare necessity (such as those required for successful completion of their course of study and the range of simple transactions required in everyday living, such as shopping). The contexts in which L2 learners find themselves – in which they seek to operationalise their identity and culture - is also considered important. For example, Vietnamese L2 learners undertaking employment to fund their studies may be using the target language more than those who do not work. Similarly, if a ‘tight knit’ Vietnamese community has coalesced it may restrict its members intercultural interactions resulting in less L2 encounters. Context is therefore important and my research therefore seeks to capture the ‘lived realities’ of my participants in order to understand the context-culture-SLA relationship. ‘Identity’, ‘culture’ and ‘social roles’ are contested and overlapping concepts and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The overall research question is therefore: does identity influence the L2 acquisition process for postgraduate students in a study abroad/naturalistic context? This question can be unpacked to produce three researchable questions:

1. Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
2. How – if at all – is identity implicated in Vietnamese students’ interactions in the English language?

3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual's own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how?

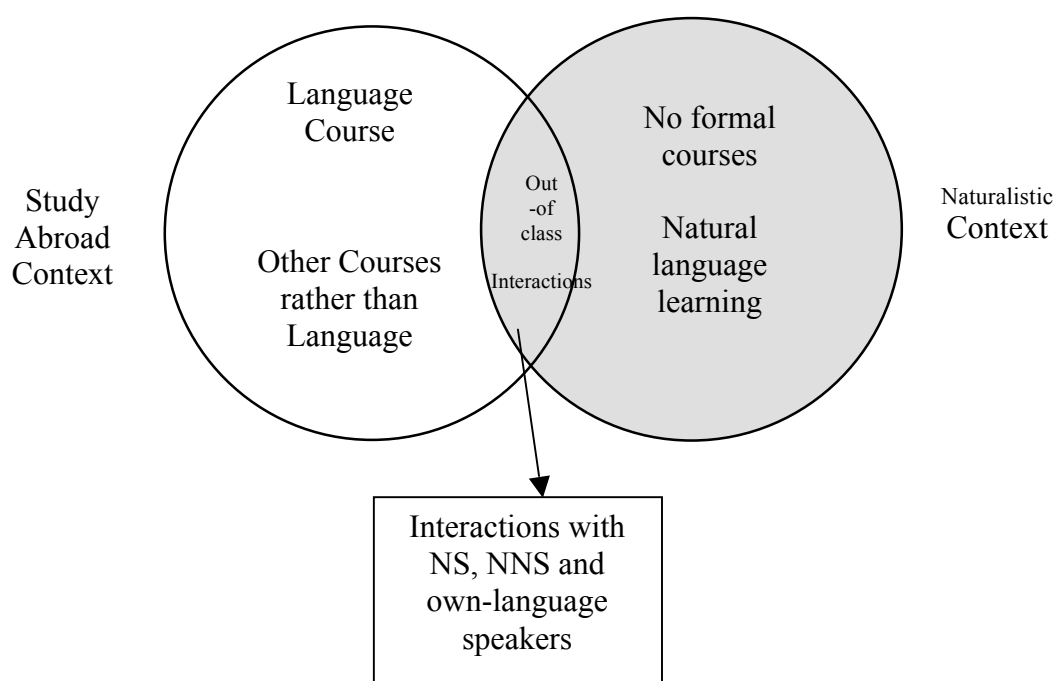
In order to answer the three research questions, a mixed methods strategy was employed which includes both self-completed diaries and a series of focus group interviews. Diaries were completed on a daily basis to answer question 1 - which types of identity are reported by participants during the data collection period? For questions 2, 3 triangulation and synthesis of both diary and focus group data was attempted. The triangulation process helped to validate the reliability of data collected from the diaries and interviews alone. Pilot focus groups were conducted in two different locations in the UK between May and August 2008. The data collected from the pilot focus groups was used to inform the process of designing a semi-structured diary for participants to complete each day for the duration of the study. The diary was then piloted in early 2009. The findings from the pilot studies suggested that diary and focus group interviews are effective tools for collecting data capable of answering the three research questions. The diary template and interview agendas were reviewed and amended in accordance with feedback received from the pilots in preparation for the main study. The main study (diary) lasted from February – April 2009. Focus groups were held regularly between March – May 2009. Participants were recruited via approaches to the Vietnamese Societies of the Universities of York and Leeds. Fourteen MA students - 2 from York and 12 from Leeds - agreed to participate in the research by maintaining a daily diary and attending monthly focus group interviews.

#### **1.4 The significance of the research**

The context of the research is unique in that the participants were enrolled on a range of MA courses rather than formally studying English in a 'study-abroad' context. They were not in receipt of any formal instruction in the English language (but all participants were desirous of improvements to their L2). The context of the research therefore falls in-between the two, arguably most common, targets of SLA research: the naturalist context and SLA study-abroad (SA). The research is an attempt to draw attention to this relatively underexplored middle ground (also see Chapter 2). Findings relating to a context pertaining to one particular L2 learner group can not be easily

‘read-across’ to other L2 groups (see Appendix L for discussion of problems in categorising SLA contexts). However, the desire for simple models in SLA research has resulted in most research focusing on one particular context - either the naturalistic context or second language context – and a failure to acknowledge the diversity that really exists. This leaves a gap for research into those contexts which fall in-between.

The research context does not fall into any particular SLA contexts which have been categorised in the literature. It includes both the naturalistic context (Block, 2003) and out-of-class interactions (Freed, 1995). As presented in Figure 1.1, the research context also differs from SA (study abroad) context: there is no formal English instruction. Learning opportunities are likely to come from natural situation, out-of-class interaction and in-class activities (to learn other subjects). The interactions in both out-of-class and naturalistic settings cover those between non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS); among NNS of one particular language (in this case English); and learners who speak the same mother tongue (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1: Context of the research**



There has been little research on the actual English-speaking experiences of Vietnamese students, and hardly any on Vietnamese Masters students. This may sound trivial, but the ‘testing’ of identity and social roles as determinants of SLA demands that we operationalize the social turn to both different contexts and to different groups of L2 learners so that knowledge may accrue. It is hoped that not only will this contribute to a general understanding of the SLA process, but will also provide insights into the problems that Vietnamese students encounter in their daily experiences of speaking English. The research may therefore be of some use to Vietnamese students who are studying or thinking about studying in an English-speaking university.

In terms of methodology, the majority of research on identity is primarily qualitative. Data is typically collected from participants’ ‘stories’ (also see Chapter 3). This research is of mixed methods design and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the contribution of identity to the L2 acquisition process. This will hopefully help future SLA researchers who are interested in using a mixed methods approach.

### **1.5 Synopsis of the thesis**

The thesis comprises of 7 Chapters.

Chapter 2 critically reviews the SLA literature to set out the context for the research. Then it discusses contemporary research on identity to generate a working definition of identity that can be adopted in the research. The latter part of the chapter focuses on three main influential theories which inform the ‘social turn’ and implicate identity in the SLA process: social identity and investment (Norton, 2000) in the field of SLA; six stumbling blocks in communication in the field of Intercultural Communication (Barna, 1998); and the Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). These theories are drawn on throughout the thesis – both to make sense of the data and in order to be ‘tested’ by the data.

Chapter 3 discusses methodology and the research design. The chapter justifies and explains the use of self-completed diaries and focus group interviews at both the pilot and main study stages. The chapter describes each of the main stages of the research, providing details of the data collection and analysis processes, the design and thinking that influenced the diary, the rationale behind and conduct of the focus group interviews and a description of the basic content analysis conducted on the qualitative data. Some ethical matters regarding participants as well as issues regarding reliability and validity of the data collected are also addressed.

Chapter 4 discusses the process of data analysis presents findings of diary data with reference to data of diary collected in pilot study.

Chapter 5 is structured similar to chapter 4, but addresses the focus groups in the main study, with reference to data from the pilot study. It describes the process of data collection from the focus group, then analyses the data to generate findings.

Chapter 6 combines the findings from Chapters 4 and 5. The combination of findings is part of the process of triangulating data from focus groups and diary for the purposes of validating and establishing the reliability of the data (as set out in Chapter 3 – Methodology). The findings are then evaluated with reference to three main theories: Social Identity (Norton, 2000); Stumbling block in Intercultural Communication (Barna, 1989) and Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). This chapter seeks to answer the research question regarding the implication of identity for participants' interactions in English.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter which summarises the key findings of the research. The conclusions are discussed with reference to relevant theories. Then, the chapter considers the implications and recommendations for Vietnamese students and future SLA theorising. Finally, the chapter discusses some limitations of the research and makes several suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

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In this chapter, I will present and discuss aspects of the theories of identity underpinning this study. The chapter includes three sections. First, I will discuss the theories of identity in second language acquisition (SLA) relevant to this research. Second, I will briefly review the theories of identity in L2 communication, as part of the SLA process, that have informed my study. Third, I will discuss the theoretical framework of the study, which is based on three theories: social identity and investment (Norton, 2000); six stumbling blocks (Barna, 1998); and the Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). Also in this chapter, I will present the cultural values/backgrounds in Vietnam that are considered to impact the identity and L2 communication of Vietnamese students.

#### 2.1 Overview of identity

Omoniyi (2006) acknowledges that identity has now emerged as a key concept in social and behavioural science. In the field of SLA, identity has recently come to the fore (Bayley and Schechter 2003; Isabelli-Garcia 2006; Kanno 2003; Kinginger 2004; Maiworm et al. 1991, 1993; Miller 2003; Norton 2000; Pellegrino 2005; Siegal, 1995, Norton Pierce 1995; Toohey 2000). The focus on identity is driven in part by the failure of SLA theories “to develop a theory of social identity that adequately integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (Norton Pierce 1995:12).

In fact, the importance of context to language learning had already been acknowledged, more than 30 years ago, in Schumann’s famous Acculturation Model (1978) and in Gardner’s and Lambert’s (1972) research investigating integrative motivation. However, SLA researchers such as Norton (2000) are increasingly privileging identity as a key concept with which to understand the complexity of the social context within which L2 learning occurs (Norton, *ibid*). I will start this section

by describing how identity re-theorises the two key theories in SLA (Acculturation Model and Integrative Motivation). I will then present the definition of identity operationalised in this research. Next, I will provide an account of how identity is used in SLA research; in particular, showing the relationship between identity and L2 interactions and communication.

## **2.2 Some key SLA theories utilising the concept of identity**

Acculturation (Schumann, 1978) is expressed in terms of the social and psychological integration of the learner to the TL group. So we can think – and measure - social integration in terms of the extent to which an individual interacts with TL speakers and culture (including accessing English language media). Psychological integration can be understood as the extent to which an individual is prepared and able to experience, understand and even assimilate a target culture. Schumann’s research proposes that learners can be positioned on a continuum of “social and psychological distance and social and psychological proximity to speakers of the TL” and argues that the “learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates” (1978: 29). Among Schumann’s six participants (two children, two adolescents and two adults), Alberto, a 33 year-old Costa Rican immigrant to the USA, developed only very limited English. Schumann attributes this failure to Alberto’s unwillingness to acculturate to the Americans. He was considered to be socially distant from the TL speakers, as he belonged - and appeared to prefer to belong - to a working class Latin American community. This community was self-contained and isolated from the host community, and Alberto socialised mainly with other immigrants in his neighbourhood, where Spanish was widely spoken. Schumann’s findings are controversial because Alberto was found to hold positive motivation and attitudes towards English speakers (obtained and measured by a questionnaire at the end of the study). Schumann explains this contradiction by casting doubt over the honesty of Alberto’s answers to the questionnaire, suggesting that he might have wanted to please the English-speaking researcher. There were certainly contradictions between Alberto’s answers and his behaviours: he did not make efforts to communicate with English speakers; he refused to own a TV (he claimed it was impossible to understand) and instead listened to Spanish music; he chose to work at nights (when contact with NS was limited) and did not attend the English classes that

were available locally. An assessment of Alberto's lifestyle led Schumann to conclude that Alberto lived in high anxiety and experienced high levels of protracted cultural shock.

Schumann's research is significant in that it acknowledges social and psychological factors as contributing to the process (and 'end-state') of SLA. Alberto is an example of a learner who had no cognitive deficits or biological difficulties capable of hindering his learning process. Alberto's lack of acculturation to the target language is the main cause of his poor attainment in the L2. Schumann's emphasis is on 'environment' (as a causative factor) and the extent to which it exposes learners to sufficient contacts with the TL culture to be of benefit, but also on the learner's own psychological openness to take advantage of such contacts with TL speakers.

However, Schumann's model was later refuted by a number of researchers: DeKeyser (1991); Freed (1990); Higgs & Clifford (1982); Segalowitz & Freed (2004) and Spada (1985, 1986). Among those who disagree with Schumann's findings, Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes, a Japanese photographer based in Hawaii is worth considering in detail. Like Alberto, Wes's English remained very limited. However, unlike Alberto, Wes displayed high levels of social interactions with NS and very low levels of anxiety. However, Wes displayed high levels of social interaction with NS and very low levels of anxiety, unlike Alberto. More recently, Norton (2000:115) criticizes Schumann (1976b) of "only hear(ing) what he (Schumann) wants to prove". She believes that Alberto did, indeed, tell the truth in his questionnaire (which showed that he had a positive attitude towards Americans). Schumann simply dismisses it and concludes that Alberto is unmotivated to acculturate and as a result his language pidginizes (a concept developed by Schumann to indicate reduced and simplified forms of English). Norton argues that Alberto should have been understood as a learner who had been marginalised by the target community despite his efforts to seek opportunities to speak the TL. Alberto is willing to interact with TL speakers and in fact did seek opportunities to do so. This is shown by his participation in the 10-month study and his practising of negative construction in English with Schuman.

Forty years ago Gardner and Lambert (1972:132) included social identification and ethnolinguistic identity to arrive at their famous concept of integrative motivation

(Ushioda, 2009). The key idea of the integrative motivation concept is that an L2 learner “must be willing to identify with a member of another ethnolinguistic group” (Gardner and Lambert, 1972:135). The link between integrative motivation and L2 achievement - in which motivation is seen as causal – has inspired considerable debate in SLA research. However, the significance of integrative motivation – for English at least - has been challenged given the global spread of the English language. English is now an international language; therefore it is impossible to identify any particular target English community to ‘integrate’ with. Ushioda and Dornyei (2009) suggest re-theorising motivation in SLA in the light of identity, in which an emphasis should be placed on learners’ internal identities - their ‘international posture’ (Yashima, 2002) - rather than an integrative concept which emphasises L2 learners’ identification toward an external target community. Although a significant amount of SLA identity-based literature is focused on establishing the importance of integrative willingness and cultural distance (between learners and the TL community) an alternative approach focuses instead on the emergence of a ‘global community of English language users’ (Ushioda and Dornyei, 2010: 3) which certain groups of English learners (professional and semi-professional and the internationally mobile) may feel that they belong to. Yashima (2002: 57) describes such learners as possessing an ‘international posture’. Deciding whether or not a global English language community exists or is fictitious is beyond the remit of this thesis. But the concept undoubtedly shifts the terms of the debate – if identity is important, it is not so much whether or not individual learners’ concept of ‘self’ can be made to correspond with that of an external reference group – the TL community - but the extent to which the L2 learner self-identifies him or herself as a member of a global English language community. However, it seems to me that this can be possibly exaggerated - English may be global but English learners can only be in one place at a time and wherever they are they will encounter a TL culture, because the concept of identity is influenced by ‘place’ (also see 2.3.4).

Clearly, however, identity counts. Block (2007) confirms that identity has now established its own role in SLA. So an issue here is whether international students in a particularistic study abroad (SA) context experience freedom or agency, or whether, *inter alia*, the SA context minimises individualisation and magnifies the deterministic potential – and therefore significance - of identity e.g. by creating economic or

linguistic powerlessness or spaces and opportunities in which students become the target of unwanted stereotyping.

Indeed, it appears easier to identify identity-based obstacles (to L2 proficiency in SA contexts) than benefits. There may be no such thing as a universal student experience, but studying abroad generally presents international students with certain psychological, social, economic and cultural challenges and opportunities which they must encounter and navigate. When students with limited knowledge of English cross borders thousands of miles away to stay and study in the UK, for example, their identity seems ‘bound’ to the mother tongue language (Miller, 2003). An alien setting poses significant challenges to international students. Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) emphasise the challenges associated with one’s sense of identity and identification upon moving from one country and culture to another. Less able to exercise autonomy the deterministic elements of social identity theory may, therefore, remain apposite for international students in a SA context (see Appendix K for further discussion of SLA contexts).

### **2.3 Definition of Identity in the Thesis**

This section describes a conceptualisation of identity of L2 learners that is relevant to the current study. It starts out with a review of the widespread confusion in definitions of identity in the field of SLA. Then, it presents the definition which accords with the context and research aims of this research.

#### **2.3.1 Definitions of identity in SLA research**

Gass and Selinker (2001:5) define SLA as a generally agreed term to refer to “the learning of a non-native language after the learning of native language”. The term refers to both the acquisition of a second language in a classroom situation and in more ‘natural’ exposure situations.

Recent literature has shown that identity is manifold, contextually realised and constantly shifting (Hall 1996; McRobbie 1996; Omonyi 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2001). SLA researchers have constructed different theories of identities to shed light on their contextual studies. However, different terms with or without clear

definitions of the concept of identity can be observed in SLA research. This reflects in itself the complexity and fluidity of the concept. The terminological confusion creates a situation in which some researchers are clearly working on identity but do not explicitly use the term. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) note, there are numerous terms in use: ‘identity’, ‘positioning’ (Davies & Harre, 1999) and ‘subject positions’ (Miller, 2006) are used almost interchangeably in the current literature. Hall (1995) uses ‘identification’ instead of ‘identity’ to capture the non-fixed state of the concept. He argues that the term ‘identity’ gives an impression that it is immovable. Weedon (1997) prefers the term ‘subjectivity’ which interestingly accords to the ‘social identity’ concept developed nearly twenty years earlier by Tajfel in 1978 (McNamara, 1997). Table 2.1 below illustrates the terminological complexity.

**Table 2.1: Terminological complexity – Identity**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Literature</b>
Social Identity	Miller (2003); Norton (1993, 1995, 2000); Morgan (1997); McNamara (1987);
Ethnic Identity	Goldstein (1996); Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997)
Cultural Identity	Bosher (1995); Scheter and Bayley (1997)
Linguistic/Ethnolinguistic Identity	By most sociologists
Second Language Identities	Block (2007)
Sociocultural Identity	Duff and Uchida (1997)
Subjectivity	Norton (1997)
The Self	Pellegrino (2005)
Voice	Thesen (1997)
National Identity	Kinginger (2004)
Ethnorelativism	Isabelli-García (2006)
Identification	Hall (1995)
Relational Development Identity	Boxer (2002)

This is not an exhaustive list of the research or terms used to explore the link between identity and SLA. However, it offers a brief picture of a wide range of identity ‘classifications’ and terminology which have been constructed and utilised in SLA research over the past fifteen years. Block (2007) maintains that most researchers working with identity do not develop a clear definition of the term. Block (2007) equates social identity with migrant identity. According to Block, all NNS living



abroad – either in employment or education – evidence a migrant identity (Block uses the term ‘second language identity’) delineated by: race, ethnicity, nationality, migration, gender, social class and language.

The thesis maintains that the identities of L2 learners in SA contexts influence the types of L2 interactions that they have. L2 learners bring with them certain identities, but new ones – wanted and unwanted, adopted and ascribed – may also be formed during the SA experience. These identities shape both the quantity and quality of learners’ L2 experiences. This, in turn, may influence L2 learners’ behaviours; how they make sense of and adapt to L2 encounters and, ultimately, their L2 communicative competence. This is a three-stage model of SLA, crudely comprising inputs (identities), L2 encounters (quality and quantity) and outcomes (L2 communicative competence). However, the relationships between the stages are iterative. Identities may influence encounters, but certain encounters may also contribute to a re-shaping of identity. Similarly, certain aspects of L2 interaction may be associated with positive or negative communicative competence outcomes; but the precise outcome is likely to be influenced by individual factors including those linked to motivation, expectations and personality.

### **2.3.2 Norton’s definition of social identity**

As such, I find Norton’s (2000:19) definition of social identity as “the relationship between the individual and larger social world as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services and law courts” helpful. I am also persuaded by Norton’s insistence that identity must be considered a dynamic concept; one that can change over time and which varies from one social context to another and/or when subjected to shifts in personal disposition. My interpretation of identity is that it is the way a person views themselves, and which is: socially and culturally constructed, vulnerable to change over time, and shaped by particularities of community and experience.

### **2.3.3 Criticism of Norton’s definition of identity and my response**

Norton’s definition of social identity has been criticised. First, Norton does not distinguish clearly social identity from cultural identity. Norton (2000) admits that she separated the two concepts at the beginning of her study but eventually decided that

cultural identity and social identity have more similarities than differences. Second, McNamara (1997) claims that the concept of social identity used by Norton Pierce (1997) is merely a repackaging of the concept as developed in earlier research (including that of Tajfel [1978]) and also accords with the concept of ‘subjectivity’ developed by Weedon (1997) in that both share three characteristics: fluidity, vulnerability to change and sensitivity to context.

Those criticisms can be overcome by a deeper understanding of the relationship between the type of identities and the social context. In fact, such criticism only further emphasises the context-sensitivity of the identity concept. Identity can be constructed through individual interaction with others, an imposition or an elective, wanted or unwanted. Each social context is unique which generates unique data and types of identity. As Block (2007:202) states:

*My main aim has been to show how second language identity work varies considerably across these contexts. First, it varies as regard the extent to which it actually takes place... Second, when second language identity work does take place, there is a good deal of variability as regards the aspects of identity that emerge as salient. Thus, in some situations, gender emerges as the single most significant aspect of identity, while in other situations it is race or social class that is most significant.*

Therefore, Norton’s (2000) definition of ‘social identity’ may differ from other researchers, but may still be an ‘actual’ social identity that genuinely emerged from her research context. Also, such overlapping between cultural and social identities is an illustration of the view that L2 learners possess multiple identities. Norton seeks flexibility by not attempting to draw a clear-cut distinction between the two and acknowledges that a person can have multiple identities which are constantly shifting across contexts and time. Therefore identity should be seen as a set of psychological, social and historical “variables”. The experience of L2 learners is unique, changing over time, even in the same context. Firth & Wagner (2007) consider this view of multiple identities as a leap forward from earlier beliefs that learners have only one identity. The variety of terms and identity-types and criticisms of Norton’s (2000) social identity can be interpreted as a struggle in which SLA researchers are

attempting to construct a framework which helps explain and explore the experience of L2 learners in the real world. On the other hand, they can also be viewed as reflecting a flexible approach in order to capture a slippery concept.

In short, Norton's definition of social identity serves as guidance for my research but also emphasises the need to be flexible when identifying and evaluating specific identities (such as gender, race and ethnicity) and social roles (such as international student and boyfriend/girlfriend) emerging from the research. In the following section, I will clarify some of the linked concepts that fall under the general term identity or social identity.

### **2.3.4 Social identity, Social roles, and Cultural identity**

In her definition of social identity (see 2.3.2), Norton's (2000) understanding of the way that the 'social' influences identity seems to focus on how it constrains the roles people can play in society. For example, she explicitly discusses how the deteriorating socio-economic status of immigrants affects their identities – how they see themselves and how others see them.

Wetherell (1998), however, views social identity as one of four main perspectives of understanding personal identity: it accounts for *social* influences on personal identity. The other three include the phenomenological perspective, the psychoanalytic perspective and the biological perspective. However, the biological perspective can also be combined with a social perspective. Lewis' (1998) suggests that our identity is formed based on the sense of who we are, which is first felt by our body: eye shape and the colour of our skin and hair, etc. We develop a sense of 'self' and how we might be related to (and distanced from) those who we assume are (physically) similar (or dissimilar). This sense of 'self' is not purely biological because it is felt in relation to other people, and is therefore socially sensitive. But as a consequence Lewis (*ibid*) argues that race and ethnicity be classified as social rather than just biological. Lewis also addresses the link between 'race' and 'place' which can help understand the experiences of Vietnamese (Asians) in the UK (Europe), and points out that our bodies also provide others with visual clues with which to categorise us. Lewis's argument can be extended to assert that gender also be considered socially constructed rather than biological. Given the nature of this research the belief that identity is

socially constructed is considered to be an appropriate lens through which to understand behaviours. Other perspectives - biological, psychoanalytic and phenomenological- offer less utility in the context of this research, but the biological and phenomenological have not been entirely neglected.

Wetherell (1998:55) defines cultures as the “customs, conventions, signs and symbols of a society which are passed on from individual to individual through learning”. Culture is therefore also socially constructed. That view slightly resembles Norton’s (2000) in that cultural and social identity are two overlapping concepts albeit evidencing more similarities than differences.

### **2.3.5 Personal characteristics**

Dewaele and Furnham (1999) consider personality traits as relatively stable dispositions and indicators of personal needs. Eysenck (1974), cited in Dewaele and Furnham (1999), sees extraversion/introversion as a key dimension of personality. Whether or not individuals are socially or biologically programmed to extraversion/introversion is beyond the remit of this thesis, but certainly extraversion/introversion has implications for the behaviours and experiences of international students whilst studying abroad because it may shape the extent and nature of their L2 interactions. Research by Dewaele and Furnham (1999:537) concludes that extraversion/introversion primarily affects speech production in the L2 (and argues that motivation is the main personality variable affecting SLA). However, Lasen-Freeman (2001) argues that L2 learning depends on ‘openness to experience’ and therefore considers learners’ social networking abilities as promoting L2 progress. Learners who want to interact and who are good at it will experience greater social contacts (and improve their L2) more than those who are less inclined to seek out and manage such contacts (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Evaluating L2 learners’ ability to create and manage L2 interaction opportunities may therefore be important.

### **2.4 Communicative competence**

MacIntyre & Charos (1996) believe that the primary goal for L2 learners is communication, which is manifested in L2 communication frequency. Macintyre & Charos (1996:19) conclude that “communicating in a second language appears to be

related to ... most important, the perception of competence”. In this section, I will discuss in detail the concepts of communication and intercultural communication before offering a definition of ‘communicative competence’ in the context of SLA.

Communication is defined as the management of messages in order to create meaning (Griffin, 2005). In other words, communication is considered to achieve a certain purpose through interacting with others. Every interaction occurs within a physical and contextual environment. The former refers to the location (seminar, bus stop, etc.) where the communication takes place. The contextual, or social environment refers to the context that frames the interaction and influences both the substance and the style of communication employed (McDaniel, Samovar, et.al, 2012) – if asked ‘how are you today?’ by a relative stranger on the street one’s response will be different to that provided to a doctor at a medical appointment or to a group of close friends during a social event or to that given on Facebook.

Research on identity in communication mainly focuses on the intercultural communication context (Chen, 2010). Intercultural communication refers to how people from different cultures interact face-to-face.

Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Spitzberg (2000:375) as ‘appropriate and effective behaviour in a given context’. Spitzberg’s definition, however, is found unhelpful because the perpetrators of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour are not necessarily in a position to know how their behaviour has impacted on interlocutors – whether it is appropriate or inappropriate and therefore whether or not they are practising effective intercultural communication. Barna (1998) defines intercultural communicative competence as the inner capacity to overcome the stumbling blocks in communication (see 2.7.3). Barna’s definition appears more practical and specific: competence is measured by the extent to which one has overcome six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. However, the list is almost certainly not exhaustive. For example, Kim (1991) too identifies a range of ‘stumbling blocks’ some of which are not addressed in Barna’s framework. According to Kim (1991:259), intercultural communicative competence refers to “the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely cultural differences, and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture,

and the accompanying experience of stress”. Stumbling blocks clearly exist, but there is disagreement regarding how many there are and most of them are themselves complex and contested concepts that require unpacking. Further, Barna’s and Kim’s definitions of intercultural communicative competence are presented as suggestions of how to improve one’s intercultural communicative competence, rather than measures of how well one has achieved specific L2 objectives.

MacIntyre and Charos (1996) advocate a basic measure – simply that of how able do learners themselves feel when communicating in the L2? Although communicative competence can be formally assessed, according to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), Clément and Baker *et al* (2003) and Brantmeier (2005) L2 learners’ assessments of their own communicative competence are generally accurate, with positive assessments generally associated with enjoyment (of an experience) and the absence of anxiety; and it is this measure of competence that is used in the thesis.

Norton’s concept of investment (see 2.7.1.2) has viewed language learners as investors who make efforts in their learning and expect outcomes from their investment. She argues that the learner’s world is a site of struggle in which learners have to negotiate opportunities to practice the TL. The process of learning a language is not merely one of learning the words, grammar and pronunciation, but also involves the construction of ‘self’. Learners’ L2 communicative competence should therefore be seen as a process of identification in an alien context. In the process of identity construction, the primary mode of self-representation - speaking - must undergo a transformation. For minority students (eg. Vietnamese) who enter a dominant culture (eg, English culture) proficiency in the dominant language is essential, as it is the primary means of making sense, being seen and being heard (Trueba 1989). Interaction with target speakers occurs in specific social contexts or sites which may facilitate or constrain students’ abilities to make sense of themselves and others. Guiora *et al* (1972:112) suggests that of all language skills, speaking is psychologically the most demanding, necessitating fundamental changes to “the basic modes of identification by the self and others”. An investment in language learning, therefore, is also an investment in the identities of L2 learners.

This section has defined several key concepts: communication, communicative interaction, intercultural communication and communicative competence (in the context of an intercultural communication context). It has also established that communicative competence can be assessed by L2 interlocutors themselves. The issue of how communicative competence can be measured has been discussed through the stumbling blocks (Barna, 1998); through the frequency of interactions (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996); through the absence of anxiety and presence of enjoyment (Clément and Baker *et al.*, 2003 and Brantmeier, 2005); through the ability to ‘impose the right to be heard’ in communication (Norton, 2000) (which will be discussed later in 2.7.1). I have also argued that Norton’s concept of investment helps us to understand how L2 communicators make sense of their L2 experiences and their communicative competence.

## **2.5 Identity and L2 communicative competence**

Researchers have attempted to chart the types of identities that emerge over a period of time and their impact on L2 communicative competence. Wilkinson (2002) looks at how identity is manifest in teacher-student relations. His research describes how participants feel when they are seen as learners (or rather inexpert speakers of the target language) not only in the classroom but also with host families and strangers in public areas. Being corrected by interlocutors, no matter how respectfully, still resulted in participants losing faith and subsequently performing to a lower standard. Indeed, Wilkinson (2002) concludes that identifying identity-based obstacles to L2 proficiency in SA contexts seems to be easier than identifying the benefits. Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) also emphasise challenges associated with one’s sense of identity and identification upon moving from one country and culture to another. Studying abroad generally presents international students with certain psychological, social, economic and cultural challenges and opportunities which they must encounter and navigate.

Roberts and Simonot (1987:138) describe a context in which “adult workers have to learn to communicate by communicating in order to learn”. It is worth noting that the process even happens in indifferent or hostile environments, and even when the L2 learner has a strong desire to learn. The researchers conclude that:

*They (L2 learners) are, from the outset, disenfranchised by their lack of the language which in turn leads to a loss of rights at work and in their private lives. We see here language performing the function of perpetuating the power structure and in turn being a product of these structures.*

Acton and Walker de Felix (1986); Laubscher (1994); Bacon (1995), Wilkinson (1998b) and Isabelli-Garcia (2006) have examined possible ‘stages’ that SA participants go through. In her study, Isabelli-Garcia (2006) was interested in whether or not four Americans on an SA programme in Argentina were able to join the established speech communities and build up social networks (Milroy, 1987) in their host environment. In general, her participants continued to project a superior American national identity (towards the TL speakers). Counter-intuitively, the SA experience enhanced affiliation to an inherited national identity, as opposed to the development of greater intercultural sensitivity.

Much discussed in SLA research is the sexual harassment of female students and how such harassment affects opportunities to develop their target languages. Polanyi (1995); Twombly (1995); and Talburt and Stewart (1999) discuss this in depth. Female students in their studies report how they were frustrated at not being able to talk with men in the host countries (Russia, Costa Rica and Spain) because of the men’s sexual advances. The women finally chose to avoid going out and therefore experienced limited opportunities to practise speaking the TL. Clearly the imposed identity of female-sexuality by the TL culture (men in host countries) has shaped the type and frequency of interaction that L2 learners have in the TL country.

Mismatches in expectation and perception between TL speakers and L2 learners may also influence the quality and quantity of L2 interactions in SA contexts. Boxer (2002:179) studied cross-cultural gate-keeping encounters in an American university context. She based her study on the theories of *Gemeinschaft* (membership of a society through birth) and *Gesellschaft* (instrumental relationships not merely based on common history or background) developed by Scollon and Scollon (1995). The research focused on the face-to-face communication between international students and two staff members who worked in the International Program Office in the



university. Boxer (2002:204) concludes that the work of staff members in the university is not enough to lead to “relational talk and gate opening”. The data collected confirms that students failed to recognise and take advantage of the opportunities even when the staff attempted small talk or used terms of endearment, which she terms as “Relational Development Identity”. There was a lack of knowledge on the part of students regarding how to engage correctly with their interlocutors. The staff, on the other hand, were considered to judge students too harshly. International students, having passed TOELF (Test of English as a Foreign Language) tests to enter an American university, were expected to understand the norms and rules of interactions in America. If they failed to do so, it was considered the students’ own fault because, as one staff member commented, “they are not mixed enough with Americans”. Boxer states that ESL teachers agree that passing TOEFL tests at 550 or 600 (out of 750) does not mean a student can understand bureaucratic workings and immigration laws. She also indicates that while there should be a two-way understanding, international students are left with the burden to wrestle with ‘the rules of the game’. In short, there was a mismatch between the staff’s intentions/perceptions and students’ perceptions/reactions. Boxer used a metaphor: the staff put the key to the door for the students but did not open it for them - they expected the student to know and open it by themselves. Unsurprisingly, it remained closed.

The experiences of the international students in Boxer’s research are evidence of how students have to ‘struggle’ even in a university setting where there are deemed to be favourable conditions facilitating effective communication with TL speakers (staff members). The data (ibid: 204) suggests:

*Lack of shared contextualization cues can cause missed opportunities for Relational Identity Development. Stereotypes are likely to be reinforced in such instances. Gates close that might otherwise be opened.*

In addition to students’ extra-classroom experiences, the university - as a physical and bureaucratic entity – also emerged as problematic. The unique experience of L2 learners in a naturalistic context requires SLA researchers to address the relationship between learners and the ‘real world’ that they occupy. Broad-brush assumptions

regarding the ease of accessing L2 interaction opportunities in naturalistic settings are easily problematised, so too the entire SLA process. There is no such things as a universal international student experience and the remainder of this chapter draws on the ‘social turn’ in SLA research to understand how identity might be responsible for shaping international students’ L2 interactions and their L2 communicative competence.

Ricento (2005:899) criticises SLA research for not taking into account the “social aspect of language learning and use”. Using the concept of identity to investigate the experience of L2 learners, Ricento concludes that learners pay a price of losing their identity or accepting dual identities in exchange for being accepted into the TL culture:

*... an individual’s identity in L2 contexts is mediated by the reactions of others to that individual’s social and cultural position, which in turn, can influence that individual’s motivation to learn in ways that are not predictable using standard psychological or sociological categories*

Socio-biological factors and cultural stereotyping can have a powerful effect on learners’ L2 experiences. When Mishela, a female black African student in Spain (Talburt and Stewart, 1999) walked on the street, she often received sexual comments from local Spanish men who saw black African women as sexually symbolic. The link between the discrimination experienced by Mishela outside the classroom and her limited linguistic development is not established, but the study raises important issues and connections between culture, race, identity and language learning. According to Mishela, her difficulties were not “something cultural but an ignorant mind” (Block, 2003:168169). Her identity and experiences as a black female student can therefore be understood through the lens of a cultural stereotype (the black woman as a symbol of exotic and aggressive sexuality).

In summary, the above discussions suggest that identity appears to shape L2 interactions because the SA context is a challenging learning environment; and because the process of accessing the TL community is a social endeavour – it is a

process of negotiation and a site of struggle shaped by the distribution and exercise of power which is inextricably linked to the identities and social roles of its main actors.

## **2.6 Vietnamese Social and Cultural Backgrounds**

Cultural understanding and constructs are therefore implicated in the communication experiences of international students. An understanding of Vietnamese culture and society is therefore considered important. The ancient Vietnamese culture was formed around the Red River (Song Hong), and featured typical South East Asia culture (Huu Ngoc, 1995). Current Vietnamese culture is a result of three major developments: Chinese rule (179 BC – 1858), French colonialism (1858 – 1945) and socialist ideology (since 1945). As a result of contact with other cultures, Vietnamese culture is a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism Taoism, and Socialism. Much of the contact with new cultures and ideology is marked by conflict but the core characteristics of Vietnamese culture – *ban sac van hoa* - were often maintained and directed towards protecting and promoting nationalist sentiment. As a consequence, patriotism remains very powerful in Vietnam.

### **2.6.1 Strong sense of community**

Vietnam's largely agrarian economy was labour intensive and rice production in particular required significant levels of co-operation and coordination among people in the community. Therefore, Vietnamese people developed a culture of bonding to each other, to support each other's' growing and harvesting activities. Phan Ngoc (1998:89) describes this as a 'village culture' (*Van hoa lang xa*). Villagers support each other not only in farming but also in social life and Ly and Howard (2005:4) observe a 'strong human relationship' as a core characteristic in Vietnamese culture. Individual villagers have clear understandings of where they belong and of their responsibilities. In return, the village protects their rights, offering them a base, a community where he/she belongs and lives: the saying 'the King's rules are surpassed by village rules' - *phep vua thua le lang* - emphasises the importance of 'the local' and 'community' over centralised sites of power and even the king.

Phan Ngoc (1998:444) suggests that a traditional Vietnamese person defines his/her identity in relation to the surrounding people in his/her local community. This is

illustrated by looking at the form of address used in the Vietnamese language. The forms change constantly with the same person. When a Vietnamese talks to his father, he calls his father ‘*cha*’ and refers to himself as ‘*con*’. But when he talks to a brother he would refer to himself as ‘*anh*’ and to his younger brother as ‘*em*’. When he talks to an older sister he becomes ‘*em*’ and refers to her as ‘*chi*’. Vietnamese interlocutors need to be aware of age, gender, social status etc. during social exchanges. There is therefore an element of fluidity in identity that changes from interaction-to-interaction and aspects of one’s personal identity are shaped by individuals’ relations with surrounding people.

Vietnamese forms of address are also evidence of the importance of community in Vietnamese culture. Ly and Horward (2005) indicate that Vietnamese people address people in the community-at-large – including strangers - using the same form of address as they use with their family members. For example an older male person is referred to as *anh* (as is a brother); an older female person is referred to as *chi* (as is a sister). This rule applies to many other addresses: *ba* (elderly woman/grandmother); *ong* (elderly man/grandfather); *chu* (middle-aged man/uncle); *co* (middle-aged woman/aunt) etc. This possibly originated from a popular legend that the very first 100 Vietnamese people were born to the same mother (Au Co) and father (Lac Long Quan): that all Vietnamese people today are members of one big family and have a duty to render assistance to one another.

### **2.6.2 Respect and responsibility**

Vietnamese people are expected to show respect to others regardless of their social status, age or gender. Phan Ngoc (1998) considers this an example of how *ban sac van hoa* were maintained despite the influence of Confucian hierarchies emphasising masculine and authority – poor and low social status individuals can still gain respect as long as they fulfil their responsibilities to their family, village and country. Individuals are expected to care more about other people and to subordinate personal desires. This philosophy is clearly influenced by Buddhism but Phan Ngoc (1998) also suggests the relationship works in reverse: Buddhism accords with *ban sac van hoa* and was purposely adopted because of this. Such a philosophy contrasts with Western culture which generally encourages individualism (Phan Ngoc, *ibid*).

### 2.6.3 Gender in Vietnamese Culture

According to Le and Horward *et al* (2005), prior to Confucianism women/femininity were worshipped in Vietnam and men and women had roughly equal social status. Infact the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam was relatively limited (compared to certain other South East Asian countries) and the Confucian maxim ‘men and women should be physically distant’ (*‘nam nu thu thu bat than’*) was largely ignored. According to Phan Ngoc (1998: 85) Vietnamese social gatherings (*le hoi*) were opportunities for men and women to socialise together. Over time, however, men began to dominate the political and social world and women’s authority was largely restricted to the domestic sphere (although highly valued). Education – the key to social status – was only accessed by men, depriving women of opportunities to improve their social status and consolidating their domestic roles (Nguyen Phuong An, 2004:167).

This situation was increasingly challenged during the French colonial years (1858-1945), when feminism, individual freedoms and free marriage were introduced and hitherto restrictive dress codes were abandoned (the *‘ao dai’*, a tight-fitting dress influenced by western fashion, was introduced). However, as Nguyen Phuong An (2007) argues, this new openness was only available to middle class women - the majority of Vietnamese women were peasants and they remained under Confucian influences.

Gender inequality remains a problem in Vietnam characterised by double standards *vis-à-vis* acceptable behavior and sexual conduct. Asian women are expected to dress modestly, expound conservative values and lead morally respectable lifestyles. Men, on the other hand, are subject to fewer sexual and cultural mores. Sex before marriage continues to be frowned upon in Vietnam, but when it happens almost all the opprobrium is reserved for the woman (Nguyen Phuong An, 2007). However, increasing numbers of Vietnamese women are challenging these traditional gendered roles and accessing education in order to pursue successful careers, either in addition to or in place of any domestic/familial expectations. Even though Asian men are subject to far fewer restrictions in terms of their social conduct, middle class Asian men are under pressure to provide for their families and the concept of the strong,

responsible and ‘socially adept’ Asian male – commanding respect - remains powerful (Davis and Proctor, 1989). As already noted, numerous researchers investing SLA in SA contexts have identified gender as an important variable. Asian women, like black women, have not escaped sexual-cultural stereotyping. Like black women, the West has constructed Asian women as ‘exotic’. However, in contrast to the masculinisation of black women, Asian women are constructed as hyperfeminine - available, submissive and dutiful, subordinating their own sexual needs to those of (white) men (Pyke and Johnson, 2003: 36).

#### **2.6.4 Vietnamese’ Attitudes towards the West**

The French introduced notions of democracy, individualism and personal freedom to Vietnam (Jamieson, 1993; Smith, 1968), although these applied most to the urban middle class (Nguyen Phuong An, 2007:295). Individualism began to replace collectivism and is associated with Vietnam’s economic reforms in the 1980s which, according to Thomas & Drummond, (2003:2) and Marr (2003) increased Vietnam’s porosity to western goods and culture. Gillespie (2005:62) argues that this has been accompanied by a shift away from traditional Vietnamese culture to a society based on “individualism and consumerism” where western values and lifestyles are valorised and constructed as ‘cool’: a process particularly pronounced amongst Vietnam’s young people (Nguyen Phuong An, 2004:175).

Patriotism and communitarianism remain influential in Vietnam, but co-existing and competing with the individualisation processes associated with westernisation. Crudely, the latter helps to explain why so many young Vietnamese pursue a Western education (see 2.6.5), whilst the latter may help to explain certain behaviours of Vietnamese students during their sojourns – particularly the widespread formation and pastoral role of Vietnamese Societies.

#### **2.6.5 Education as motivation**

Thus far, it would not be too erroneous to describe SLA in SA context as a learning process in potentially rewarding but nevertheless tricky circumstances. It is appropriate, therefore, to also understand learners’ motivations, which may have implications for their ability to learn from and overcome setbacks. Parenthetically, an

investigation of individual learning styles would provide an even greater level of resolution, but is considered beyond the remit of this thesis.

The majority of participants are middle class, educated professionals/semi-professional. According to Trinh Duy Luan (1993) and Bresnan (1997:77), Vietnam's urban middle class comprise three overlapping advantaged groups: (1) employees in administrative roles; (2) those who have economic capital; and (3) those who are educated and possess employable skills. The participants of this research belong to the third group. All participants were born during the 1980s when the American War had ended and the country was opening the door to the outside world via a series of economic reforms known as '*doi moi*'. However, the market economy also brought about higher unemployment and a widening gap between Vietnam's rich and poor and it was at this time that the middle class emerged as a powerful strata. All of the participants are young and come from the two largest cities in Vietnam - Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – where they were employed in relatively well-paid semi-professional and professional jobs. King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh (2008:804-806) describe young professionals in Vietnam as consumerist, committed to their personal career development (via acquiring new knowledge and skills), and to accessing news and information. They have aspirations to improve and maintain their social status.

Credentialism is important in Vietnam and education has long been considered the best way of securing personal (career) success. It can be traced back to feudal times when education was one way of climbing the class ladder (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974:26). The tradition continued during French colonial times (1883 – 1954). Education was not only a route to success and social status, but also a means of achieving public respectability (Tran Trong Kim, 1929 cited in Jamieson, 1993:95). After the French left and when Vietnam moved towards communism, between 1954 and 1986 young people who performed particularly well in their university entrance exams were sent to other communist bloc countries to receive a better education and upon their return to Vietnam were offered key positions working for the government. Therefore, in Vietnam there is a widespread belief that educational qualifications, especially those gained from outside Vietnam, are a passport to success; but the high tuition fees and living costs associated with international study render this option

available only to a minority (King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2008:800). The middle class therefore view international study as a financial investment to improve their career prospects and consolidate their social status.

## **2.7 Key Theories used in the research**

This section is focused on developing a deeper understanding of how identity impacts the L2 communication with reference to three theories: Norton's (2000) power relations, Barna's (1989) 'stumbling blocks' and Giles' (1982) intergroup model. The thesis as a whole engages extensively with these. I will explain the major approaches; how they are used in this research and position each theory in the literature.

Research on identity in communication mainly focuses on how identity is shaped by considerations of power and how it influences interactions (Chen, 2010). The discipline of studying identity construction and its influence on interactions is based on four approaches: intergroup approach, cultural approach, critical cultural approach and post-colonial approach (Shin & Jackson, 2003). Intergroup approach adopts the theory of social identity to shed light on the inter-ethnic communication from the perspective of uncertainty reduction and ethnolinguistics and is reflected the work of Giles and Byrne (1982). The cultural approach views communicative competence as culturally and ethnically specific variable and can be discerned in the work of Barna, (1998). The critical cultural approach and post-colonial approach share a similar assumption that identity is re-constructed constantly under the unequal distribution of power in the society and is reflected in the work of Norton (2000).

### **2.7.1 Social identity and investment**

In this section, the concept of social identity is explored in depth. This also helps define the term social interaction, which will be used widely throughout the thesis. In the second and third parts of this section, the Norton's (2000) understanding of investment is also presented, in light of motivation theories. Finally, the fourth part will discuss another layer of power relations, between NS and NNS.



### 2.7.1.1 Social identity and social interactions

Norton's (2000:19) definition of social identity is focused on understanding tensions between people at the micro level of daily interactions which are characterised by asymmetries of power including unequal access to symbolic and material resources.

Social interactions can be understood in light of Norton's (2000) definition of social identity (also see 2.3.2). A social interaction is a negotiation between a person who performs in a context to present his/her identity. Social interactions therefore include a context where one interlocutor interacts with another and what is going on between the two communicators. Social interaction therefore exists at daily micro levels such as a simple transaction in a shop or a small talk with a stranger at a bus stop, etc. Social interactions also exist in a macro level which is manifested through the unequal distribution of power relations, which will be discussed below.

In her longitudinal study of five immigrant women in Canada, Norton (2000) argues that language learners have complex social identities, which can be understood in relation to the power relations that structures social order. Drawing on the concept of subjectivity by Weedon (1997) Norton Pierce describes a learner's social identity as 'multiple and contradictory'. The success or failure of the learning process depends on how the learner navigates his or her way to construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard and the terms of the discourse. Understanding the concept of identity therefore requires an understanding of the concept of power relations and how they operate in a social setting. As identity is shaped through social interactions, it is also shaped by a social order that reflects relations of power. Norton's (2000:7) defines power as:

*...socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated.*

Norton's definition stresses how symbolic and material resources are produced, distributed and validated in a social structure. These symbolic resources are: language, education and friendship; and material resources (capital goods, real estate and money). Norton agrees with Foucault (1980) that power relations reflect themselves both at macro (institutions, government) and micro level (daily social exchanges), and

that power is unequally distributed in a society. Power is not manifested in physical possessions, but in social exchange. Norton's definition of power accords with Weber's (cited in Coates, 1995:41) "power is the probability that an actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" – a view fully compatible with the process of L2 learning in SA contexts.

The centrality of power relations lies in the unequal distribution of *both* symbolic and material resources. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) work, Norton (2000:8) agrees that there had been an assumption among SLA researchers that those who speak regard those who listen as 'worthy to listen', and those who listen regard those who speak as 'worthy to speak'. Norton (*ibid*) therefore suggests that an expanded definition of communicative competence should include the "right to speech" or "the power to impose reception". This requires a sort of "investment" by learners in order to learn a second language. They do so to negotiate access to symbolic and material resources.

Norton emphasises on both material and symbolic resources as the keys in understanding the unequal power relations. In the context of the research, participants are Vietnamese students, this can be applied with a focus on the symbolic resources (English language). If we consider only economic/financial resources as the key, for example (the one who pays to learn will experience fewer difficulties than the one who gets paid to learn), we cannot understand many international students' sub-optimal experiences. Students in Welsh's (2001) research demonstrate very little difference in the scale and types of difficulties affecting both groups. Students are assumed to have more positive experiences in their interactions with TL speakers than immigrants, precisely because students pay to be accommodated and pay to learn. However, in terms of symbolic resources (e.g. English language skills) they, like immigrants, are still 'dependant' on TL people: they have to negotiate and struggle (Schuman, 1978; Goldstein, 1996; Norton, 2000; Welsh, 2001; Boxer 2004).

### **2.7.1.2 Investment**

Norton (2000) developed the concept of "investment" to describe learners' desire to learn a target language. Learners have a certain expectation and hope to receive a good return from their 'investment', one which will achieve access to symbolic

(education, healthcare, etc.) and material (financial) power/resources in the TL community. This, in turn, will increase their ‘cultural capital’ - a concept developed by Bordieu and Passeron (1977) to refer to the knowledge and modes of thoughts which belong to classes and groups in a particular social context. Ellis (1997:42) supports this view of L2 acquisition as a site of ‘struggle’ and ‘investment’.

*Successful learners are those who reflect critically on how they engage with native speakers and who are prepared to challenge the accepted social order by constructing and asserting social identities of their own choice.*

The investment that a learner makes in a target language therefore can be understood as an investment in their social identity. They expect a wider range of identities in the target community. Investment and identity are concepts which accompany each other, or as Norton describes it: “investment is best understood in the context of a post-structural notion of identity” (Churchill, 2002:4). This perspective can help us understand the role of power relations in the interactions between learners and TL speakers.

### **2.7.1.3 Differentiating between investment and motivation**

The concept of investment helps explore deeper the interrelationship between learners and the social world. It contrasts with the instrumental motivation of Gardner and Lambert (1972) which views the desire of learners as fixed and unitary. The following examines the concept of motivation in more detail and compares and contrasts this with the concept of investment.

#### **Motivation**

Several different types of motivation orientations that have been used within SLA research, including: resultative (Hermann, 1980; Savignon, 1972; Strong, 1984); intrinsic and extrinsic (Dörnyei, 2001); travel, friendship, prestige and knowledge (Kruidenier and Clement, 1986); self-understanding and instrumental (Belmechri and Hummel, 1998) and integrative assimilation (Graham, 1984 cited in Ricento 2005). The most influential work on motivation is arguably that by Gardner (1985). He is

interested in establishing the relationship between motivation and achievement in SLA. According to Gardner (1985:50), motivation incorporates four distinct aspects: “a goal, effortful behaviour, a desire to attain the goal and favourable attitudes towards the activity in question”. The goal is the reason why an individual wants to learn a second language; effortful behaviour is the activities that the person employs to learn the language; the desire reflects how much she/he wants to achieve the goal; and finally attitude refers to how she/he feels about the learning process. Gardner emphasises that all four aspects are involved but that they are not uni-dimensional. For example, the goal acts as a stimulus for motivation but is itself not a measurable component. Motivation itself varies because the last three categories (efforts, desire and attitude toward the activity) are variable. This distinction has brought about the two notions of “orientation” (long-range goals) and “motivations” (efforts learners are ready to make). The former involves types of motivations and the latter refers to their “intensity”. In collaboration with Lambert, Gardner identifies two types of motivation orientations: instrumental (Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991) - which refers to functional reasons such as securing jobs and educational opportunities - and integrative - which reflects an interest in the target culture and people (Gardner, 1985; Gardner and Lambert, 1959). These ignite debates regarding which motivation is capable of generating most achievement in SLA. Gardner’s and Lambert’s Canadian research suggests the integrative type is most significant, but later acknowledge the importance of instrumentalism based on evidence from the Philippines and India (Ellis, 2004). Gardner and Lambert eventually agree that both types of motivations are equally important and co-exist in a single learner group.

After a review of 27 studies in motivation using integrative – instrumental constructs, Au (cited in Ricento, 2005:897), casts doubt over the measurement of motivation and the theory behind the measurement. According to Au, the reliability of the measurement tools is questionable. One cannot easily be defined as having just or mainly integrative or just or mainly instrumental motivation. Graham (Ricento, 2005:88-97) also problematises the concept of integrative motivation and introduces his own concept: integrative assimilation. Here, assimilative motivation refers to a desire to become a member of the TL community not just to learn the TL (as opposed to the case of integrative motivation): the former requires constant contact with the TL community whereas it is not a prerequisite for the latter.

Gardner and Lambert's view of the link between motivation and L2 achievement - in which motivation is seen as causal - is also challenged. Research in resultative motivation actually indicates the reverse - it is the success or failure in L2 that affects learners' motivation and at a quite sophisticated level: in a French study, success in the target language was found to enhance positive feelings towards local people and culture, not merely greater progress in the TL. At the same time, a Californian study of Mexican English learners demonstrated that success in English heightened female learners' exposure to discrimination, eventually undermining their respect for and interest in American culture (Ellis, 1997: 75) - *less* integratively oriented Mexican women in California were more successful in learning English than those who were *more* integratively oriented.

In addition, Gardner and Lambert's concept of motivation is overly-deterministic in that the types of motivations they describe are presented as a menu for learners to choose to apply to their tasks, eventually resulting in success or failure. Crookes and Schmidt (1994) point out that some research suggests some learners do not necessarily subscribe to any particular motivation. This very nearly accords with what Noel *et al* (2000) term as amotivation - the absence of a motivation to learn. This is controversial as it runs counter to the Olsonian belief that nobody does anything unless they want to or are coerced. Individuals are also found to have changed their motivation types throughout a course of study. Gardner and Lambert's research has encouraged closer scrutiny of the types of motivations in practice and prompted further studies into which motivation type contributes most to SLA achievement. Overall, however, the degree of effort that learners are prepared to commit to their learning experience (and why they chose to do so) remains under-researched (Ellis, 2004).

In response to these criticisms, Dörnyei (2001) developed a process model of learning and motivation which aims to chart how motivation changes over time. He divides the process model into three stages: a "preactional stage" which resembles the idea of orientation ("choice motivation"); an "actional stage" dealing with efforts that learners are ready to make, reflecting the quality of the learning experience; and a "postactional stage" involving the attributions outside the learning experience which decides learner's willingness to continue. While Dörnyei's model can be considered

superior to the more static concept described earlier (Ellis, 2004), it still struggles to capture the complex, dynamic and multidimensional elements of motivation. Dörnyei himself (2001:9) considers his ten “contemporary motivation theories” as “far from complete” and calls for “an eclectic construct to represent multiple perspectives” (ibid:13). Later, whilst discussing individual differences including the concept of motivation (and “self-motivation), Dörnyei (2005:219) still admitted to “irritation in understanding individual difference variables toward SLA”. He believes that “all the variables described in this book are either in the process of, or in desperate need of theoretical restructuring” (ibid: 218). To avoid the ‘irritation’, Dörnyei advances “intriguing parallels” which suggest SLA researchers take into account the context where the learning task and learners are situated; adopt more complex theoretical paradigms; and attempt to integrate linguistic and psychological approaches.

Much of the above evidences the difficulties experienced by SLA researchers to construct an agreed measurement of motivation in SLA and an account of how it works. Motivation research can, at worst, be considered confusing and contradictory; and, at best, unfinished.

### **Why investment?**

Learners in Norton Pierce’s view have, instead, multiple desires and constantly reconstruct their sense of who they are and how they belong to the social world when they speak. It is in this sense that investment in the language also means investment in one’s identity.

Learners, according to Schumann (1978), Welsh (2001), Ellis (1985) Krashen (1981) and Stern (1983), do not live in an ideal world where opportunities are available and conditions to interact with TL speakers are readily at hand. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992:213), however, comment on the ‘voluntary’ characteristic of the informal context where the “individual can either participate or not in informal acquisition contexts”. Such a view does not take into account the inequitable relations between social strata. It results in crude classifications of some learners as motivated and others unmotivated. With regard to international students, they are in shock, in a strange place, speaking a language they have not yet mastered. They can be missing friends and home. This is not the sort of environment where everyone can flourish,

and it is certainly not an environment where people can choose to do whatever they want. People might want to be motivated, but be prevented from doing so. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) write about the voluntary factor – but it appears that for many international students it is the involuntary factors that are more likely to shape their experiences (McKay and Wong, 1996; Agelil-Carter, 1997). Therefore, the concept of motivation alone cannot explain enough about the L2 learning experience. It requires a combination of the concepts of both identity and power relations.

Norton (2000: 10) also recognises shortcomings in the literature on motivation and SLA, arguing that “debates do not capture the relationship between power, identity and language learning”. Norton (2000:4) examines the ‘struggle’ confronting SLA researchers:

*SLA theorists have struggled to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not developed a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learners and the language learning context. Further more, they have not questioned how relations of power in the social world impact on social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers.*

Norton Pierce (1995) therefore privileges the role of social identity in the L2 learning process, promoting the concept of “investment” as an alternative way of understanding L2 learners’ motivation. Learners are not like computers, limited to processing inputs, but are investors who have expectations and who may dare to impose their right to be heard (Ellis, 1997). According to Norton, motivation must be viewed as a flexible concept, which is subjected to individuals and their experience; which is again reflected by their temporal social context.

#### **2.7.1.4 Native and non-native speakers (another layer of power relations)**

Much L2 learning occurs at the native speaker/non-native speaker nexus. Even the terms native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) are found “offensive and hierarchical as they take the native as the norm, and define the other negatively in relation to this norm” (Phillipson in Ricento 2005:903). The immigrant women in

Norton (2000) are not considered “worthy to listen” by TL speakers, which Norton attributes to the fact that they are seeking material resources (finance) or symbolic resources (English language) from TL speakers. The hierarchical relations between NNS and NS originate from sources associated with language ‘ownership’. Wilkinson (2002) maintains that if an L2 learner’s proficiency is poor, she takes the role of student not only in the classroom but also at home (with host families) and in daily interactions (with TL speakers). Such learners are judged - harshly or constructively, it doesn’t necessarily matter - which makes them feel inferior when speaking English in front of English speakers. If they are confident enough, and have not been dissuaded by negative attitudes, they may eventually acquire a good command of the TL. But, sometimes, such ‘achievements’ are considered as “linguistic theft” (Davies, 2003). The native speakers somehow consider their mother tongue as exclusively theirs. It is a world that L2 learners can never fully enter without intentional or unintentional obstacles from the TL speakers.

Lave & Wenger (1991) developed a theory of legitimate peripheral participation as an analytical way of examining the learning process. In their view, learning should be seen as participation in a community of practice, in which learners are considered as newcomers who seek full participation in a new social context for knowledge. Lave and Wenger (1991:85) insist that “the important point concerning learning is one of access to practice as a resource for learning, rather than to instruction”. Thus, it is essential for learners to be able to access activities and other community members, and to be able to access information, resources and favourable conditions to become full members of the community. This is in fact problematic and returns us, full circle, to power relations. Again, where there is “struggle”, there are issues of “investment” and “identity”. Lave and Wenger (ibid:53) stress that “identity, knowing and social membership entail one another”.

### **2.7.2 Intergroup Model**

The NS-NNS nexus – and its implications for intercultural communicative competence – is also implicated in the SLA process and Giles’ and Byrnes’ (1982) Intergroup theory is considered particularly relevant. Giles & Byrne (1982) investigate the relationship between a learners’ language group and the TL group. Intergroup



Theory sees the interaction between groups of learners and those of the TL as dynamic. This dynamism is strongest between groups possessing different ethnolinguistic identities. Giles and Byrne see ethnolinguistic convergence progressively related to social integration and L2 proficiency.

As previously noted, international students experience a sense of dislocation during their sojourn and may or may not seek 'refuge' in the company of those with whom they share certain key socio-cultural-linguistic commonalities. The boundaries between L2 and L1 communities are dynamic arenas and Giles and Byrne investigate how and why certain individuals are able to move more or less freely in and out of one linguistic 'camp' to another, affecting intercultural communicative competence. Intergroup theory necessitates an appreciation of the organisation and pastoral role of own-language/own-culture practices and institutions in SA contexts and their relationship vis-à-vis the TL language community – how they might facilitate, shape or constrain L2 interactions.

In Schumann's research, Alberto spent considerable periods of time mixing with people of his own culture. The 'pull' of staying within groups of one's own culture appears strong. Alberto's desire to participate in a Latin American group – and such groups' availability - appears to have been at the expense of Alberto's interactions with TL speakers. Where own-culture groups do not exist, extensive and protracted interaction with TL speakers is less avoidable (though not inevitable). The presence of such groups may therefore form a key determinant of the extent of learner's interactions with TL speakers, and ultimately their progress in the TL. It also places considerable emphasis on ethnicity as the basis for group-formation and group-allegiance. However, Giles and Johnson (1981) argue that although groups do form around race and ethnicity, what individual members may actually be seeking is the company and familiarity of people who share identical or similar values: these may just happen to be those with the same ethnicity. Groups therefore don't simply have the power to determine the extent of social interaction with TL speakers, but are also heterogenous and capable of coalescing around a range of ethnic, social, political and economic categories and concerns. Interestingly however, there is also evidence which suggests that group formation and cohesion is strongest when the group forms around and seeks to represent exclusive, rather than inclusive, interests (Van Gyes, de

Witte et al 2001). So people who find themselves isolated and/or 'different' might have an increased propensity to join and form groups together. The 'pull' of the Latin American group in Alberto's case, however, was not explored in any depth. Schumann notes the existence of a (Latin American) in-group and an (host community) out-group, but views the relationship between them as static, with a fixed border (Barkhuizen, 2004). The inter-group model, examined later, develops a more socially sensitive look at the channels of opportunities and influences that shape individual learning experiences, over which individuals may or may not exercise precise control.

### **2.7.3 Stumbling blocks in communication**

Barna (1998) identified six practical stumbling blocks in intercultural communication which help to explain the 'struggle' that someone from a different culture may encounter and reinforces the view that the SLA process (in SA contexts) has a social dimension and is about more than vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

The first is an 'assumption of similarities'. Barna argues that we easily fall into making assumptions that others are the same as us, that we have similar social, psychological and biological conditions and needs and that we see and understand epiphenomena in the same way. In fact, we are heavily conditioned by the culture we have been brought up in. Unless it is recognised that people are different, communication with people from different cultures is problematic.

The second and third stumbling blocks are linguistic ones, or in Barna's terms: language differences and nonverbal misinterpretations. Miscommunication attributable to differences between the L1 and L2 is, of course, unsurprising, and proficiency in and knowledge of the *lingua franca* is important in many cultural encounters. However, Barna does not privilege either of these. This implies that he does not believe learning the TL or understanding nonverbal cues is determinant of the success of intercultural communication.

The fourth stumbling block concerns the preconceptions and stereotypes that we might hold. In the context of this research, stereotyping refers to the beliefs that

people from different cultures have of one another. They may be very wide of the mark. Stereotypes are considered a stumbling block for communicators because they interfere with objective thinking. Stereotypes exist because we all possess and construct shorthand preconceptions of people from different cultures and evaluate their behaviour accordingly.

The fifth stumbling block is the 'tendency to evaluate'. People tend to agree or disagree with other peoples' statements and actions rather than trying to comprehend and 'make sense' of what they do from the actors' own perspectives. This tendency to judge acts as a barrier, preventing an open mind towards others' behaviours and attitudes.

The last obstacle is termed high anxiety (tension or stress). This is a common feeling when people from different cultures attempt to communicate. It is common and should be kept under control, so not to 'get in the way' of communication.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to illustrate how 'identity' and the 'social' has been incorporated into theories and models in SLA research to provide a better understanding of the L2 learning experience and key theories and assumptions about SLA in SA contexts relevant to my research have been identified.

An overarching assumption regarding SLA in SA contexts is that social identity counts and has implications for the quality and quantity of L2 interactions. But identity is a contested and complex concept, which varies from person-to-person and different identities and aspects of identity may have different implications for L2 interaction. There is therefore a need to capture the types of identities likely to be found amongst international students, whilst remaining aware of the fact that there is probably no such thing as a universal international student experience. The difficulties associated with capturing identities are complicated by the fact that identities may be electives or ascribed, wanted or unwanted, with different ones being foregrounded under different conditions. The cultural, socio-biological and psychological dimensions of identity must also be accounted for.

The chapter has investigated the relationship between identity and SLA. An underlying assumption is that SLA in SA contexts feature manifold L2 interaction opportunities. However, much research suggests that this is exaggerated – or, at least, not inevitable - and that it is social and identity-based phenomena which can explain the variation. The complex, lived realities of students in SA contexts – their motivation for studying abroad; porosity to western culture; financial circumstances; social networking skills; own-language group affiliation; gendered experiences etc. - is therefore vital to understanding how identity functions as a mechanism shaping L2 interactions, both in terms of their quantity and quality.

As mentioned earlier, identity appears to shape L2 interactions because the SA context is a challenging learning environment and because the process of accessing the TL community is a social endeavour – it is simultaneously a process of negotiation and a site of struggle influenced by the patterning and exercise of power which is inextricably linked to the identities and social roles of its principal actors. The research draws heavily on three main theories. Power relations (Norton, 2000) emerged from the SLA field and emphasises the role and impact of identity on L2 learners and its capacity to help them navigate and negotiate learning opportunities in the TL community. *Stumbling Blocks* (Barna, 1989) flows from an intercultural communication perspective, and constructs the successful learner as one who has developed communicative competence by overcoming six key communication obstacles extant in the TL community and culture. The Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982) investigates the interactions between learners' own (L1) and the TL communities (as well as with other English NNS) with particular emphasis on the functioning of socio-cultural and linguistic group affiliations.

A second underlying assumption is that L2 interactions in SA contexts are beneficial to the SLA process – that L2 interactions in naturalistic contexts can impact L2 communicative competence. It is argued that identity works here not simply because it may have functioned to open up (or close down) L2 interaction opportunities, but because it may also have opened up (or closed down) specific types of interaction opportunities – those most (or least) beneficial to SLA – and because the identities of interlocutors are likely to shape the content and conduct of L2 encounters.

This thesis therefore seeks to identify the ‘types’ of social identities reported amongst Vietnamese students in SA contexts and assess their role in accessing L2 interaction opportunities; the content and conduct of those interactions; and the relationships between L2 interactions and communicative competence – crudely, which identities facilitate the most optimal L2 interaction experience *vis-à-vis* L2 communicative competence.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

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This chapter presents the research strategy and methods of collecting data for the target group. It comprises of three parts. Part one describes the research aims, research design and methods. Part two looks into the ethical considerations and criteria to ensure trustworthiness Part three discusses the research procedures: pilot and main studies.

#### 3.1 Research aims

The concerns and daily experience of Vietnamese students in the UK in their endeavor to improve their communicative competence are of primary importance. A qualitative strategy will help focus on the participants' own views of identity and intercultural competence. I would like to develop a relationship with my participants to "genuinely understand the world through their eyes" and in order to obtain "rich, deep data" (Bryman, 2008:394).

According to the literature (Chapter 2), a qualitative approach provides 'room' for exploration and theory to emerge from data. In contrast, quantitative research often starts off with hypotheses or clear theories which are then subjected to 'trial by numbers'. This does not mean that qualitative research is not as effective at testing theories as quantitative research. In fact, more qualitative researchers are interested in this. Therefore, the research questions in qualitative research may sometimes be more general than those in quantitative, affording researchers the right to come back to address and refine them in light of emerging data or as a result of experience from the field (Bryman, 2008:370). This flexibility is particularly useful where the research concepts (identity and intercultural communication competence) are fluid and contested.

Qualitative research also involves developing a ‘feel’ for natural settings, for the ‘real world’. It links the actions of participants with their social settings in order to understand deeper the often hidden meanings behind behaviour. The context of the research - Vietnamese students in the UK - is unique; generalisation of findings (of the sort quantitative researchers might practice) is therefore not an explicit aim. Rather, the research seeks an understanding of particular phenomena within a particular context. I am interested in capturing a particular reality more so than the big scale social settings - specifically how Vietnamese students in the UK interact using the English language.

### **3.2 Research questions**

The main focus of the research is on the relationship between the learner’s identity in their daily interaction and communication in English. Such a relationship can be divided into three areas of interests: identity and interactions, identity and intercultural communication, and the type of identities. I have worked out three research questions as follows:

1. Which type of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
2. How – if at all - is identity implicated in Vietnamese students’ interactions in the English language?
3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual’s own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how?

### **3.3 Research design**

#### **3.3.1 Choosing appropriate research strategy**

Social research is often categorized into two types: Descriptive research and analytical (explanatory) research (Buckingham and Saunders, 2007). Descriptive research, as the name implies, describes a phenomenon, whereas analytical (explanatory) research seeks to explain how a phenomenon happens. However, Buckingham and Saunders (2007) refer to a third type: exploratory research. Exploratory research is particularly appropriate where our ontological and/or epistemological understanding of the

phenomenon is so vague that we do not quite know what it is like or how we can measure it. In such a case, Buckingham and Saunders (2007:44) advise:

*The purpose of the research is therefore to gather as much relevant information as possible so that we can begin to identify and specify what it is we are studying. Only then can we design studies to measure or analyse it*

As presented in Chapter 2, the phenomenon of research remains controversial. First, there is no agreement on contested theories regarding identities and intercultural communicative competence. Secondly, student experiences of studying abroad are unique (Freed, 1995), so that any research on this is dealing with fairly unique sets of circumstances (different people, with different L2 skills; in different settings etc.). Thirdly, the research is the accumulation of knowledge, step-by-step, adding – albeit incrementally – to existing knowledge in this area by applying theories and frameworks to another unique set of circumstances. Therefore, the exploratory research design of Buckingham and Saunders (2007) is selected.

### **3.3.2 Stages of the research**

Stage 1: Pilot focus groups - May 2008 to August 2008

Focus group 1: May 2008 (in Leeds)

Focus group 2: August 2008 (in York)

Stage 2: September 2008 to December 2008

Analysing data from focus groups

Reporting on focus groups

Contacting and recruiting participants for the main study

Stage 3: January 2009

Diary design and piloting

Stage 4: February 2009 to April 2009

Main study: 12 students in Leeds and 2 in York.



- Daily diary keeping in three months (February, March and April)
- Focus groups (each group is met 5 times in three months, 5 times x 3 = 15 focus groups)

Stage 5: May 2009 to May 2010

Data analysis

Stage 6: June 2010 to May 2011

Writing up

### 3.4 Research method

The main study comprises studying 12 participants in Leeds and 2 participants in York over a period of three months (started from beginning February to the end of April 2009). Sub-methods include focus group interviews and self-completed daily diaries.

Table 3.1: Main study plan (Adapted from Menard, 2008:5)

	1 <sup>st</sup> month	2 <sup>nd</sup> month	3 <sup>rd</sup> month	
Group A (participants 1-6 in Leeds)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group A (participants 1- 6)
Group B (participants 7- 12 in Leeds)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group B (participants 7- 12)
Group C (2 participants in York)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group C (2 participants in York)

The above design means the same set of cases are investigated each month (each period). Participants are divided into three groups, using stratified random sampling, with gender - identified in previous related research as a significant variable (Norton, 2000) - selected as the key criteria. Two groups of 6 and one group of 2 therefore

comprise the same proportion of males to females as the overall sample. Other factors were candidates for stratification but were ruled out: age was not a factor, and ‘friendships’ – wishing to construct groups that did or did not put friends together – was complicated because friendships themselves are dynamic and change and expand and contract over time. There is no ‘main’ or superior group. All groups are treated equally and their participants go through the same data collection process and experience identical interventions.

All the field work is carried out by myself. I met the participants 5 times in total. At the first meeting the participants are briefed about the purpose of the research and what they are expected to do during the three month period. Training on diary keeping is given, with detailed examples. Questions from participants are welcomed and answered. At each of the second, third and fourth meetings, I met the participants in a focus group format to discuss each participant’s diaries, experiences and attitudes etc. (the diaries have been collected shortly in advance of the meeting to facilitate moderator input and activity and are obviously kept by me for further, later analysis). The fifth, final, meeting is organized for any follow-up activities and is also an opportunity to thank the participants and brief them again on what would happen with the data they have provided.

### **Points of interventions**

As presented in table 3.1 above, ‘treatment’ is conducted at the end of the first, second and third month: a focus group of information raised in the diary within the month (which is collected in advance). The idea of more ‘relaxed’ treatment, i.e. every term or two months was rejected after careful consideration. First of all, the attrition rate can be controlled better when participants are supposed to fill in a diary on a daily basis for three months, not 6 months or even longer. Secondly, in a discussion with a researcher friend, who did a similar longitudinal study, I was advised against it. In that research, participants met every term during one academic year (10 months) = 3 times altogether. Because of the length (over 10 months) participants could not fill in a diary on a daily basis. They were advised to complete it on a weekly basis and only when they felt something important or relevant to the research had happened. In fact, only 50% (3 participants) adhered to the plan. Some emailed or phoned the researcher at

times in between their 3 interviews, but the majority were difficult to contact. In my opinion, this is not an effective way of collecting data related to the concept of identity and intercultural communication and which ‘emerges’ from everyday living. I am interested in daily routines and interactions of participants to tease out relevant information. The chances of missing information, as a result of the participants’ bias of what is and is not important and relevant to the research topic, is therefore reduced with my approach. For these reasons, treatment will be introduced monthly during the three months of the main study.

The research combines two ‘sub-methods’ of diary keeping and focus group interviews. Justification for the triangulation of the two sources of data and how it is going to be carried out are presented in the next section.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

#### **3.5.1 Triangulation of focus group and diary**

Triangulation as an approach bases itself on “different methodological standpoints” (Gillham, 2000:13). Data yielded by a method can be viewed as a puzzle. Puzzles, collected together, help build up the general scenario of the research interest. Patton (2002:555) argues the “logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations”. As different data requires different methods to collect and each method has its own advantages and disadvantages, there is a need to triangulate data. However, understanding the term triangulation in this meaning remains limited. The traditional literature review is a typical example of another type of triangulation in which reviewers use different theories and evidence to shed light on the topic of research (Gorard, 2004). Chapter 2 – literature review – can be considered to have adopted “theory/perspective triangulation” to use Patton’s term (2002:556). It discusses studies and theories relevant to the concept of identity and intercultural communication. In the fieldwork, I adopt another type - “triangulation of sources” as mentioned in type 2 in Patton’s (2002:556) list:

1. *Methods triangulation: Checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods*

2. *Triangulation of sources: Checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same method*
3. *Analyst triangulation: Using multiple analysts to review findings*
4. *Theory/perspective triangulation: Using multiple perspectives or theories to interpret the data*

Patton's list is more comprehensive in that it covers both Gillham's (2000) and Gorard's (2004) definitions and bring forward two more types: analyst triangulation and triangulation of sources which is chosen as a means to verify and validate qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

It is important to note here that though different in terms and types of triangulation, the literature unanimously warns against the misconception that the triangulation of different data yields the same results. According to Gillham (2000), not every puzzle fits into a picture as expected. When this happens, it does not mean a particular method is wrong but it can be maintained that the understanding and the facts do not match. The expected joints of the pictures are not what is imagined. This is where the theory needs further updating. Any particular data which is not explained by the theory means the theory is being challenged. Patton (2002) emphasizes that triangulation does not just help look at a phenomenon in different ways but also contributes to 'credibility' by strengthening confidence in any conclusions drawn. It checks the consistency of cross-data. Areas where there is convergence should generate greater confidence in the findings. On the other hand, dissonant data, if found, can also illuminate a problem and generate a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon being researched.

Gillham (2000) also admits that the process of fitting puzzles together is not smooth. It is messy or even contradictory. By adopting triangulation, I demonstrate an awareness of the "mess" and the non-linear characteristics of much research that I will have to confront. The benefit of triangulating data, as discussed above, easily outweighs the troubles and amount of workload it can cause, but needs careful planning.

As mentioned above, triangulation of sources (Patton, 2002) is chosen. This approach involves comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information gathered at various times and by different qualitative methods. The research relies on two channels of collecting data: focus group interviews and diary reviewing, which belong to “qualitative” methods (although diary data has been quantified). Similar approach is termed ‘diary-interview’ as per Elliot’s (1997) health research. Sheridan (1993, cited in Elliot, 1997) notes that different people have different views on keeping diaries. Some really enjoy the task, but others find it mundane. Diaries may record simple or complex attitudes and feelings or just be a record of events. The use of focus groups and diaries is intended to provide some triangulation - research based only on the diaries or only on the focus groups may miss important data. Therefore, triangulation is being used to ensure that issues are explored and put ‘under pressure’ from more than one direction, especially in terms of their universality – do the personal testimonies etc. of individual participants resonate with those of others’ and can they withstand any scrutiny e.g. that associated with group interaction? Specifically:

- Checking for consistency of how the same event is recorded in diaries and expressed in focus group interviews
- Comparing what people say about the same thing over time (at the time of completing the diary and later in focus groups; in the first, second and third months)

### **3.5.2 Descriptive and inferential statistics of diary and focus group data**

As part of my triangulation strategy and in order to establish relationships between key variables I was interested in generating statistical data. Diary data lends itself well to both descriptive and inferential statistics. Here I was particularly interested in establishing relationships between social roles and the extent of interactions:

- Estimated hours of speaking English
- Who participants spoke English with
- The nature of the conversations

In addition, I was interested in the relationship between the above variables with participants' rating of their communicative experience. Upon receiving diaries from participants, I coded data and then entered them into SPSS software.

**Descriptive statistics:** I have used descriptive statistics to present key variables such as those referred to above. The descriptive statistics were presented in tables, figures and charts where necessary (see Chapter 4).

**Inferential statistics:** According to Bryman (2004) there are two types of inferential statistics: descriptive and causal. The descriptive inferences mainly refer to generalisability while causal inferences refers to the relationship between variables. The descriptive statistic is less relevant in this research because of the small sample which makes generalisability impossible. On the other hand, the inferential statistics are used to attempt to explore the relationship between three key sets of variables: social roles, social interactions and self-rated communicative competence. Therefore inferential statistics in this research should be understood as causal inferences (Bryman, 2004). Tests of correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) were employed to identify relations between those variables, which of those variables contribute most to communicative competence. Details of those tests of correlations are presented in Appendix I.

Further contribution to triangulation and also an alternative approach to understanding the relationship between social roles and communicative competence was offered by content analysis (Bryman, 2004) of focus group data. The literature survey (Chapter 2) and focus group analysis (Chapter 7) seem to suggest that variables such as passivity, extroversion/introversion and willingness to sample 'foreign' culture could be factors influencing the patterning of individuals' communicative experience and linguistic outcomes. Qualitative analysis of focus group data was used to categorise participants as opportunity makers/takers (OM/OT), value matcher/takers (VM/VT). Participants were allocated into categories and then statistical tests were performed. Further details of the tests performed are provided in Appendix J. The aim of the statistical tests of correlations is to compare and contrast the experiences of different participants according to their membership of the above categories.

The process of categorising participants into either VM or VT, and either OT or OM was relatively straightforward. Transcripts of focus groups were analysed and certain behaviours and expression associated with the afore-mentioned categories were recorded next to each participants' names. I followed Georger's (2009) approach to basic content analysis. All focus group interviews (approximately 4000 words) were analysed. Participants were categorised as VM or VT on the basis of the ideas and stories they recounted. This was clearly a subjective process. In order to limit subjectivity, a fellow Vietnamese research student was employed to perform exactly the same procedure using the same pre-agreed VM/VT definitions. Any disagreement regarding categorisation would be subject to negotiation; but we both reached identical conclusions (I chose a Vietnamese research student because all focus group transcriptions were in the original Vietnamese language). A tally was kept of VM and VT evidence and an overall judgement was made regarding which category participants were allocated to. Selected examples of the operationalising of Values and Opportunity are provided below.

#### Value Matchers

- Tu and Bac withdrew from interactions, especially when native speakers were involved. They did so to 'rescue' their 'maleness'.
- Many female participants attended drinking events once and then decided they would never come again. They did not like the atmosphere: noisy music, loud people, etc. They believe socialising should not be controlled by alcohol. A more preferred way of socialising can be eating out or cooking at home.

#### Value Takers

- Sang attended evening events organised by Christian Union even though he was not interested in God. Sang is an atheist. He simply considered such events as opportunities to practice English.
- Hoa and An hardly went out drinking in Vietnam where it is not common for girls to be seen drinking in public places. However, they did not mind going out to pubs with their friends in the UK.

#### Opportunity Makers

- Tu created opportunity by speaking in English with his Vietnamese girlfriend
- Mi prefers American accent and she was dating an American man so that she had lots of opportunities to speak English.

### Opportunity Takers

- Several participants attended social events organised by their university
- Some participants believed the universities should be responsible for providing more opportunity for them to socialise. They complained about the lack of such a support from the universities.

The process was relatively straightforward, however, several problems were encountered. First, several participants did not express views or provide accounts of their behaviour which could be readily categorised. Secondly, two participants expressed views that were easily categorised but did not express many of them. Therefore, the categorisation process might be based upon minimal evidence. With these caveats in mind, I was able to categorise all participants into categories. Statistical tests of correlations examining the relationships between membership of the OM/OT and VM/VT categories and the variables captured by the diary data were then possible. Cohen's conventions (1991) are used throughout to describe effect sizes. Descriptive statistics and information regarding the distribution of variables are provided in Appendix J.

Statistical analysis of the relationship between membership of a particular category and participants' experiences of interactions and linguistic outcomes generated a range of interesting findings. For example, being a value taker associates positively with communicative experience. This supports Giles and Byrne's (1982) argument that individuals who are prepared to suspend their personal and group-based cultural affiliations are more likely to move in and out of any linguistic camps (thereby maximizing their L2 experiences). But some findings challenged key theories. For example, findings in the statistical test suggests that certain individual characteristics are far more deterministic in patterning individuals' interaction experiences than the social roles privileged by Norton (2000). Similarly, there is room in Barna's (1998) framework for individuals to perceive each block differently and some blocks are overcome more easily by some language learners than others. Individual characteristics – more so than social roles - may therefore be important in patterning individuals' interaction experiences and how they understand linguistic obstacles and learn from them. Additionally, because of the small sample size, no claim of generalisability can be made. Overall, this aspect of my research is therefore highly



problematical. The phenomena that it tried to capture – such as the relationship between extroversion/introversion, interaction experiences and communicative competence – are still presented not least because, as discussed earlier, they emerged during the focus groups. However, the statistical analysis is instead offered as a ‘flawed experiment’ and presented in Appendices I and J.

### **3.6 Considerations to ensure trustworthiness**

Mason (1996); LeCompte and Goetz (1982); Kirk and Miller (1986) maintain that the concepts of reliability and validity widely used in quantitative research also apply to qualitative research. However, I agree with Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) suggestion that qualitative research should be judged on different criteria, which fall under the heading of trustworthiness and this is addressed below.

Central to Guba’s and Lincoln’s (1994) advocacy for alternative criteria to evaluate qualitative research is their rejection of an overly-deterministic view of social reality. In fact, they argue, there is no unproblematical objective reality and there might be, at the same time, several explanations of particular social phenomena. I will adopt this point of view approach towards the topic of the research. Trustworthiness consists of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I will discuss how each criteria is applied in this research and also discuss the issue of generalisability.

#### **3.6.1 Credibility**

Credibility concerns whether or not research results and interpretations adequately reflect how the participants actually responded to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve credibility, Bryman (2008:377) suggests that any findings arrived at need to be fed back to the participants for ‘respondent validation’. In the research, the following will be carried out to ensure a good match between my presentation and participant’s experiences and points of view:

- Give participants the transcripts of their interview texts

- Ask for feedback from participants and see if they are happy with how they have been quoted in the report.

My experience with the pilot studies showed that the relationship between participants and myself (as a researcher) were close, so they may have been reluctant to provide critical feedback. In addition, being critical is not especially common in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese students tend to respect researchers as well-educated and knowledgeable figures. The focus group in Fern (2001) is an example, in which participants turned to the researcher for advice rather than giving their opinions. Therefore, it is essential for participants to understand that all their ideas are welcomed - see also section 3.7 (ethical considerations).

Hobbs (1993) and Skeggs (1994) also suggest that participants may not be able to provide critical feedback because they may not understand social science terms and terminology. Given that none of the participants are language or education students, it might not be possible for them to make sense of analyses related to theories in SLA and intercultural communication and this might therefore cause frustration and confusion when they are requested to give comments. For this reason, I decided to seek feedback on my analysis from fellow researchers and academics - only accounts of largely factual information provided by the participants were fed back to them for comment.

### **3.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability is concerned with whether the findings of a study can be transferred to another study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that transferability can be achieved when the context of the original study is found to be similar to that of a proposed study. This links to generalisability or external validity (Bryman, 2008). Findings from one context can be beneficial to other contexts or in similar or identical contexts but at different times. Therefore, the transferability of qualitative research is possible. However, in order for transferability to work, 'rich description' is needed (Gomm, 2000) so that informed judgments on the possibility and degree of transferability to other contexts can be made. In this study, in order to achieve transferability I have provided a detailed description of the participants, how they were recruited, and of the research methods and instrumentation (see 3.4). The participants in this study are

social science and business majors within the UK university context and it is possible that the findings might be applicable to other Vietnamese students elsewhere in the UK with similar majors. The findings might also be applicable to other Asian students (with similar majors) who share similar social and cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, as Freed (1995) acknowledges, it is difficult to replicate studies in a broad context (see Chapter 2) because we cannot ‘pause’ whole social settings; and even with the same set of participants in the same context, research conducted at a different time will not be the ‘same’. This clearly has implications for generalisability. The research is vulnerable here because the focus groups are based on only 14 participants in total; and because non-probability snowball sampling was used, which is not representative of the population.

However, Gomm *et al* (2000) consider this criticism problematic. Generalisation, in qualitative research, does not mean the same as in quantitative research – most obviously it does not depend on carefully selected participants generating quantifiable and normally distributed data capable of representing a population. In fact, small scale research has what Stake (2000) calls ‘naturalistic generalization’. He argues that the idea of developing a ‘law’ of generalization is misleading because if it is false, it causes misunderstanding, but if it is true it contributes to a too simplistic understanding of the social world. Achieving generalisability should not be considered as the target of the research. Rather, I adopted a small-scale study in order to capture the unique characteristics of a particular context. It is an in-depth investigation into a particular ethnic group that does not aspire to generalisability, but which may nonetheless produce findings capable of being transferred to other similar contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Donmoyer (2000) even suggests that findings from small-scale and *suis general* research can even ‘jump’ contexts; providing important insights into completely different situations. Certain findings suggest that the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants may have impacted on their L2 experiences, as discussed in Chapter 2; suggesting that the overall research findings might ‘transcend’ the particularistic context of the research and apply to young professional/semi-professional Vietnamese/Asian students learning in the UK generally. My research design was not

set up to specifically test the importance of (Vietnamese/Asian) socio-cultural background to L2 communicative competence in a UK environment - a multiple case study approach comprising at least one non-Vietnamese comparator group selected on a ‘most similar’ basis (other than socio-cultural background) would have achieved this. Given this, the ability to generalize with confidence largely depends on the extent to which such socio-cultural influences (on L2 experiences) can be isolated from other social and even psychological variables and their precise influence measured. To illustrate, a female participant reporting very few social activities with the TL community may be doing so because *inter alia*:

- She is shy
- She is not invited (e.g. because she is unpopular or not considered interesting)
- She is embarrassed by her L2 competence
- There are limited social activities
- There are limited social activities involving speakers of the TL
- Social activities with speakers of the TL comprise unappealing and culturally unfamiliar elements (e.g. alcohol-centred; inappropriate venues)
- She is too busy (e.g. studying or working)
- Own-language social activities are more accessible/frequent/fun

In reality, the precise patterning of participants’ L2 experiences and contact with the TL culture and native speakers is likely to be influenced by several of the above at the same time and may vary from person-to-person. Where the data indicates that socio-cultural factors are indeed influencing participants’ L2 experiences, and can be distinguished from the array of influences linked to the precise social contexts that participants occupy, this is clearly indicated. However, such analyses are suggestive and must be interpreted within the overall set of caveats associated with highly context-specific and case study research as outlined above.

### **3.6.3 Dependability**

In order to ensure the dependability I kept a clear record of all interview audio files (as recorded by a digital recorder), transcripts (both in Vietnamese and English), written

documents (diaries and field notes). The transcriptions and translation (as described in detail later) were proofread by native Vietnamese and English speakers.

#### **3.6.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with whether the findings and interpretations of findings are a true reconstruction of the participants' responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be achieved by careful examination of the data, findings and interpretations. In this research, I acted as objectively as possible, especially during data transcription, translation and analysis. Any conclusions from the data was drawn as objectively as possible and I tried to present ideas from the participants in fairly and accurately (Bryman, 2008:379).

#### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

All participants were recruited on a volunteer basis. According to DeVaus (2002) no-one should be put under pressure or coerced to participate in research. Also, Buckingham (2007) argues that it is unethical to ask participants to take part in research which has no academic or social utility (see Chapter 1 – Introduction for the rationale of the research). I also ensured that participants were fully briefed with regards to the goal of the research and their roles in the project prior to their agreement to participate (Bryman, 2004; Harrison, 2001; Buckingham, 2007; Harrison, 2001; DeVaus, 2002). Participants were notified of their entitlement to withdraw at any time (see Appendix F - Consent form). With regard to the invasion of privacy, this research does make enquiries into individual's private lives – right down to personal daily routines. But Bryman (2004) argues that individuals who volunteer to take part are also, to an extent, 'surrendering' their right to privacy and expressing a willingness to expose certain attitudes and behaviours to recording and analysis etc. Therefore, I believe that the research does not invade participants' privacy.

I have considered the existence of any potential harm to participants. I expected the main potential harm to be limited to individuals raising certain information in the focus groups and receiving unfair or harsh criticism etc. which they may find uncomfortable and upsetting. In order to prevent it, I made it quite clear at the beginning of each session that the value of the research depended on all participants

feeling that they can be open without fearing undue criticism; and that their participation in the research was interpreted as their agreement to this (see 3.5 for description of administration procedures). My own evaluation of the two focus groups showed that no participant was harmed in this way.

However, it was also possible that participants could be subjected to ridicule and criticism *outside* the focus group as a result of what they said during it. Clearly I do not have any control over this.

### **3.8 Focus Group**

#### **3.8.1 Research aims**

Focus groups are employed as a tool to explore a research topic before any further decision regarding research design is made, i.e.: measuring or analysing the phenomenon in question (Buckingham and Saunders, 2007). In exploratory research, focus group interviews appear the better choice than the survey questionnaire. This is because the focus group allows emerging themes and/or concerns to be explored, obviating the need to commence with a structured set of questions which might reflect and be influenced by the researcher's bias or limited understanding.

#### **3.8.2 Research method**

Mannheim and Rich (1995) describe the focus group method as an in-depth discussion on topic(s) among a small group of people who are carefully selected in order to establish their opinion on a given topic.

Much research on the concept of identity has used focus group interviews to capture the range of identities constructed (Norton, 2000 among others). Focus groups or "qualitative interviews" (Fern, 2001:154) are employed to "generate hypotheses which can be used to develop theoretical explanations for phenomena of interest". Harrison (2001), however, sees focus groups having several uses: from formulating research questions to outlining important indicators for data collection, and to actually collecting data to answer research questions themselves. Kitzinger (2005:57)

considers focus group as “ideal for exploring people’s talk, experiences, opinions, beliefs, wishes and concerns”.

Focus groups, therefore, are one of several methods available which can be chosen in the initial stage(s) of the research to explore the daily experience(s) of Vietnamese students in the UK; in which the significance of the concepts of identity, power relations, cross-cultural communication and ‘inter-group’ relations on intercultural communicative competence can be rendered testable. In comparison with surveys, Harrison (2001:76) argues that focus groups have several advantages:

- 1 *they ensure that the research question is covered; they can overcome the problem of wording that may be encountered with surveys and the possibility of interviewer effects;*
- 2 *an explanation of answers can be requested;*
- 3 *it is possible to recognize how opinions are given in relation to the answers and reactions of others.*

In fact, none of the first three advantages are amongst the reasons why I chose to use focus groups. Firstly, if a focus group is poorly run (see later), it may not fully address the research question. Secondly, questions still need to be carefully put to the participants of focus groups, and the attitude and behaviour of the moderator can affect the results as much as the attitude and behaviour of an interviewer. Thirdly, it is quite possible to conduct surveys administered by trained interviewers who are able to guide, prompt and probe respondents. It is Harrison’s fourth point which comes closest to explaining the decision to eschew surveys.

Delli, Carpini & Williams (1994) also support focus groups’ superiority over (closed question) surveys, arguing that respondents can generate unanticipated and open-ended responses, which can limit or compensate any bias or shortsightedness on the part of the interviewer. The large volume of data generated in focus groups – often highly detailed – therefore creates fewer ‘spaces’ for interviewers to be tempted to fill-in with his or her own interpretations. Of course, the (in)famous ‘double hermeneutic’ cannot be eliminated completely: the participants in this research are

interpreting their 'world', so as the researcher I am myself interpreting others' interpretations (Marsh, 2002).

Fern (2001:142) provides quantitative evidence showing that focus groups generate similar findings to surveys but provide far more information. This benefit of focus groups fits in well with the requirement for this research to generate substantial and substantive information. Therefore it does not make sense in the context of this research design to replace focus groups with a survey.

All the above benefits in focus groups can also be found in one-to-one interviews. However, the focus group remains a better choice for several reasons. Harrison (2001) focuses on the ability of focus groups to expose interactions, which may consequently reveal or hint at how strongly a person holds an opinion and is prepared to defend it under public pressure. As the concepts of identity and communicative competence are closely connected with social interactions, their exploration within a dynamic environment may be advantageous. I am also interested in how the main concepts used in the research are shaped and re-shaped in discussions. Also, it is the interaction that takes place that is largely responsible for generating the larger volumes of (qualitatively different) data. Bryman (2004:358) also argues that the interaction associated with focus groups makes them "less artificial than many other methods" because interaction is a "normal part of social life".

The focus group was not selected for being economical in the sense that it permits multiple interviews in 'one-shot' which Bryman calls a group interview (2004). Even though the focus group will help save time and money it is its effectiveness as a research tool in the research context that persuaded me to adopt it. Additionally, focus groups tend to explore particular topics in depth, whereas group interviews tend to be expansive (Bryman, 2004)

However, I also acknowledge a problem regarding the raising of sensitive issues in a focus group setting. In focus groups - especially in mixed sex groups - sensitive issues may not be easily raised. Therefore, provision for individuals to raise sensitive/personal issues and confidentiality must be built-in. This will be done in two distinct ways:



1. diary entries that participants do not want aired at the focus group will be held back if requested to do so by the diary owner
2. in these circumstances there should be provision for the participants and myself to discuss the matters privately, if the participant is content to do so.

These ‘protocols’ will be built-in to the research, and participants clearly notified of them.

All focus group interviews (both pilots and the main study) are audio recorded. I decided not to use video recording even though it has some acknowledged benefits (e.g. it can capture, in precise detail, the body language and interactions of participants). Krueger (1998:83) gives the following reasons for not using video recording:

*Video recording is obtrusive and usually not worth the effort. We have found that the video camera may change the environment and affect participant spontaneity. Videotaping usually requires several cameras plus camera operators who attempt to swing camera quickly to follow the following conversation. The fuss and fury of videotaping makes the focus group appear more like a circus than a discussion.*

I chose not to use video recording because of its possible effects on the participants. Interactions and body language can still be noted during the discussion, and assessed for significance during the transcription process. The idea of combining observation with interviews (Darlington and Scott, 2002) was also rejected after careful consideration. This combination is mainly advised for when verbal contacts are limited (eg. in research involving children or some disabled people). I chose to ‘observe’ the body language and other cues instead and take notes during the discussion. Video recording the interactions of participants and interlocutors (Boxer, 2005) or audio recording are possible options. However, after considering the issues involved in such methods, they were rejected: the benefits do not offset the trouble and potential trouble they can cause. They involve major ethical issues and commitment from participants. Given the number of participants in the main study is 14, audio and video recordings

would generate significant amounts of data above-and-beyond that likely to be collected by the daily diaries and focus interviews. As I am interested in how the participants understand and describe their interactions ‘in their own terms’, the interaction through the eyes of participants are of primary concern. Therefore, I decided to run focus groups, audio recorded with the permission from participants.

### **3.8.3 Pilot Focus Group 1**

#### **3.8.3.1 Research aims**

The literature emphasises the importance of piloting and pre-piloting (Gillham, 2000). As a research tool in the main study, the focus group interview needs piloting to see if it is a suitable vehicle with which to collect data (potentially) capable of answering the research questions. It is also ‘practice’: ensuring that I am comfortable in running the focus groups in the main study. In short, piloting makes an important contribution to the working out of reliable research tools.

#### **3.8.3.2 Size of the focus group**

The ideal size for focus groups is contested. Fern (2001:161) recommends between 2 - 8 for “exploring tasks”. Bryman (2004) recommends 6 - 8 participants and Harrison (2002) suggests 8 to 10 interviewees. The ‘ideal’ group size appears, more often than not, to be the average number of participants that other, similar research involving focus groups have used. However, I find Morgan’s (1998:72) guidance on the calculation of the number of participants convincing, because of its ‘scientificness’. First, I worked out how many questions I would like to ask (see Appendix B – interview schedule). Then I considered the sensitivity of the topic for the participants (I concluded the sensitivity of the research to be quite low which Vietnamese students would not find too difficult talking about). Finally, I estimated how much time each participant would have for each question. It would be ideal if all participants each had time to elaborate on all points of view, but overlong interviews are exhausting for all concerned (Gillham, 2000) – this risks deterioration in the quality of the discussion. After careful consideration, and following Morgan’s guidance, I decided to target 6 - 8

participants. Morgan (1998) considers groups comprising 6 or less as small, and those of between 6 and 10 as big.

### **3.8.3.3. Recruitment**

In 2007, I had an unsuccessful experience of recruiting Vietnamese participants for another project. With the support of the International Office in the University of York, I sent a “cold” letter to potential Vietnamese participants enrolled at the university, requesting volunteers for my research. My response rate was zero. From later discussions with eventual volunteers it was confirmed to me that the Vietnamese I approached were not comfortable with a formal request for their assistance from a total stranger; and that they were reluctant to ask for clarification: they simply ignored the letter.

I therefore adopted a different approach for my current research: snowball sampling via an existing Vietnamese institution. I contacted the President of the Vietnamese Society in Leeds - VietsoC - briefed her of the aims of the research and asked for VietsoC’s cooperation. She showed great interest in the research by joining the focus group and passed a copy of my recruitment letter (Appendix A) to seven other society members in the 2007-2008 academic year on my behalf. This approach proved successful and I received a 100% response rate, equating to eight Vietnamese students.

To minimise ‘no-shows’ a reminder was sent one day before the event. This was considered preferable to over-recruiting, which is rarely recommended (Morgan 1998). Therefore, I decided to stop approaching additional potential participants once eight agreed and confirmed their participation. A high no-show rate can be a serious problem. To guard against it, the actual method of recruiting participants was taken seriously. Incentives for participating in the research are modest (due to a limited financial budget), so it was essential to make a good ‘impression’ on potential participants through the recruitment letter. It was polite, not overly formal and friendly, emphasising the importance of their participation. The responses of potential participants were carefully acknowledged, and gratitude was expressed. Reminders were sent in advance of the meeting. Any questions from the participants regarding

their participation in the focus group were addressed promptly. I also made it as easy as possible for participants to attend by seeking their approval regarding the date, time and venue of the meetings (see the logistics section, later). These steps were aimed at putting participants at ease – they are much more likely to feel comfortable (and turn up!) if they are familiar with a location and have a rough idea of what a focus group does. They know that it will be an informal, relaxed ‘talk’, unthreatening and relatively unconstrained. Significantly, all the participants were acquainted with one another (Fern, 2001): they had a general idea of who else would be participating in the discussion. As a result, the response rate was 100%.

#### **3.8.3.4 Participants**

As it is a pilot study, I was trying to elicit as many ideas from participants as possible, and so therefore welcomed participants of various ages, studying different degrees, and different durations of study in the UK. There was an equal mixture of males and females (4 each). Participants were recruited from a ‘natural group’ (defined by Bryman [1998] as an established group); in this case from the community of Vietnamese students enrolled in educational establishments in Leeds and members of Vietsoc (Vietnamese Society). The participants knew each other quite well, and displayed discernable levels of familiarity and cohesion. The advantages and disadvantages of focus groups comprising of participants who know each other are identified in more detail below. However, it is worth adding at this point that the centrality of ‘the group’ and group dynamics as, *inter alia*, a retreat or a repository of shared identities and understandings is a key focus of the research.

In the research project, I refer to the participants using pseudonyms. This reflects concerns about invasions of privacy linked to concerns regarding: what happens with the information that is obtained; who has access to it; and can it be traced back to the individual (which overlaps with concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity and the need to avoid harming participants).

**Table 3.2: Pilot focus group 1 – Participant Profile**

Interviewee	P	V	LA	S	HI	HY	MA	HA
Gender	M	M	F	M	F	F	F	M
Age	30	24	36	22	25	25	30	31
Degree	PhD	MA	PhD	Found- ation	MA	MA	MA	PhD
Major	Science	Business	Social Science	-	Science	Business	Business	Social Science
Currently sharing with English- speaking housemates	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Part-time job (s)	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Member of other society rather than Vietsoc	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Length of stay in the UK	4 years	3 years	4 years (MA in 2002)	3 years	1 year	1 year	1 year	3 years

**Time, place and administration/procedure**

Time: 31 May 2008, from 2 – 3.10 pm

Duration: The focus group lasted 1.20 hours

Venue: In the Vietsoc's President's accommodation

Nine chairs and one small table were arranged in a circle; I was sitting at the same table as the participants. The room was unimposing and of medium size, comfortably accommodating all participants and myself, thereby avoiding any environmental effects on the participants (Krueger, 1998). A digital voice recorder was placed in a central position. The accommodation itself was chosen by the participants as a place

where they had socialised before. Refreshments were available throughout the focus group.

At the beginning, I thanked participants for attending the session and stressed the importance of their participation. I also briefed them again regarding the purpose of the discussion and made it clear that all ideas were welcome and that 'we meet as equals'. I adhered to the ethical considerations recommended by Bryman (2000) (see 3.7) to ensure no harm to the participants (e.g. bullying, ostracising etc.).

At the conclusion, I repeated my thanks to the participants for their assistance. I briefly explained what would then happen with the data they supplied. If any participants were interested in reading the transcription I promised to send them a copy.

Participants were also informed that a short questionnaire requesting personal socio-demographic information would be sent to them after the session. This was done afterwards and not in advance in order to help participants feel more comfortable about attending the focus group. It was not asked for on the day of the discussion because of time constraints and its potential for disruption. However, after conducting the first pilot focus group, I found it more helpful to let participants introduce themselves at the beginning of the discussion (see lessons from focus group 1 – 3.8.3.6)

For the interview schedule: As the purpose of the first pilot group was exploratory, the questions were less structured (Morgan, 1998:45). I attempted to strike a balance between the topics that I believe are relevant to my research questions, and the need to create opportunities for participants to express their own concerns and interests. Therefore, I included in the protocol open-ended questions (see Appendix B).

Regarding the level of moderator/facilitator involvement, I acted as the moderator of the focus group, assisted by a friend who helped with refreshments and child-minding (two participants were married and brought their child). As explained in section 2, the overall approach was to avoid being too intrusive or insistent on too much 'structure'. The set of questions developed were intended to function as general guidance only:

*steering* the discussion but not *straightjacketing* it. This had the advantage of affording participants the freedom to talk about issues that were important or interesting to them in terms of their efforts to improve their English. However, too much freedom and a fully undirected approach might allow too much irrelevant information to surface. It was my responsibility to decide the extent to which participants could stray ‘off-topic’ and continue along lines not of obvious direct relevance to the research. I was aware of the sensitivities involved when steering them ‘back’ into more relevant territory. I was also aware that some contributions, which on the surface might be viewed as tangential, may at a different level of analysis contain useful information etc. worth investigation. Further comments about the degree of intervention by the moderator is presented later.

### **3.8.3.5 The interaction among participants**

One of the differences between focus groups and individual interviews is that the former permits significant interaction between the participants (Bryman, 2004). Focus groups were chosen partly because I was interested in the way participants construct and present their views during – and as a consequence of - interaction with others as “members of a group” (Bryman, 2004: 346). However, in reviewing over 200 research projects over a 50 year period, Wilkinson (1998:112) concludes that in most research employing focus groups the interactions are “rarely reported, let alone analysed”. It is a pity to run a focus group and only pay attention to what is said and ignore how it is said; the context as well as the prompts. Therefore, the report focuses on the interactions among the participants. In general, the participants were relaxed and interested in the discussion. There was little I had to do to maintain the liveliness of the discussion and the participants were enthusiastic right from the start. Towards the end, they lingered to chat, even after I announced that the session had ended and they were welcome to leave. Morgan (1998) considers this as evidence that the participants found the event and the topics interesting and enjoyable. In contrast there is Fern’s (2001) focus group comprising of Vietnamese women’s understanding of and feelings about sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Fern argues that Vietnamese women are reluctant to communicate openly with strangers, and so the participants Fern selected were all friends. However, their level of participation was not adequate (2001: 158):

*They tend to agree more with the moderator and express personal belief, values and practices... In fact, two thirds of the content of the Asian transcripts was devoted to giving information and answering questions. It is reported that Southeast Asians reflected courtesy bias and were less likely to express their views that they thought were not acceptable to others in the group.*

Fern's focus group, as it was reported, turned out to be unsuccessful. According to the author, the participation was adversely affected by a lack of confidence in speaking in English and by a "horizontal collectivist culture". The problem identified by Fern (2001) appears daunting because it invokes limitations pivoting around innate and/or deeply held cultural mores. However, another factor might be at work, and it might not be the language that mitigated against success. As the author notes, the focus group was a disappointment despite the women being confident in communicating in English in the one-to-one pre-sessions with the recruiter. The problem that Fern and the research team had can be avoided in advance. I can use the following to illustrate the point that culture might not have played the only part in the failure.

In order to develop a "feel" for a "proper focus group", I volunteered to be a participant in one conducted in the University of York. I would call it a group interview rather than a focus group because the discussion was one-way, between the moderator and one participant at a time. There was limited interactions or even eye contact between participants. In my opinion, this was not due to a "horizontal collectivist" culture as the participants were from different cultures. The problem was that I was only one of four participants who agreed to meet, of which only two (myself included) turned up (50%). The number of moderators/administrators present (3) outnumbered the participants. In fact the presence of the manager – no doubt keen to listen to ideas from respondents first-hand - spoiled the atmosphere. None of the participants – myself included – felt comfortable providing opinions, and were keen for the event to end. Accordingly, I would argue that the most rewarding incentive for participants (excluding pecuniary rewards!) is to receive an opportunity to express ideas which they think are important. In order to be able to say what they really think, participants must feel able to trust all the people in the group, including the moderator. Once they feel comfortable, they will be more committed to the discussion.



I therefore took cautious steps to avoid and limit this possible problem. First, in terms of recruitment, all participants have socialized with each other before. Secondly, I made sure the participants felt comfortable with the accommodation. Third, the focus group was presented as/contained a socialising element, with refreshments and snacks available. The Vietnamese participants were therefore quite relaxed and interested in the discussion and keen to contribute ideas and opinions. In particular, they were not afraid to acknowledge their sub-optimum English proficiency.

I also ensured that the participants understood the purpose of the focus group. I confirmed my commitment to adhere to principles of confidentiality and anonymity regarding the information recorded and topics discussed. In addition, it was emphasized that all ideas were welcome; that no judgments would be made, and that we meet 'as equals'. The Vietnamese participants felt sufficiently comfortable to challenge and disagree with each other. This gave me a chance to see how participants justify their opinions and form ideas based on what others in the group say and how they react to particular statements etc. In some cases, individual participants had to explain why he or she maintained certain positions. As one of the interests of the research is to see how ideas and concepts are formed under the influence of interactions among members in an established group, it was useful to see this dynamic in action. Fern's (2001) study suggests that conducting a focus group in L2 adversely affects levels of participation of Vietnamese. This problem was eradicated by conducting the focus group in Vietnamese (my own L1).

The second problem is the difficulty in analysing data. This is due not only to the huge amount of data generated but also the complexity associated with many people involved in a discussion (overlapping conversations; (in)audibility; interruptions; abrupt changes of topic etc.). Recording therefore sometimes does not capture everything (sometimes this is due to poor recording equipment or poor positioning of the equipment or background noise and poor acoustics). I followed advice given by Gillham (2000). I commenced transcribing straight away, when my memory was still fresh about the interview day. Notes about body language and laughter and sarcasm etc. were also noted during the discussion. Careful attention was paid to the position of the microphone so as to record all participants' contributions clearly. If in doubt, I

was prepared to contact participants to check if what I heard was what they said (but in fact I did not have to do so).

The next problem involves the amount of effort and time spent on transcribing. Blooer *et al* (2001) points out that transcribing a focus group takes more time than transcribing an interview of the same length. The interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese, using Microsoft Word. It may take up to six hours to transcribe a one-hour interview (Gillham, 2000) but for a one-hour focus group it took an extra two hours.

Group effects can seriously affect discussions and therefore their validity. This problem was observed in Krueger's (1998) and Morgan's (1998) focus groups. That there will be dynamics in a group event is inevitable. There are always dominant participants and "shy" ones. In my experience, group effects did occur in both of my pilot groups. I have followed Krueger's (1998) guidance on how to 'turn the spotlight' off the dominant one(s). I was careful to not upset him/her (Morgan, 1998). I tried to keep a balance between encouraging rapport (between participants and myself) and limiting the over-dominant participants. I also paid attention to those participants who appeared to be holding back, perhaps feeling intimidated, and encouraged them to speak by asking them questions directly, referring to them by their names, and maintaining frequent eye contact with them. It did work.

Group-think is where an idea assumes dominance and valid alternative views – usually held by a minority - remain unarticulated (in some cases the unarticulated view may be held by a majority, but individuals may feel that publicly they must express certain other – e.g. more socially acceptable - opinions). In some focus groups, a group view may take hold, which participants become too attached to and uncritical of. There are, obviously, certain difficulties associated with identifying when group-think is occurring – how to distinguish it from legitimately held views which are the product of robust personal evaluations of competing views.

The last problem is associated with sensitive issues surfacing in focus group. The problem may take three main forms. First, participants may withhold sensitive/personal information, thereby limiting the usefulness of the focus group

(which would of course remain hidden from me). Secondly, if someone does raise sensitive information and viewpoints it may make other participants feel uneasy and embarrassed, suppressing their willingness to participate in that and future sessions, and/or conditioning their reactions. Finally, some sensitive issues may also be controversial ones, capable of generating heated debate and disagreement, which may be an unpleasant experience and, once more, may deter people from participating. Some of the negatives associated with the last two issues can be mitigated by a skilled moderator (eg. moving the subject on if he/she detects discomfort). However, I felt that the subject of the research was unlikely to generate such strong emotions. I anticipated the first problem being most likely: that participants will simply keep quiet about issues they feel embarrassed about or consider too personal. Fern's research (2001) describes a group of Vietnamese women's unwillingness to be really open with anyone who isn't family or a very close friend. Although sensitivities associated with SLA research are likely to be relatively rare – and certainly not as profound as those related to SIDS - previous research suggests that some sensitive issues are important here. Freed (1995), for example, showed how the opportunities to speak English for Russian women in America were shaped by American men's construction of Eastern European women's sexuality. Consequently, provision has been made encouraging all participants to be able to talk to myself on a one-to-one basis to discuss those issues he/she does not want to raise 'publicly', with appropriate guarantees regarding confidentiality.

The interviews will be transcribed soon after the interview day, whilst the memory remains fresh, as suggested in Gillham (2000). I found this way very helpful as it has helped me understand the significance of transcription better.

For example, in Pilot Focus Group 1, in Leeds, a male PhD student commented on his limited access to the English language caused by not owning a TV or radio at home. He used the word "we" to refer to many cases of Vietnamese students, not just himself. As soon as he finished the comment, he looked around at other participants to seek support. Once his idea was confirmed by the others in the discussion he felt more confident and elaborated further. Such 'observation' may indicate that this viewpoint was not strongly held by the student (although there are several alternative explanations). Observing body language, although open to misinterpretation, is clearly

capable of complementing spoken words and revealing meaning. Gillham's (2000) recommendation of immediate transcription proves helpful.

### **3.8.3.6 Lessons from the focus group 1**

This section reviews points for consideration and improvement from the first focus group. It is based on my observations, and with reference to appropriate literature on methodology. In general, there was a need for considerations of a more structured focus group. The first pilot group was an exploratory discussion, and the questions were less structured. It had the advantage of providing participants with space to raise interests and concerns about their experiences of speaking English in the UK. However, the experience of running the first pilot group showed me that I needed a more structured approach in the second focus group. Morgan (1998:46) describes the advantages and disadvantages of a structured approach as follows:

*The obvious strength of the more structured approach is its ability to deliver a maximum amount of well-targeted information. The downside, however, is an inability to learn about issues that are not included within the narrowly focused set of predetermined issues.*

According to this, I run the risk of missing important information. However, the decision to conduct a more structured focus group was made after careful consideration. First, because the concepts of identity, power relations, and intergroup and intercultural communication are sensitive, complex and subtle. In order to collect more data about them, the questions must be more focused. A more focused approach will help nail down answers to the research questions. Second, as generating large numbers of additional topics of concern was not a primary goal, I felt confident in risking limiting information in exchange for "a maximum amount of well-targeted information" (Morgan, 1998:46). It must be noted that focus group 2 was still far from *highly* structured merely *more* structured compared to the first pilot. A more structured focus group mean reflects in the size of the group, the interview schedule and the level of moderation, which will be discussed below in detail.

### **Size of the focus group**

The size proved suitable with the semi-structured interview schedule. However, the concept of identity requires a more structured interview which will help tease out information. A smaller size, for example 6, would possibly be more suitable for a more structured level of moderation. This was taken into account in the pilot focus group 2 (see 3.6.4.2).

### **Interview schedule**

The schedule for the pilot focus group 2 should be more structured and contain fewer questions. This was taken into account in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.5). I realized that I actually had only limited control over the interview schedule. Firstly, this was due to my relative inexperience as a moderator and of finding the right balance between getting the answers to the questions I want to ask, and receiving unanticipated information. I was not particularly adept at this in the first focus group (this issue is discussed later, in more detail). Secondly, I did, in fact, ‘abandon’ my schedule at times in order to generate more ideas and to follow the thoughts and stories of participants. In the schedule, questions are designed based on literature reviews and assumptions. As soon as I started talking to the participants, I realized that I had to listen to them more, rather than interrupting them and mechanically moving on to the next question to ‘complete’ the interview schedule.

On the bright side, Bryman, (2000) refers to these as both problems and as opportunities. A degree of freestyle moderation allows the researcher to generate more ideas and views from the participants. Darlington and Scott (2002) also reports a case when a researcher called Angelina started out with a very detailed question guideline for her focus groups. However, at the first focus group she managed to ask only a few of them and in the final meetings the situation had deteriorated so much that she asked none from the schedule at all. She said she did not want to ruin the relationship between her and the interviewees by imposing her agenda and disturbing the conversation flow. I felt the same in the first focus group. As Pilot 1 was exploratory, the schedule was less structured and moderated in a flexible and experimental manner. Details about the level of moderation is addressed in the following section.

### **Level of moderation**

In Vietnamese culture, it is considered rude to interrupt speakers. Therefore, I found it difficult to interrupt participants even when straying off topic. This was fairly common. For example, when asked to rate their speaking performance now compared to when they first arrived in the UK, one participant started to talk about her writing skills instead. Almost immediately others joined her and expressed multiple views about writing skills. This is quite common in focus groups as Krueger (1998) acknowledges.

At first, I tried to be patient, as I did not want to upset the participants as this might adversely affect the quality of the focus group. Later, I realized that if I simply waited for them to finish their point I would never be able to complete my agenda. So I did interrupt, but not when the participants were in the middle of telling a story or were particularly animated (Krueger, 1998:59). In fact, I became more confident in handling this when I saw the participants themselves interrupt each other without incurring annoyance.

More detachment from the focus group: When I was transcribing, I realized that I could have been less judgmental. At times, I did contribute some comments (almost by accident or habit) such as “really?” which might have a certain effects on the participant (in this case, suggesting disbelief). I was even telling my own story at one point. I should have spent that time listening to the participant’s stories. At times I became too involved, possibly because as a fellow international student I felt I had similar experiences to my participants. This also happened when the participants themselves sought agreement and ideas from me. In this case, I should have anticipated the situation and treated it as a topic for group discussion.

Another issue is the researcher/participant relationship. I met the participants in Leeds for the first time at the focus group (except S, who I had several contacts with before). Also, the age difference between myself and the participants should be taken into account. Vietnamese people address each other according to gender and age differences. This means that from the moment we greet each other, we need to know who is the oldest (and who the youngest) in order to produce an appropriate address. It is possible that these ‘rules’ had an effect on the participants (also see Chapter 2). S, in

Leeds, for example was much quieter in the discussion than he usually is outside. One possible explanation is that as the youngest (see Table 3.2), he might have felt intimidated in expressing ideas in front of his elders - those who (in Vietnamese culture) are supposed to have more experience to share. Another possible explanation is that S was sitting next to me. I was therefore not able to give him as much eye contact as the other participants. This might have discouraged him from getting more involved in the discussion. I raised these concerns with S, privately and informally, afterwards. He maintained that he felt relaxed and did not feel any extra pressure as a result of being the youngest, and disagreed with my belief that he was more quiet than usual. However, this issue was suggested to be paid attention to in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.6).

Overall, I should have paid more attention to the 'balance' between the level of structured questions and the degree of moderator involvement. The questions are less structured, so the level of moderator involvement is minimal as well. When participants went off topic, I should have brought them back more effectively. When discussing topics absolutely relevant to the research, I should have afforded them more freedom, and intervened less.

Instead of sending out questionnaires about bio data afterwards, it would be helpful to ask participants to introduce themselves briefly at the very beginning, instead of a small questionnaire being distributed afterwards. This was because I wanted to help participants to feel at ease right at the start of the focus group. In the first focus group, I assumed the participants had known each other well so I did not use such an introduction. This was taken into account in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.2).

### **3.8.3.7 Summary**

This section has described the first pilot focus group, which was conducted in Leeds in May 2008. It debriefs the preparations, information of participants and recruitment method. Literature supporting my reasons for utilising focus groups is also discussed. Pilot study 1 generated some interesting data, which will be presented in Chapter 4. The lesson from focus group 1 suggested that there remained 'areas for improvement' in my utilisation of the focus group tool. Considerations and suggestions on how to

improve the research tool have already been put forward. Several conclusions were executed in the second pilot focus group. Recruitment, appropriate accommodation in Pilot Focus Group 1 all proved effective. They are therefore repeated in the second pilot focus group. One of the most important lessons learned concerned the level of structure of the questions, and the level of moderation which clearly influenced the extent and nature of my interventions.

### **3.8.4. Pilot focus group 2**

#### **3.8.4.1 Research aims**

Gorard (2001) emphasises the importance of piloting and re-piloting until the research instrument becomes sufficiently effective to ensure the reliability of the research. Discussion in the previous section shows that there was a need to conduct the second pilot focus group with special attention paid to working towards a more structured approach to the interview schedule and level of moderation. For pilot focus group 2, I decided to replicate the recruitment method, setting and facilities etc., as they had all proved effective in pilot focus group 1.

#### **3.8.4.2 Recruitment**

The recruitment method for the first pilot focus group proved effective so I replicated it in the second pilot: snowball sampling via an existing Vietnamese institution. I again contacted the President of the Vietnamese Society, but this time in York (“Vietsoc”), and asked for their cooperation. This time, I was supported by the President (again), who passed my recruitment letter to five students; and she herself also participated in the interview. I chose to target six students instead of eight as a result of lessons learned during the first pilot in Leeds (see 3.8.3.6). The focus group size was smaller because I planned to operationalise a ‘more structured’ focus group.

Although the timing was not ideal (the focus group was planned for August in the summer holiday when most students would be exploring the UK or even visiting home) I was happy with the 6 volunteers and it met the minimum target number suggested by Bryman (1998). Given the second focus group was intended to be more



structured, a smaller number of participants would provide each with more time to answer my questions, thus eliciting in-depth views. I used the same letter of recruitment from the first pilot study, as it too had proved effective. Similarly, reminders were mailed out to minimise “no-shows”. I was keen for all 6 participants to come to the focus group as I did not want to end up with a sub-optimal number of attendees and wanted to avoid the type of *debacle* that I had participated in previously (see 3.8.3.5).

This recruitment method once again proved effective as I received 100% response rate for the second time. This suggests that I can keep the same recruitment strategy for the main study. All participants were, of course, recruited on a volunteer basis.

Time, place and administration procedures:

Time: 16 August 2008, from 7pm – 8.35 pm

Duration: The focus group lasted 1.35 hours

The focus group was conducted in domestic accommodation, with seven chairs around a modest-sized table. I was sitting at the same table with the participants. It was in the evening, the lighting was good enough but not too bright. Davies (1994:61) points out potential detrimental effects caused by inappropriate venues:

*The ambience of the room may influence group members and their productivity. Conditions such as too much noise and heat and too many visual effects may create stress that in turn makes demands on the attention and information-processing capacities of group members. The increase stress can result in distorted perceptions of smaller interpersonal space. As heat and noise level increase, some individuals may feel more physically constrained and that their privacy is threatened. These threats are stressful conditions, group participations begin thinking about ways to compensate for their perceived lack of personal space. Thus, they become less sensitive to social cues, less motivated to be helpful, unable to recall facts and issues that have been raised, and may become more aggressive and less tolerant of others; views.*

With this in mind, precautions were taken to limit any environmental effects on participants. With the consent of the participants, a digital voice recorder was placed

in a central position on the table. Refreshments were provided throughout the focus group.

I followed the same procedures in the first focus group and adopted similar ethical considerations (see 3.7). As suggested in the lessons learnt from focus group 1 (see 3.8.3.6), I asked participants to introduce themselves briefly at the very beginning, instead of a small questionnaire being distributed afterwards. This was because I wanted a 'device' that could act as an ice-breaker, and sufficiently composed to answer questions and contribute.

### **3.8.4.3 Participants**

Six undergraduate students (two females, four males) participated in pilot focus group 2. Similar to those in Leeds, the York participants knew each other quite well (some had even have known each other for more than 2 or 3 years). However, they were younger; all pursuing undergraduate degrees and majoring in Business (it was known to me beforehand that all Vietnamese students in York in the academic year 2007-2008 were undergraduates and pursuing Business studies). As mentioned earlier, I was interested in carrying out a more structured focus group, i.e. just as – or even more – interested in testing the tool rather than the findings. Therefore I was relaxed with the relative homogeneity of participants - I did not have any preference with regards to their ages or subjects of study. Nevertheless, I was happy that the York group was different from the Leeds group. I was interested to see if this would generate different data and give me a chance to compare and contrast the groups (see Chapter 4 for Analysis and Findings).

**Table 3.3: Pilot focus group 2 – Participant Profile**

Interviewee	HN	TH	HNG	M	T	HG
Gender	F	M	F	M	M	M
Age	22	20	20	20	23	21
Degree	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate
Major	Business	Business	Business	Business	Business	Business
Currently sharing with English-speaking housemates	no	no	no	yes	No	no
Currently working part-time	yes	yes	no	yes	No	no
Member(s) of societies rather than Vietsoc	yes	yes	no	yes	No	yes
Length of stay in the UK	5 years	3 years	4 years	3 years	3 years	3 years

#### 3.8.4.4 Interview schedule

As suggested in lessons from focus group 1 (3.6.3.6) the set of questions of the second focus group were more structured (see Appendix D). I designed a different set of questions for the second pilot focus group. I picked up the most important issues from the first group and used them as a template for the second group. More structured questions were designed on this basis to be used in pilot focus group 2 (see Appendix D). The exploratory task in focus group 1 generated ‘headline’ concerns for a group of Vietnamese students in Leeds. As mentioned in the recruitment section, I was also interested in investigating how relevant those concerns were for participants in York. The set of questions for the second focus group therefore were based on the themes that *emerged* from the first focus group, rather than either a brand new list of topics or the list that I had started out with in Leeds (for schedule focus group 1 - see Appendix B):

- Participants’ evaluation of their current speaking skill
- Participants’ identity
- Opportunities of practicing the target language in the UK
- Participants’ views of ideal ways to improve speaking skill

The interview schedule allowed me to compare the answers of the two groups. This is part of the task of comparison that I want to engage with in the main study (Menard, 2002). In addition, as suggested in the lessons from pilot focus group 1, the schedule also reduced the number of questions from 8 to 5, which gave each participant more time to answer (see 3.6.3.6).

#### **3.8.4.5 Level of moderator/facilitator involvement**

The level of moderation is largely influenced by the structure of the focus group. In the context of a highly structured focus group Morgan (1998:46) emphasizes:

*A highly structured set of questions would limit your ability to uncover this missing information. And even if the group might try to raise it, a more structured moderating style would redirect the discussion back to the preset topics.*

I acted as the sole moderator of the focus group, again without the support of anyone else. I adopted a more structured moderating style which steered participants back to the interview topics whenever they strayed. However, there were moments when I let participants feel free to carry on to finish a point they were trying to make, even though I did not think they were fully answering my questions. I did not adhere slavishly to my question schedule as originally intended. Partly because I did not want a highly-structured focus group, but partly because I inevitably found some points that participants raised to be novel and very interesting. Whenever this occurred I allowed them to continue without interruption. I was also, of course, trying to get a balance between developing a rapport and getting what I wanted.

With my experience from the first focus group, during the second I was more attuned to the responses from participants. For example, in the discussion I noticed that while most participants valued contacts with native speakers of English – seeing it as a good way for them to improve their own L2 skills - most were living with other non-native speakers, typically fellow Vietnamese. I encouraged the participants to expand on this fact and received interesting comments directly related to the concept of identity and intercultural communication (see Chapter 4).

With regards to the researcher/participant relationship, as suggested in lesson from focus group 1 (3.8.3.6), I also paid attention to the fact if the age difference was at work. I am the oldest Vietnamese student in York, therefore, the age difference between myself my participants in York was bigger than that the Leeds participants. However, during the focus group I did not notice any possible problems that might have caused by the hierarchy caused by age differences as described in section 3.8.3.6. One possible explanation was that I met and knew the participants in York prior to the focus group. We had attended a number of social events together, and had known some of them for three years at the time of the pilot study.

#### **3.8.4.6 Summary**

In general, pilot focus group 2 was better run, being based on lessons from the first focus group. A more structured interview schedule and moderation approach seemed to work well when combined with the small group size of six participants. I was confident after focus group 2 that I had become a much better moderator. I also learnt how to achieve a balance between detachment and involvement, where necessary. Both focus groups 1 and 2 showed that the focus group interview is a suitable research instrument for generating and comparing Vietnamese students' feelings about their learning experiences in the UK. It is therefore recommended to be utilised in the main study.

### **3.8.5 Some final points for both pilot focus groups**

#### **3.8.5.1 The use of Vietnamese language**

The two pilot focus group interviews yielded approximately 175 minutes of audio material. With the participants' consent, the interviews were digitally recorded. I also had a back-up recorder for each interview - but I was lucky and did not experience any technical problems.

Consideration was given whether to use English or Vietnamese language through out the interviews and in correspondence with participants. The use of English language

can have several advantages. In particular, it can eliminate time spent on translation and therefore also problems associated with loss of accuracy. As it happens, Vietnamese language was used throughout all the interviews for the following reasons. First, it was the participants' choice to speak in their L1. In my first letter to potential participants in my first focus group, I left the choice of Vietnamese or English up to them. I did not think it would be an issue in their willingness to join the discussion, but to my surprise, most participants seemed anxious about having to use English in the interviews, and expressed 'relief' when I emphasised that Vietnamese could be used if it made them feel more comfortable. Some participants even mentioned that they would only turn up if Vietnamese was not used. Apparently, the idea of using the English language had the potential to 'scare' participants off.

The difference in languages between participants and the moderator can possibly result in dissatisfaction (Fern, 2001). A similar problem was reported by Goldstein (1996) when the author interviewed Polish women working in Canada. She acknowledges her inability to understand the language of the informants as one of the weaknesses of her research.

As the topics of discussion focus on Vietnamese students' daily experience of communication in English - and the complex multi-layered concept of identity, which can be difficult to conceptualise and articulate even in the mother tongue - I considered it desirable to use my participants (and my) first language, so that we could all express our ideas accurately.

### **3.8.5.2 Translation**

Temple and Young (2004) criticise several research projects for failing to identify problems surrounding issues related to translation: with the whole process of translating and interpreting information provided by participants remaining largely hidden. This can have the undesirable effect of making the reader question the methodological validity of the research. In the context of this research, I share Vietnamese as the L1 with the participants. This permits me to also function as a translator. Temple and Young (2004:168) argue that there are advantages associated with situations where the research can be conducted in the participants' L1:

*The situation where the researcher is fluent in the language of communities she is working with is rare. It offers opportunities in terms of research methods that are not open to other researchers in cross language research. I can use the experience of translating to discuss points in the text where she has had to stop and think about meaning.*

I am a proficient and experienced translator of Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese, having worked as a translator in both Vietnam and the UK. In addition to understanding the syntax, vocabulary and meanings of Vietnamese words, I am a Vietnamese national and have spent 30 years living in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city. This therefore affords the further advantage of the research being undertaken by someone with first-hand experience and understanding of certain cultural concepts raised by participants.

One example of a serious consequence associated with a lack of shared cultural knowledge is described by Eisenbruch (1994:179). The case involves a female Vietnamese patient of a UK General Practitioner. The patient and the GP were 'at odds' in agreeing on a course of treatment for the patient's condition. Neither the patient's non-fluency in English nor the doctor's inability to speak Vietnamese were the main source of confusion and disagreement. Rather, it was the GP's failure to understand the cultural origins that lay behind his/her patient's understanding of her condition that therefore influenced what treatments she trusted - and therefore was or was not prepared to accept.

I consider myself as an "objective instrument of research" (Temple and Young, 2004:169) in which all information is merely transmitted through me, so keeping the originator's message as unchanged as possible. To achieve this I was aware of the likelihood of encountering Vietnamese phrases which might not have exact equivalents in English. Whilst maintaining the anonymity of my participants, I therefore sought occasional assistance from other bilingual Vietnamese and English speakers to proofread my translation (all of whom were external to the research itself). This was to eliminate any "bias", one of the primary concerns of all research that involves translation processes. The bias does not solely rest in the translator's ability

to translate accurately, but is also potentially reflected in my “socio-cultural positioning” (Temple and Young, 2004:169) and in the use of “language to construct self and other” (Alcoff, 1991; Back and Solomos, 1993; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996, cited in Temple and Young 2004:167). Additionally, when translating, I tried to ensure that I had understood not just the etymological meaning of the words themselves but also the meanings and emphases intended by the interlocutor (the speaker’s timbre and/or facial expressions and/or the context within which something is said may provide additional clues to meaning).

Further details regarding the procedures used to interpret and transcribe the interviews is provided in Chapter 4 – Data analysis and findings. All interviews and completed diaries are translated into English.

### **3.8.5.3 Conclusion**

Focus groups were chosen to be a key research instrument in the research project. It was tested twice, the first in May 2008 in Leeds, the second in August 2008 in York. The first focus group was more exploratory, adopting a semi-structured interview schedule. However, in order to collect relevant data in a more efficient way, I decided to apply a more structured interview schedule and moderation level at the second pilot. Therefore, it is suggested that in the main study the focus group method be conducted in the same manner as the second pilot study. The following section will discuss another research tool: the self-completed diary.

## **3.9 Diary**

### **3.9.1 Research aims**

According to Bolger *et al* (2003:579) diaries are useful in generating frequent reports on individuals’ daily lives and allow us to “study change processes during major events and transitions”. As described in Chapter 2, international students experience and attempt to cope with significant levels of change when they travel to study away from home and, additionally, there is a distinct temporal element featured in my research. Daily diaries completed contemporaneously also minimize the extent to which participants must recall information. Diaries are particularly good therefore at



capturing: person level information; within-person changes over time; and the possible causes of within-person changes (Bolger *et al*, 2003, Pomerantz, *et al*, 2004, Sharky *et al.*, 2005)

Barbour (2009:294) defines a diary as a record of activities and experiences kept by respondents for research purposes. The template of such a record can be “structured or unstructured, as the researcher wishes” (Barbour, 2009:19). Therefore, diaries can be constructed requiring participants to record information at regular intervals or, alternatively, in response to specific events and signals. For the purposes of this research, a highly structured diary format will be used – in effect, a daily questionnaire - and participants are required to record and comment on those events and experiences they have experienced on a particular day (questionnaires are typically associated with cross-sectional research and capture a ‘snapshot’ of phenomena at a particular point in time. It is the temporal element associated with my research which confirms my use of this particular instrumentation as a form of diary). The use of a structured diary can help address the limitations of diary studies discussed in the following section.

### **3.9.2 Limitations of diaries**

Bailey (1991) observes that most published diary studies are completed by teachers or linguists, not actual learners. Unstructured, ‘freestyle’ diarizing may also generate highly subjective data which varies in quality and quantity and cannot easily be quantified and/or systematically compared and contrasted (Bailey, 1991, Bolger *et al*, 2003, Pomerantz, *et al*, 2004, Sharky *et al.*, 2005). Participants in my research are novice diarists but ‘real learners’. Therefore, to ensure the ‘quality’ of diary entries, a structured diary (in the form of a daily questionnaire) is used to provide more guidance and ‘focus’ for the diarists and to facilitate analysis.

Apart from addressing quality issues, the structured diary approach can also address the problem of commitment. Both Bailey (1991) and Bolger *et al* (2003) identify commitment (to maintaining a daily diary) as one of the major risks to successful diary studies. A structured template is therefore used so that the process of recording

data is less time-consuming, thereby minimizing the ‘drop-out’ rate. This appeared to work and all my participants maintained their diary for the full three months.

Although the diary takes the form of a questionnaire and is highly structured it was also designed to capture significant amounts of relevant data. The degree of structure of the diary was therefore calibrated to save my participants’ time, while at the same time generating *sufficient amounts of relevant* data capable of meeting the research aims.

Finally, Bolger *et al* (2003:592) refers to the risk of “reactance” and habituation. Reactance occurs when individuals completing the diary allow it to affect their behaviours. I have addressed this point elsewhere (referring to a housemate’s participation in a national radio listening survey). Habituation occurs when the diarist believes that he or she has ‘learned’ what is being asked of him/her and completes the diary unthinkingly: this is also addressed previously in this Chapter in further detail. Bolger *et al.*, (2003) argues that further studies looking at the effect of reactance and habituation on the validity of diary-based research is urgently needed.

With regards to the way the diary is administered, completed and returned (this can be done electronically, by e-mail, or by post) I have left this decision up to the participants. I offer both ready-printed diaries for pen-and-paper completion (so that participants can put it on notice boards or other convenient locations) or e-versions sent as an email attachment.

### **3.9.3 Recruitment**

The diary pilot was during week 1 of term 2, in January 2009. I contacted five Vietnamese students in the University of York who had never participated in any parts of the research project before and asked for their cooperation. All five students agreed to participate in the diary pilot study. I chose wholly new participants for the diary pilot in order to receive new views from Vietnamese students hitherto unaware of the main concerns of my research. The main study was targeted at between 14 and 16 participants, and therefore five participants was considered to be a reasonable number for piloting.

### 3.9.4 Participants

The purpose of the diary pilot was to test the research tool (the diary): therefore students were recruited regardless of their education background, major, gender or age. Those selected comprised a mixture of genders, but were of similar ages and studying similar degrees. They are referred to by their initials which again, are not necessarily their actual initials.

**Table 3.4: Participant profile – diary pilot study**

	THNH	CH	LPH	LTR	DA
Age	20	20	22	22	23
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male
Major	Economics	Economics	Business	Business	Economics and Politics
Degree	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate

### 3.9.5 Diary design

As discussed in section 3.9.2, a structured diary format is chosen for the purpose of this research. This section will explain the steps and thoughts involving in the process of constructing a structured template for participants to keep on a daily basis. Buckingham and Saunders (2007) recommend breaking down research questions into hypotheses, and identifying the key concepts associated with them that should then be turned into ‘testables’. A diary is then constructed which allows relationships between the testable to be identified and analysed.

Hypothesis: Identity and second language acquisition are interconnected

**Table 3.5: Hypothesis, concepts and testables**

Hypotheses	Concepts	Testables
Identity is constructed and re-constructed – not fixed	Identity	Presence of social roles and changes to them in time and space Self-perceptions regarding identity
Identity influences interaction (inputs and outputs)	Interactions	Qualitative and quantitative nature of interactions Self-assessments of linguistic competence
Opportunities to interact with L2 speakers are contingent	Inter-Group	Group facilitating interaction and acculturation, minimising shock (support mechanism) or limiting interaction?
	Power (power over and power to) – worthy to speak and worthy to listen	Evidenced In Key relationships (eg employer/employee; student/supervisor; tenant/landlord etc.) and by individual positions and ‘group’. Success or failure in specific interactions
	Motivation	
Greater interaction with target language speakers leads to greater proficiency in the L2	L2 Proficiency	Success or failure in specific interactions Nature of interactions: is quality more important than quantity of interaction? Self-assessment of progress in the L2

A structured diary template was constructed based on Table 3.5. It comprises of 4 closed questions and one open-ended question for each day. The set of questions is repeated throughout the week. There is an additional question regarding the ranking of social roles for every week, and a space for participants to provide extra information. It is also necessary to note that the diary is not used as a ‘stand-alone’ method in this research. The diary is used in combination with focus group interviews, as a diary-interview method (Elliott, 1997). Barbour (2009:18) also suggests that the use of a diary can stimulate discussion at subsequent interviews when used within the context of a longitudinal study. This is based on Elliott’s (1997) observation that the use of diaries can provide useful insights regarding what is going on in respondents’ lives in-between interviews.

### **3.9.6 Diary completion training**

It was essential that participants understood the questions in the diary and knew how to answer them properly: some training in using the diary was therefore provided. The pilot study was carried out for a period of one week for each participant in January 2009. I met two participants (THNH and CH) personally and showed them how to keep the diary. The session took place in an informal setting and refreshments were provided. Both hard and soft copies were provided to participants. I explained briefly the research and guided them through each question in the diary template (Appendix G). The diary's guidance notes (Appendix C) were also explained in detail. Feedback from both participants on the diary's format and guidance notes were positive. They had no difficulty understanding the questions. Similar conversations with the other three participants (LPH, LTR and DA) took place online or over the telephone. Both methods of approaching my participants (face-to-face and online/telephone) generated similar conversations. Lessons learned during the face-to-face encounters were used to inform my online and telephone 'conversations'.

### **3.9.7 Feedback from participants**

This section will describe changes in the format based on feedback and suggestions from participants in pilot diary study. The pilot diary template is provided in Appendix G. The revised diary template for main study is provided in Appendix H. Guidance on how to complete the diary template (for both pilot and main studies) is provided in Appendix C.

#### **3.9.7.1 Language and Format**

I offered participants both Vietnamese and English versions of the diary and guidance. Four participants preferred English versions, and DA did not indicate any preference. This was surprising as I had expected participants to prefer Vietnamese versions. When asked, participants explained that they were very confident in their English, having resided in the UK and studied in English for several years. The English version did not pose any difficulties. DA and THNH described the English language used in the diary as 'plain English', considering it simple and easy to understand. The

participants suggested the diary itself should be in English whereas the guidance should be made available in either Vietnamese or English. I also raised the issue of which language to be used in filling out the last column - 'Notes' - where participants are asked to record feelings and observations about their daily experiences. DA and LPH stated that they were comfortable completing this in either language. THNH, CH and LTR suggested that they would prefer completing this section in Vietnamese.

In general, participants preferred the diary to be in English, but expressed no language preference for the guidance. For the main study I therefore decided to produce the diary in English and to produce the guidance in English to ensure that participants understood it clearly. I let the participants choose which language (English or Vietnamese) to use when completing the open question in the last column. In short, participants described the language and format used in both the diary and guidance as simple to follow and easy to use.

### 3.9.7.2 Modification of diary template

Column 1: "How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?"

LPH and CH suggested that the scale of 'more than 7 hours' was too large. They did not believe any participants would ever speak English more than 7 hours a day. However, I suggested that there might be cases where participants held part-time jobs which required lots of speaking (customer service roles, for example). LPH and CH agreed that this was possible. However, CH and THNH suggested there should be one box for 'not at all' as '1 hour or less' does not accurately capture cases where no English is spoken at all. These suggestions were accepted and the template was adjusted accordingly.

Column 2: "Which of the following **best** describes who you spoke English with today?" (*circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers*)

It was suggested that I should add DN (Don't Know) for cases where participants are unsure of their interlocutor's linguistic status. This was also accepted and adjustment was made. The list of 'types' of interlocutors provided was considered

comprehensive. THNH did not follow the instructions of circling N for native or NN for non-natives. Later discussion with THNH revealed that he was not sure what N or NN meant. Even though this was explained in the face-to-face diary training. Therefore, further emphasis on the issue during training was recommended for the main study.

Column 3: “When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today? (tick as many as apply)

Participants seemed to need further clarification of what constitutes – and distinguishes - ‘small talk’ from ‘socializing’; and how ‘simple transactions and negotiations’ differs from ‘complex transactions and negotiations’. I therefore reinforced the guidance to make sure the definitions were adequate. I then decided to keep the definitions unchanged but would make sure participants understand the differences and similarities of the categories.

Column 4: How do you rate your experience of speaking English **today** in general?

CH suggested that I should include one more box for ‘neither negative nor positive’. In CH’s opinion, there were occasions when she spoke English but had no particular feelings about the interaction. The box ‘mixture of positive and negative’ failed to capture her particular experience. I had assumed that participants always assessed and were able to reach definite conclusions about their interactions. Therefore, I amended the diary by adding ‘neither negative nor positive’ box.

Column 5: Notes

Most participants did not enter anything in this column. Some participants said they forgot to complete this, whilst others (THNH and DA) told me that they did not know what I meant by “notes”. Training on completing this column will receive greater emphasis in the main study. In addition, the title of the column has been changed to: ‘Please describe here, briefly, the reason why you have chosen the rating scales in the column on the left’. Finally, I enlarged the column to draw more attention to it.

Final box: Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week? Please rank them, putting '1' alongside the role that most applies, '2' alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.

The options seemed to have covered all the Social Roles that students experienced. However, DA suggested adding another social role: 'Friend' as it was how some of his interlocutors viewed him. I have added one more box 'Friend' in the template for main study. The addition was under careful consideration. I already considered the fine line between 'friend' and 'student': one can have student friends but not all friends are necessarily students. I also paid attention to this issue during the diary training session to make sure participants understand the overlap between 'Friend' and 'Student'.

There was another issue flagged up by THNH who was confused regarding wanted and unwanted Social Roles that others impose on him, and roles that he believes himself to 'occupy', and roles that others believe he occupies. THNH suggested splitting the box into two - one for roles that participants felt they occupied and the other for roles that their interlocutors believed the participants occupied. This was a very interesting comment from THNH but after careful consideration I ultimately decided to keep the box unchanged. The reason for not splitting the box into wanted and unwanted roles is that it will cause more difficulties for participants to complete these boxes. It is not realistic to ask participants to guess what social roles they believe other people think they are occupying. In addition, this might cause problem for credibility when data is collected based on guesses and assumptions.

Participants in the pilot also suggested I should include a new box: "If there is anything you think important this week that I should know, please make a note of it here and I will discuss it with you in detail when we meet". This gave participants a chance to record 'freestyle' opinions and/or observations. This recommendation was accepted and I have inserted the box as such.



### **3.10 Main study**

The section will present the plan to carry out the main study which started from February to April 2009 (see Stages of the Research 3.3.2). I followed the same recruitment method as in the two pilot focus groups. 14 MA students of academic year 2008-2009 agreed to take part in the research. As discussed on the research design, the main study involves daily diary completion in three months, 5 focus groups. The section moves on to discuss the limitations of the research design and ends with possible consideration to overcome the limitations.

#### **3.10.1 Recruitment**

Chapter 4 – Data analysis and findings - suggest that participants, in their first or second year of residing in the UK, seem to experience more problems and difficulties. Also, the older they are when they first arrive in the UK, the more challenging it is for them to adapt to the target culture and take advantage of opportunities to practice speaking English. Findings from the two pilot studies do not indicate any differences associated with students' choices of subjects studied, or the level (undergraduate or postgraduate) of course pursued. Therefore, in the main study, I focus on MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year, regardless of their majors. This group satisfies the criteria: they are normally older than the undergraduate and have shorter stays in the UK (typically just one year). As the recruitment method in the pilot studies proved effective, I decided to replicate it for the main study. At the beginning of academic year 2008-2009 (October 2008), I contacted the Vice-President of Vietsoc. I explained the goal of my research and asked for her cooperation. As the numbers and contact details of MA students were not accessible until the start of the academic year, I could not contact them earlier than that. The Vice-president agreed to participate in the research and passed my recruitment letter (Appendix E) to all new MA students (for academic year 2008-2009). Twelve students (including the Vice-President of Vietsoc) volunteered to participate in the main study.

Vietsoc-York was established in 2008-2009. I nominated myself as Vice-President and was elected. This was in an effort to get involved and get access to potential

participants. However, only two Vietnamese MA students enrolled for the academic year. I met them in person separately to explain my research and asked for their participation. They both agreed, which means I received 100% response for the third time. In total, 12 MA students in Leeds and 2 MA students in York will participate in the main study.

### **3.10.2 Problems/limitations**

The design is not without flaws. However, the purpose of the research is to observe temporal changes thus it is necessary to adopt the design. Missing data occurs in any research design but might be more common due to the difficulty of securing the commitment of participants. There are many reasons for this problem (Menard, 2002:31): some participants withdraw from the research or sample attrition (Bryman, 2004 and Menard, 1991); others move elsewhere and cannot be located. Even if all participants remain active in the panel, there is still the risk of missing data - participants may forget past events, or refuse or hold back their co-operation by providing information selectively. It is not easy to contemplate the ability or inability to 'tease out' information from respondents.

It is difficult to fully control for sample attrition (Menard, 2002). There are 14 participants in my main study. The numbers of cases in such research are often deliberately small in order to remain manageable: examples include Norton's study of 5 women (2000) and Schuman's study of 4 adults and two children (1978). Some researchers have focused on a single case (Kinginger, 2004). I decided to work with 14 participants for the very first reason that 14 volunteered to participate in my research. In addition, I do not consider 14 to be unmanageable; and also because it is sufficiently high to act as a 'buffer' in case of drop-out. In a worst-case scenario involving, say, 50% drop-out that would still leave more participants than in a number of comparable studies (above). In addition, the period of time is kept to three months during which the participants will meet just 5 times. Again, this is not considered too demanding. With regards to the diaries, I have made sure the diary template is simple to use (tick-box format, available as an e-diary or as a pen-and-paper version) and does not take more than 3 minutes to complete (also see 3.9.2 and 3.9.5). Further,

incentives (small gifts) are being provided to thank participants for their cooperation, and refreshments will be provided at all meetings to incentivise continued attendance.

Another problem is referred to as ‘panel effects’ (De Vaus, 2002). This is when participants behave differently under the influence of the research schedule. I myself personally observed this effect on a housemate participating in a longitudinal study looking at people’s radio choices and listening habits. He was asked to keep a daily diary for a week about what channels he listened to, where, and for how long. I noticed that he appeared to be listening more. I had an informal conversation with him about his experience afterwards. He admitted that the idea of a researcher viewing his diary made him more eager to listen so that he had “more” to put into the diary. He knew that no one would be able to identify him but nonetheless his listening habits changed. Oddly, if he had simply wanted to ‘impress’ the researcher with his extensive radio-listening all he had to do was lie on the form. Instead, he actually changed his behaviour. I then realized the panel effect was extremely powerful and if any participants in my research did the same the “findings” would clearly be skewed. I therefore, encouraged participants to behave normally during the research period, but of course this does risk drawing attention to the possibility of panel effects and possibly even increasing its likelihood. The panel effect cannot be completely eliminated and cannot even be easily identified. But it may be partly avoidable by being careful in terms of not explicitly advising participants on what they should and should not do to maximise the benefits of any social interactions. The panel effect is not unique in longitudinal study, and remains a problem in any research where the participants know that they are being observed.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

The chapter has provided a theoretical framework for the choice of research strategy and design. It justifies the research procedures and explains in detail the steps involved in each stage of the research. It is then followed by reports on pilot groups 1 and 2. The first pilot group was conducted with 8 participants in Leeds (May 2008). The pilot study was based on a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B). A review of the study suggested that a more structured level in the interview schedule and moderation was needed in order to collect relevant data most effectively.

Therefore, the second pilot focus group was held with 6 participants in York (August 2008). The interview schedule was more structured with fewer questions, based on the main themes generated from the first focus group (Appendix D). Results from the second pilot study showed that the focus groups in the main study should be conducted using the same procedures and structure. The chapter moved on to discuss briefly the rationale and limitations of the diary pilot which is carried out from January 2009. After that, discussion for the research design of the main study was provided in detail. Findings and analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### **Diary Analysis and Findings**

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This chapter presents data collected from the diary during the 12-week main study from 2 February to 26 April 2009, with references to data from pilot study. As discussed in Chapter 3 – Methodology - the diary was kept on a daily basis. The structured template diary is provided in Appendix H; guidance made available on how to complete the diary is presented in Appendix C. The chapter consists of six main parts: (1) brief presentation of the administration of data collection and analysis; (2) the quantity of L2 interactions; (3) types of L2 interlocutors; (4) types of L2 interactions; (5) how participants felt/judged their L2 experience and (6) the social roles/identity participants believed they have occupied.

#### **4.1 Data collection and analysis process**

This section will briefly discuss the process of data collection and analysis in the main diary study, which are divided into three parts: recruitment of participants, administration and dealing with missing data. The purpose of this section is to provide some background information to aid the understanding of the findings which follow.

##### **4.1.1 Participants and recruitment method**

The same method of recruitment was used to that of the Pilot study (see Chapter 3 – Methodology) where it had proved effective. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through the Vietnamese Society (VietSoc) in York and Leeds. Fourteen MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year agreed to keep a daily diary over 12 weeks, commencing on 2 February 2009. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Ly and Ha are in York, and the rest live and study in Leeds. Table 4.1 below presents the participant's profiles.

**Table 4.1 Main study participant profile**

	Age	Gender	Major	Part-time job
Ly	25	F	Social Science	N
Ha	24	F	Business and Finance	Y
Sang	29	M	Natural Sciences	N
Luyen	25	F	Business	Y
Quynh	23	F	Business	Y
Tu	27	M	Business	N
Nga	24	F	Business	N
Hoa	24	F	Business	Y
An	26	F	Science	N
Mi	24	F	Social Science	Y
Bac	27	M	Business	N
Thao	25	F	Business	N
Chau	25	F	Business	Y
Mai	27	F	Business	Y

Participants were aged between 24 and 29, with a mean age of 24.14. The majority (10/14) were studying for an MA in the field of Business; of the remaining four, 2 were majoring in Science and 2 were majoring in Social Science. Eight students (57.1%) at the time data collection had a part-time job. Almost 80% (11/14) of the sample were female.

#### **4.1.2 Administration**

The administration of the main study was more complicated than that of the pilot due to the longer time over which participants were asked to keep the diary. But logistical problems arose also due to the fact that the majority of participants lived in Leeds, a large city some 20 miles away from the researcher's base: a significant amount of communication with these participants was via email and telephone. I held the first meeting with participants in Leeds on 31 January 2009 and in York on 1 February 2009. Participants were briefed on the research and what they were expected to do during the twelve weeks. They had been assured that they could withdraw from the research at any time. These early meetings were largely focused on training participants how to use the diary and providing them with clarification. It was agreed that participants would maintain the diary every day, in electronic ('e-

diaries') or paper format. Most of the participants chose paper (Nga, Mai, Sang and Thao however, preferred e-diaries). I suggested 'e-diaries' be returned weekly for better data protection. The diary booklet, however, was to be posted to my address in York every four weeks by registered mail. All the postage costs were covered by myself. For the two participants in York, I personally collected the diary every four weeks.

#### **4.1.3 Dealing with missing data**

During the twelve weeks of the main study, missing data problem occurred, which are divided into three 'types' for treatment. In 'type' one - Thao and Tu - the data was not collected at all Thao's computer 'crashed' shortly after she had completed the first two week's diary which she had not yet managed to return by email, even though I had suggested e-diaries should be returned on weekly basis. I was not notified of the problem until the middle of week 2 when I sent her a reminder for the week one diary. By the time Thao was ready to keep a paper-copy diary it was the middle of week 3. Thao agreed to carry on keeping a diary from weeks 3 to 12. As Thao was not confident in recalling her experiences in the first three weeks we agreed to treat it as a complete missing data set. Similar to Thao, Tu was not able to keep his diary for two weeks between 15 March to 1 April 2009. He claimed he was too busy to do so. Completing the diary retrospectively, from memory, was rejected for the same reason as that given for Thao.

In the second 'type' of missing data, the information given by participants was partially missing and then 'recovered' after follow-up discussions. This data is therefore treated with caution (see the analysis later). Quynh did not provide information about her interlocutor's categories (Native, Non-native or Don't Know). Again, the problem was not raised with me until the end of week 4 after the paper diary was returned by post. I arranged a second meeting with Quynh to give her additional training in diary completion and to help her retrieve the missing data. However, unless indicated, this data is generally excluded from my analysis because it is dependent on Quynh's memory and therefore might contain errors. Tu, Ha and Quynh also failed to rank the social roles as requested and simply ticked which ones they felt they had occupied. I returned the diaries to the two Leeds participants (Quynh and Tu) and they amended their responses, and met Ha in York

and helped her to complete hers. Because identifying participants' social roles was an important focus of the research I could not afford treating them as missing data but, once more, certain data should be treated with caution.

The final 'type' of missing data was with Chau who only handed in the first four weeks of the diary on time. Although I had chased her up by emailing and phoning her from time to time, I did not receive the remaining 8 weeks of her diaries until mid-June 2009. Her information remained legitimate as she had kept the diary on a daily basis was simply too busy to post them. This caused some problems at the diary analysis stage because I had to add her information and rewrite my data analysis.

## 4.2 Quantity of L2 interactions

### 4.2.1 Total hours spent on speaking English

Question 1: How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?

Participants were asked to estimate the number of hours they spent each day speaking English: "not at all"; "1 hour or less"; "3 hours or less"; "5 hours or less"; "7 hours or less" and "more than 7 hours" (see Appendix H). For presentation purposes, the 84-days main study was equated to 3 months.

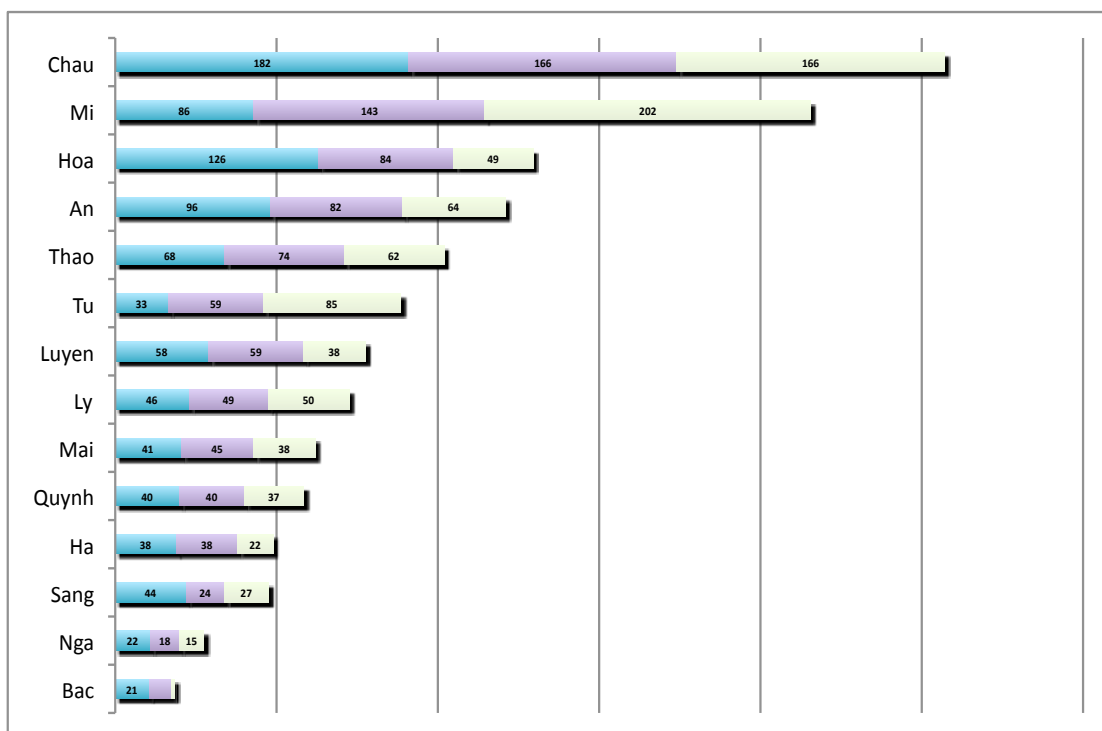


Figure 4.1 Total number of hours per month spent on speaking English



The Figure summarises the maximum number of hours Vietnamese participants spent each month speaking English during the main study. Data was missing with Tu in week 1 of the second month; and Thao in three weeks of the first month. On the whole, most participants spent fewer than 100 hours per month speaking English (or below 3.3 hours/day), except Chau and Mi who spent on average 171 and 110 hours/month respectively. Nine participants (65%) spent no more than 50 hours/month (or below 1.68 hours/day). The number of hours speaking English was on a downward trend, though varied from one individual to another, so that in the last month most participants spent between a maximum of 60 hours/month and a minimum of 0. There was only one outlier, Mi who started out below the 100 level as others but achieved around 200 hours/month towards the end of the period.

The Pilot study generated similar results. The total number of hours that participants spent speaking English is summarised in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2: Pilot diary study- total hours of speaking English in a week**

Participants	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
LPH	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs
CH	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs
DA	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 5 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 5 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 21 hrs
THNH	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 10 hrs
LTR	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs

On average, participants spent between 10 to 11 hours speaking English in a week, which roughly corresponds with the main study results. As in the main study there was an exceptional case: DA reported 21 hours in total, which is double that of others. On the contrary, CH though claimed an average of 11 hours in total, actually spent fewer hours than that. This is because CH chose ‘1 hour or less’ for the days when she did not speak English at all. This was due to the fact that the box “not at

all” was not included at the pilot stage. The diary template for the main study was amended upon CH’s recommendation (see 3.9.7.2).

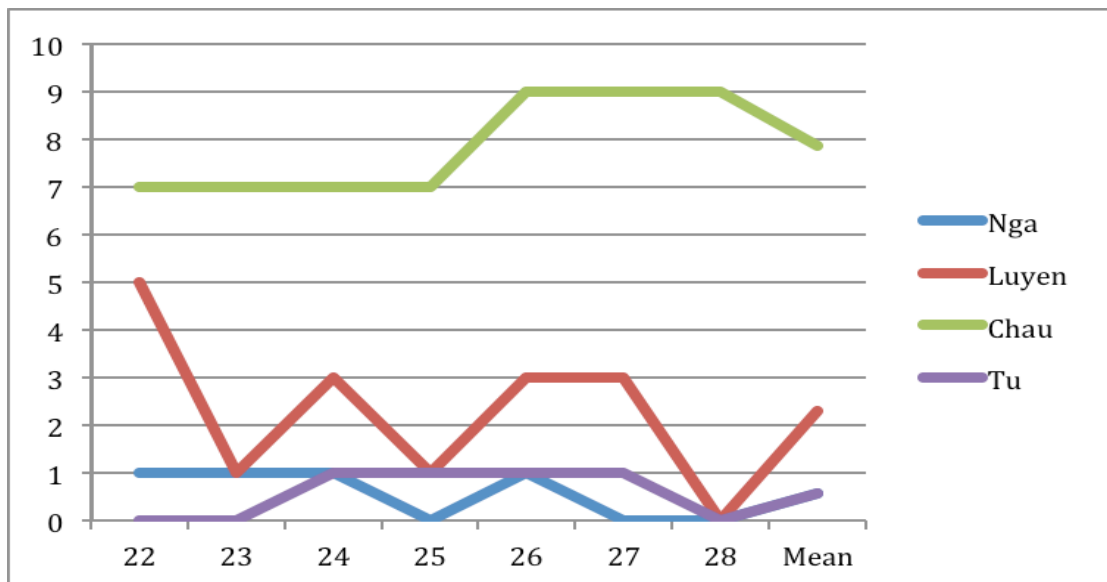
#### 4.2.2 Individual variation

Data presented in 4.2.1 might give the impression that there was no fluctuation in the number of hours spent speaking English, nor significant differences among participants. However, the fluctuations and differences can be best revealed when the data is viewed ‘close up’ on a daily and/or weekly basis. I have chosen a random week to present; day 22 to 28 (out of 84 days in total). The reason why I have chosen such a week is because there was no missing data during the week, and it is half way through the main study. The original line chart which included all participants is impossible to understand so I decided to select cases reflecting the sample range (including the case closest to the sample mean). Four participants were chosen, Nga and Tu (for the lowest), Luyen (closest to the mean) and Chau (the highest). Table 4.3 below illustrated the hours participants spent speaking English in the week between day 22<sup>nd</sup> to day 28<sup>th</sup> of data collection period.

**Table 4.3 Maximum hours spent speaking English by participants in a week**

Day	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	Mean
Sang	1	1	3	1	0	1	3	1.43
<b>Nga</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.57</b>
Mai	1	1	3	3	1	1	0	1.43
<b>Luyen</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2.29</b>
<b>Chau</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7.86</b>
Ha	1	1	1	3	1	0	0	1.00
Ly	1	3	1	1	3	1	1	1.57
<b>Tu</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.57</b>
Quynh	3	1	1	1	1	0	0	1.00
Hoa	3	7	5	7	7	7	3	5.57
An	3	3	3	5	5	1	1	3.00
Mi	1	5	3	3	3	3	1	2.71
Bac	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0.71
Thao	1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1.14
Mean								<b>2.20</b>

From Table 4.3 above, four participants are chosen: Nga, Tu, Luyen and Chau. Nga and Tu reported the lowest number of hour, only 0.57 on average. This means that Nga and Tu spent less than one hour per day on speaking English on a typical week. Chau is chosen because she achieved 7.86 hours per day speaking English. Luyen, as a middle range representative obtained 2.29 hours per day. The variation between the four participants shall now put in the Figure below to illustrate the variance among participants on a week.



**Figure 4.2 Hours spent speaking English in one week – selected participants**

As the figure above shows, the differences among the highest mean and the lowest is nearly 7 hours. The fluctuation can be seen in all participants except Tu who stayed at a stable level of 1 hour per day until the last day of the week. The upward and downward trends varied each day. Luyen, for example, moved from 5 hours to 1 hour and up to 3 hours. Nga fluctuated between 0 to 1 hour in the week. Apart from Chau, the hours spent speaking English decreased at the weekend (days 27 and 28).

#### **4.2.3 Individual routinisation**

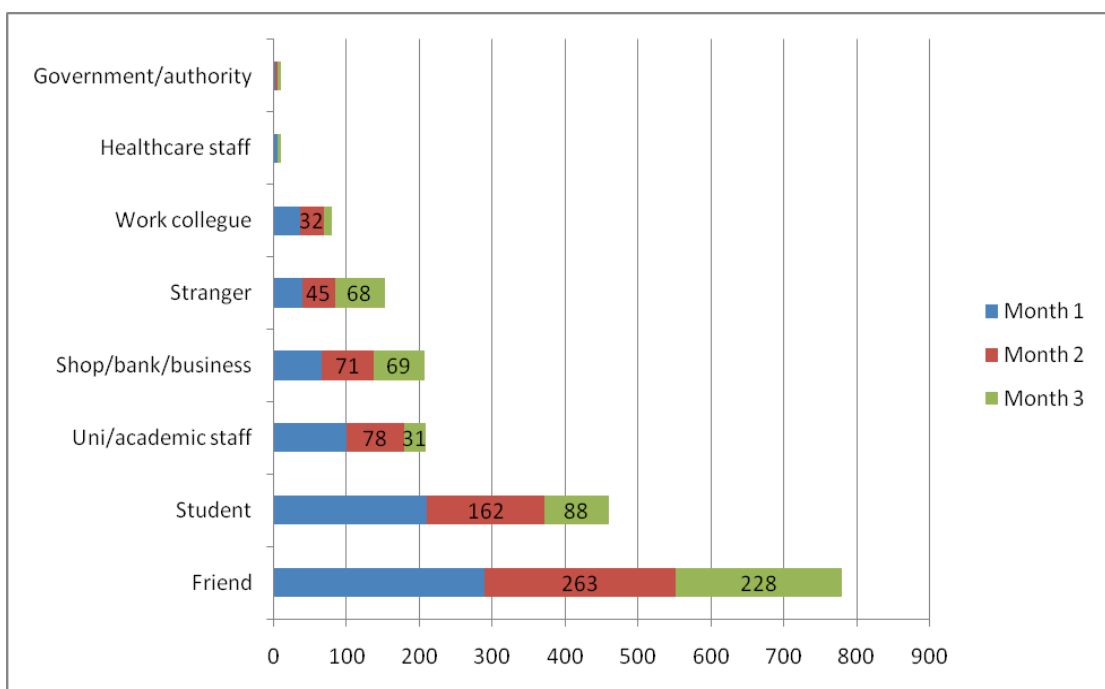
Interestingly, although there was variation *between* participants, and variation on a day-to-day basis, if the amount of time spent speaking English per week is the datum then each participant spent roughly the same amount of time speaking English each week. This suggests that individuals might construct and/or find themselves in daily routines and in ‘boxes’ which constrain them and prevent them

from speaking more (or less) English. Such ‘routinisation’ in L2 interaction is explored in the focus groups and is discussed in more detail later.

In short, there are two major trends in the total hours spent speaking English. First, participants spent only a limited amount of time speaking the L2 - around 11 hours per week - and even this was decreasing (4.2.1). Second, variation between participants is large (4.2.2), and individual participant seems to establish a routine which, over time, displays relatively little fluctuation (4.2.3).

### 4.3 Types of interlocutors

Question 2: Which of the following best describes who you spoke English with today?



**Figure 4.3 Total number of interactions with all interlocutors**

Figure 4.3 presents the number of L2 interactions participants recorded. There are 8 categories of interlocutors over the three-month study. A ninth category - “other” - was also available for participants. For this category, Chau indicated “bus/coach driver” which was then classified in the same category with “shop/bank/business”. Mi, Tu and Chau indicated “partner, boy friend and girl friend”, which is considered to belong to the “other” category. The total number of interactions with all interlocutor in Figure 4.3 above will be broken down per each individual in the Table 4.4 below.

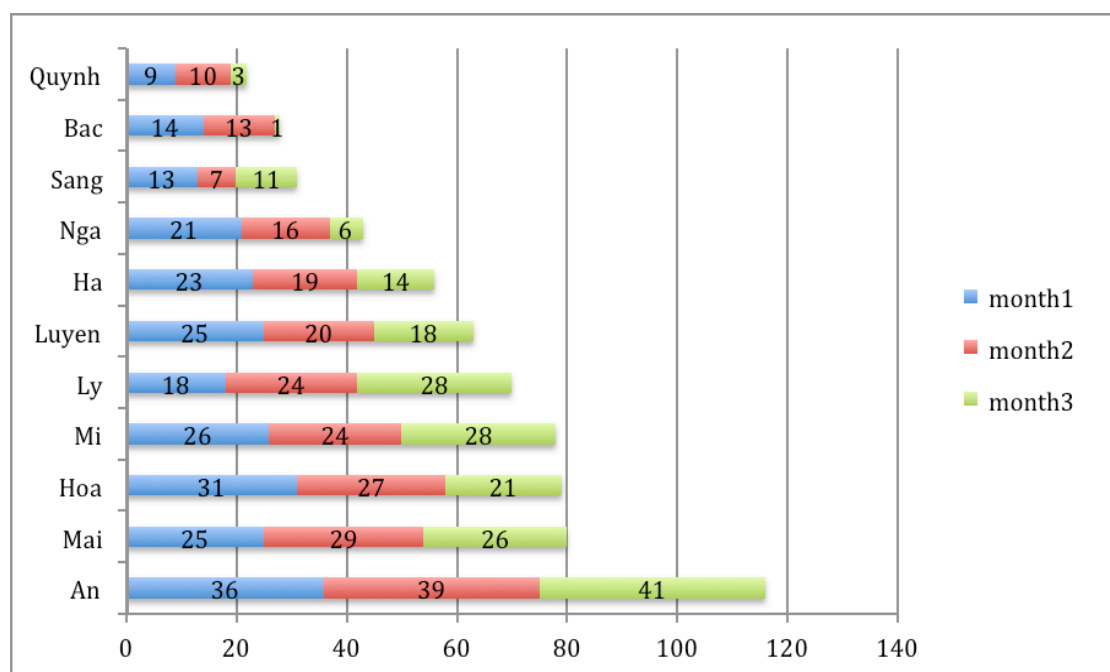
**Table 4.4 Total number of interactions with interlocutor per individual**

		An	Mi	Nga	Ha	Hoa	Ly	Sang	Mai	Luyen	Quynh	Bac	Total
Work	M1	1	7	0	17	4	0	1	0	0	5	1	36
	M2	0	7	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	32
Colleague	M3	0	3	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>82</b>
	%	0.4	8.1	0.0	33.6	3.1	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	12.5	6.3	
Stranger	M1	7	10	3	3	4	0	0	3	4	0	3	37
	M2	9	3	0	1	8	0	3	4	0	1	1	30
	M3	6	1	6	1	3	1	1	2	1	13	2	37
	<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>104</b>
	%	7.8	6.3	6.1	3.6	10.3	0.8	4.4	8.6	5.0	14.9	8.7	
Friend	M1	36	26	21	23	31	18	13	25	25	9	14	241
	M2	39	24	16	19	27	24	7	29	20	10	13	228
	M3	41	28	6	14	21	28	11	26	18	3	1	197
	<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>666</b>
	%	44	37	28.9	41.8	60.8	54.7	27.2	79.2	65.6	27.5	44.4	
University academic Staff	M1	8	18	14	9	9	11	3	3	5	1	2	83
	M2	10	15	9	3	10	8	0	3	3	1	5	67
	M3	9	0	3	0	7	2	0	2	0	2	0	25
	<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>175</b>
	%	10.4	15.7	17.4	9.0	20.0	16.4	2.6	7.9	8.3	5.0	11.1	
Shop/ bank/ Business	M1	24	3	8	0	1	1	3	1	0	2	5	48
	M2	33	5	6	0	1	1	2	2	0	2	5	57
	M3	27	0	9	3	1	2	1	2	0	8	2	55
	<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>160</b>
	%	32.3	3.8	15.4	2.2	2.3	3.1	5.3	5.0	0.0	15.0	19.0	
Student	M1	8	29	20	18	7	20	12	0	12	19	12	157
	M2	13	26	18	0	1	11	17	0	8	9	0	103
	M3	8	19	7	0	10	2	16	1	5	0	0	68
	<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>328</b>
	%	11.2	35.2	30.2	13.4	13.8	25.8	39.5	1.0	26.0	35.0	19.0	
Govern- ment	M1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	M2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4
	M3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>
	%	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.0	0.0	
Health- Care	M1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	M2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	M3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>
	%	0.4	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>Grand</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>1526</b>

The table lists participants' interactions with each category of interlocutor. An had the highest number of interactions (282) and Bac had the lowest (69). Individual variation was also significant. An's interactions ranged from 1 (work colleague) to 116 (friend); Mi (0 and 78); Nga and Sang (0 and 45); Ha and Ly (0 and 56); Mai (0 and 80); Luyen (0 and 63); Quynh (0 and 28) and Bac (0 and 28). Table 4.4 also shows the number of interactions with each category as a percentage of participants' total interactions. As discussed earlier, for most participants 50% or more of their interactions were with friends and students. Only around 10% or less of their interactions were with university and academic staff - surprisingly modest given all participants were students at the time of the main study.

#### 4.3.1 Interactions with Friends

In general, the number of interactions declines slightly over the three-month period. This accords with question 1's suggestion of a decreased number of hours spent speaking English (see 4.2.1). Participants had most interactions with friends.

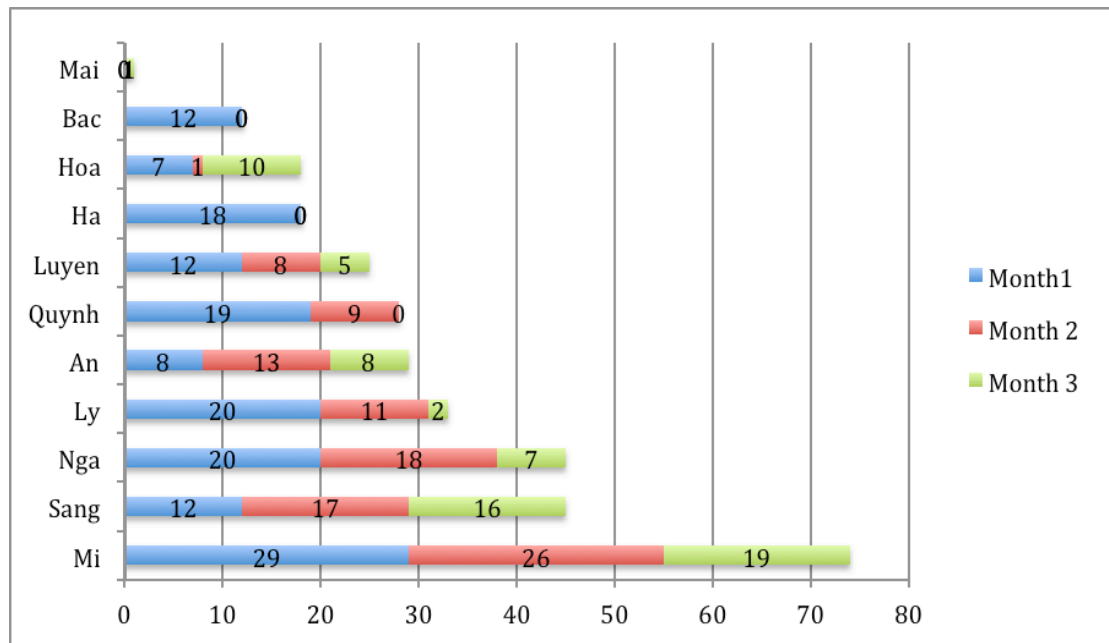


**Figure 4.4 Number of interactions with “friends” in three months**

Figure 4.4 shows each participant's number of interactions with 'Friends'. There was a large gap between the highest (An, 116) and the lowest (Quynh, 22), but several participants' reported fairly similar numbers of L2 interactions with friends.

The second most frequent interlocutors were students with a total number of interactions of 328, almost half that of friends (666).

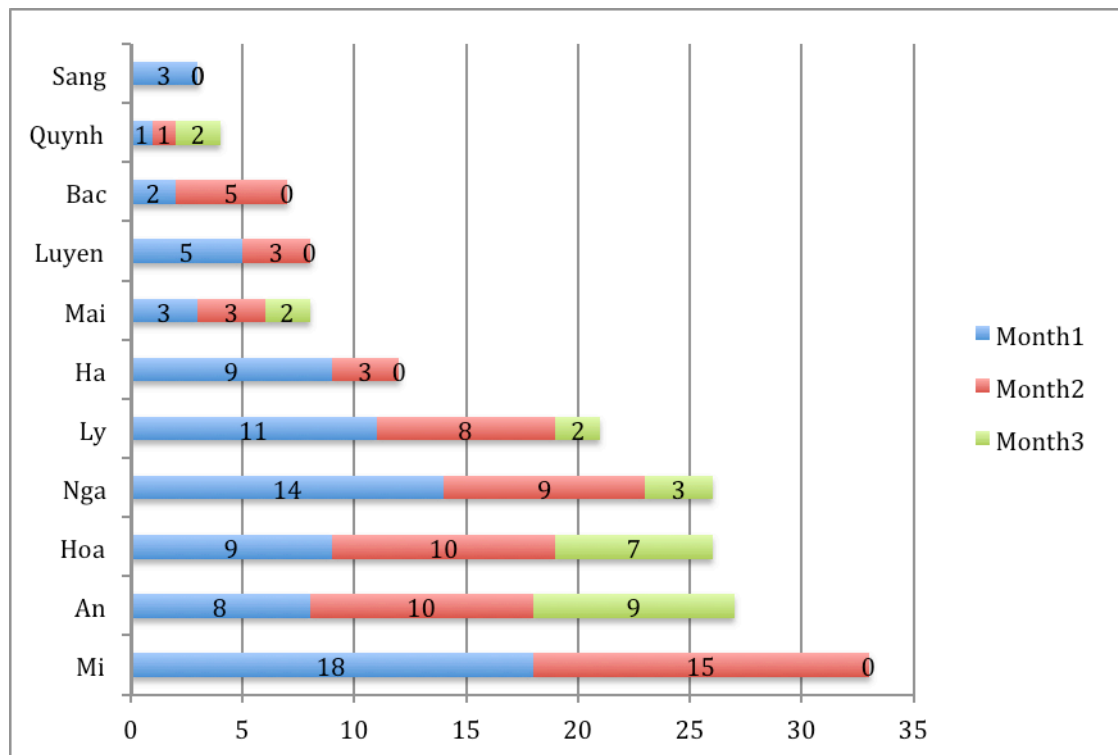
#### 4.3.2 Interactions with Students



**Figure 4.5** Number of interactions with students in three months

This category had the biggest gap among the 8 categories with the highest (Mi) reporting 74 interactions compared to Mai who reported only 1 encounter. Lessons from the pilot study had shown that there was some possible overlapping of data relating to “friends” and “students” (also see lesson from pilot study in 3.9.7.2). Therefore, during the training sessions for the main participants I defined the two categories. Nevertheless, it is probably sensible to still approach this data with caution. Mai differentiated between “friend” and “student”. Her number of interactions with students was the lowest (only 1), however, she had the second highest number in friends (80 interactions). She explained in the focus groups that her interlocutors were both students and friends but she considered them more friends than students.

### 4.3.3 Interactions with university/academic staff

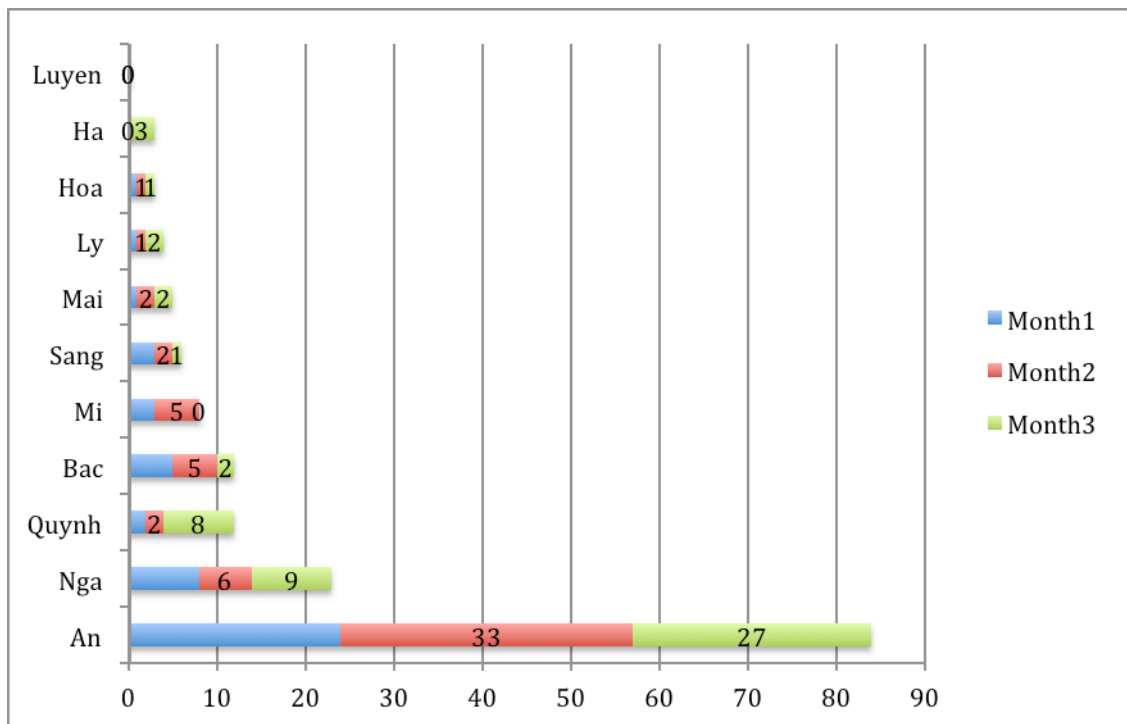


**Figure 4.6 Number of interactions with university/academic staff in three months**

Interactions with “university and academic staff” were quite high but steadily decreased with around 100 interactions in the first month to just below 70 in month 2 and 25 in month 3. This is in line with findings that participants experienced a decreased hours of interactions in English (see 4.2.1). Also the decline in the number of interactions happened during exam period in April 2009 (month 3) - participants spent more time revising for exams instead of going to lectures or seminars. Therefore the decline in the interactions with academic staff seemed to support the general trend as discussed in 4.2.1.



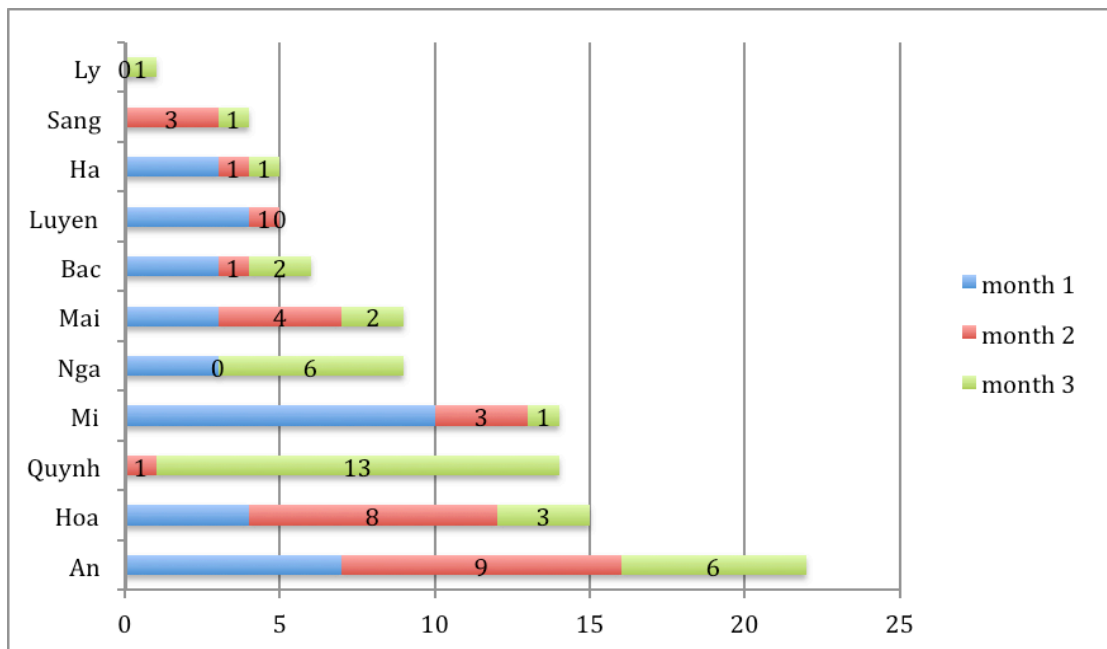
#### 4.3.4 Interactions with shop/bank/business



**Figure 4.7 Number of interactions with shop/bank/business in three months**

Interactions with ‘shops/bank/businesses’, were the middle rank of all interlocutors’ categories (earlier). Interactions with shop/bank/business were the only ones that stayed quite stable throughout the whole period at approximately 60 interactions per month. Figure 4.7 shows the stability at an individual level. Participants in general had a roughly similar number of interactions with shops/banks and businesses, except An who recorded 84 interactions - almost four times higher than the next highest, Nga with 23. This might be the fact that participants had settled into a relatively stable daily routine of contact with shops, banks and businesses. This supports the general trend of individual routinisation in their interactions (4.2.3).

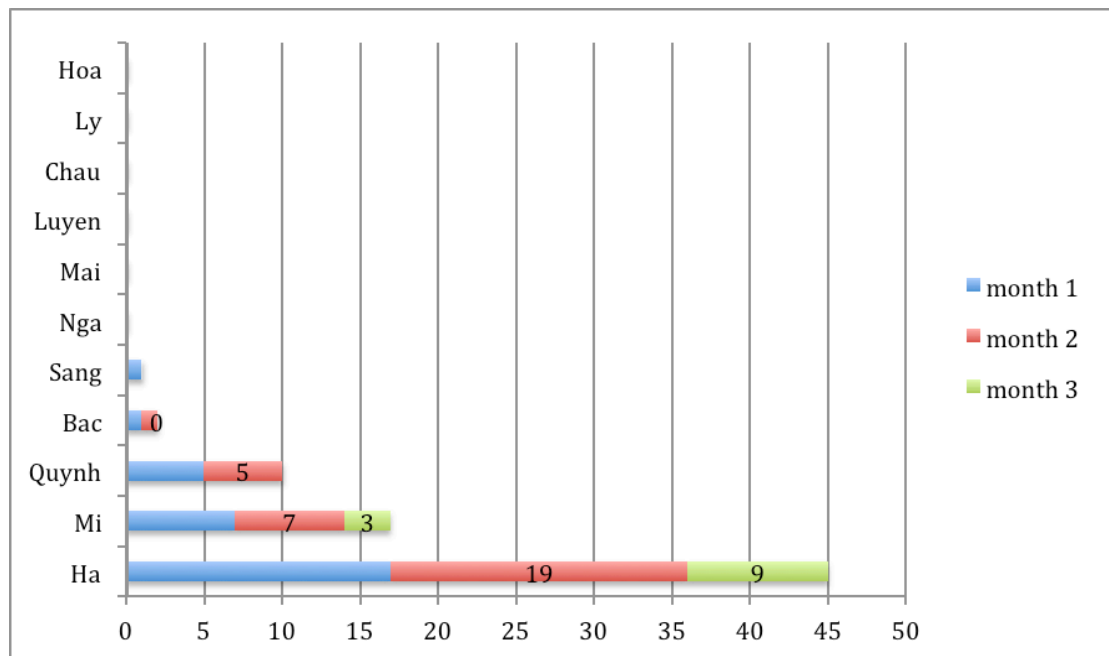
### 4.3.5 Interactions with Strangers



**Figure 4.8** Number of interactions with strangers in three months

In contrast to the general decline reported for other categories of interlocutors, the number of strangers that participants spoke English to remained quite stable at 37 in the first month, 31 in the second month and 36 in the last month. The gap between the top (An, 22) and the bottom (Ly, 1) was large. The big gap between individuals suggests that interactions with strangers depended on the personal circumstances of particular participant. Unlike other types of interlocutors such as students or academic staff who were more ‘provided’ with university life, strangers were purely those who one had interactions for the first time. Interactions with strangers therefore can be viewed as an example of how successful one can open his/her interactions. There was obvious inter and intra (month-by-month) variation.

### 4.3.6 Interactions with Work Colleague



**Figure 4.9** Number of interactions with work colleague in three months

The total number of interactions with work colleagues was among the lowest three rankings. However, the total count of interactions over three months was 82 events (earlier), which is less than half of the total interactions with strangers (approximately 170). This finding is interesting in that only 5 participants (Sang, Bac, Quynh, Mi and Ha) reported interactions in English at work even though 7 participants actually reported being employed at the beginning of the data collection process (Table 4.1 – Participants’ profile). The two participants that did not mention any L2 interactions at work were Chau and Hoa. Hoa did not mention any interactions with work colleagues at all throughout the period. In later contacts, Hoa and Bac noted that they had quit their jobs due to pressure of their exams. That explained why Bac reported very limited interactions while Hoa did not mention any in her diary at all (Figure 4.9). Chau’s experiences at work are explored in section 5.2.2.4 (Chapter 5). For the remainder of the working participants, their interactions with co-workers was limited. It started out at a similar level to that of “strangers” at 36 interactions but dropped by half to 12 by the end of the main study. Having a job did not increase the amount of time participants spent speaking English. Such figures might possibly show the ‘nature’ of participants’ relationships with their colleagues - they might have been slightly ignored, or they might have

spent time on their own or they might have used other languages (rather than English) at work.

#### 4.3.7 Interactions with government/authority and healthcare staff

Similar to data of interactions with work colleagues, interactions with government/authority, healthcare staff fell into the lowest groups. Participants showed a minimum amount of interactions with these two categories. There were only 9 interactions altogether for government/authority throughout the whole period. Interactions with gate-keepers (termed by Boxer, 2002) were minimal. This is similar to the pilot study (Table 4.5 later). Nga spent one week off sick but during the week she did not mention meeting healthcare staff, which indicated that meetings with health workers were only needed for a real health issue. There were only 4 interactions with healthcare staff over the three months.

#### 4.3.8 Interactions with Native and Non-native speakers

The table above shows the number of native (N) and non-native (NN) interlocutors in each category over the three month.

**Table 4.5 Number of Native and Non-native interlocutors in each category**

	Month 1		Month 2		Month 3		Total
	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	
Friend	54	235	71	192	60	168	<b>780</b>
Student	42	168	43	119	32	56	<b>460</b>
Uni/academic staff	72	28	62	16	23	8	<b>209</b>
Shop/bank/business	50	16	41	30	44	25	<b>206</b>
Stranger	22	17	32	13	38	30	<b>152</b>
Work colleague	24	12	24	8	12	0	<b>80</b>
Healthcare staff	1	3	1	0	1	3	<b>9</b>
Government/authority	1	0	4	0	3	1	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>1905</b>

Similar to findings in the pilot study (Table 4.6 later), participants spoke English with far more non-native speakers (1,148 interactions) than natives (757 interactions). This gap is most clearly observed in “friend” with 235 NN compared

to 54 N in the first month, 192 NN and 71 N in the second month, and 168 NN and 60 N in the third month. However, overall the gap was narrowed with every passing month with the number of non-native speakers at 479 interactions (Month 1), 378 (Month 2) and 291 (Month 3): at the end of the study period the number of non-native interlocutor interactions had dropped by almost 50%. No such steep decline was observed for NS interlocutors (266, 278 and 213). This trend accords with the decline in the number of hours spent speaking English (see 4.2.1) and that reported *vis-a-vis* interlocutor categories. The non-native number decreased due to the shrinking number of non-native friends and students (see 4.2.2). In contrast, more strangers (most of them are native) were reported as speaking English with the participants. The majority of shop/bank/business interlocutors were natives and only slightly decreased over time.

The table below presents the ‘types’ of interlocutors participants met during the pilot week. It shows the frequency and whether the interlocutors were native (N) or non-native (NN) speakers of English. One participant, THNH, failed to denote whether interlocutors were N or NN.

#### 4.3.9 Data from Pilot Study

**Table 4.6: Pilot diary study- types of interactions in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Students	-	4NN	4N 6NN	5	2N 5NN	6N15 NN
University staff/academic	2N	-	2N	3	2N	6N
Shops/banks/businesses	4N 2NN	-	1N1NN	4	2N 2NN	7N 5NN
Government/authority	-	-	-	-	-	-
Healthcare staff	3N	-	-	-	-	3N
Friends	7N6NN	5NN	2N4NN	7	7NN	9N11NN
Strangers	-	-	-	-	-	-
Work colleagues	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-

Participants in the pilot reported more interactions with friends (9N and 11NN) and other students (6N and 15 NN). In general, Vietnamese students had contact with more non-native speakers of English. Interactions with native gate-keepers (termed by Boxer, 2002) were minimal: university staff/academic (6N), healthcare (3N) and government/authority (none). Interactions with shops/banks/businesses were also limited: 7 N and 5 NN. In general, data from pilot study supports findings from main study. Interactions were limited, of which most interactions were with non-native speakers of English. The two most-frequent types interlocutors were friends, and students.

#### **4.3.10 Summary**

Section 4.3 has described the types of interlocutors reported by participants in the main study. The two most frequent types of interlocutors were Friend and Student. The total number of interactions were on a declining trend, similar to the decline in the total hours of interactions (4.2.1). However, the shrinking number of interaction events was not similar across all interlocutors types. The decline was more pronounced *vis-a-vis* students (4.3.2), university/academic staff (4.3.3), and especially with work colleagues (4.3.6). Interaction events with friends (4.3.1), shops/banks/businesses (4.3.4) and with strangers (4.3.5) remained relatively stable. This suggests that participants seemed to depend on university for their interactions. When the university closed down, interactions with university-related interlocutors (such as academic staff and students) were adversely affected. However, interactions outside campus such as with shop/bank/business or with friends were less affected. Data from the pilot study (4.3.9) also supports the findings from the main study.

#### **4.4 Types of interactions**

Question 3: When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today?

**Table 4.7 Types of interactions in three months**

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Total
Socialising	197	165	178	540
Simple transactions	124	86	99	309
Small talk	112	111	79	302
Academic discussion	89	68	35	192
Complex transactions	55	58	73	186
Learning English	6	3	1	10
Others				None

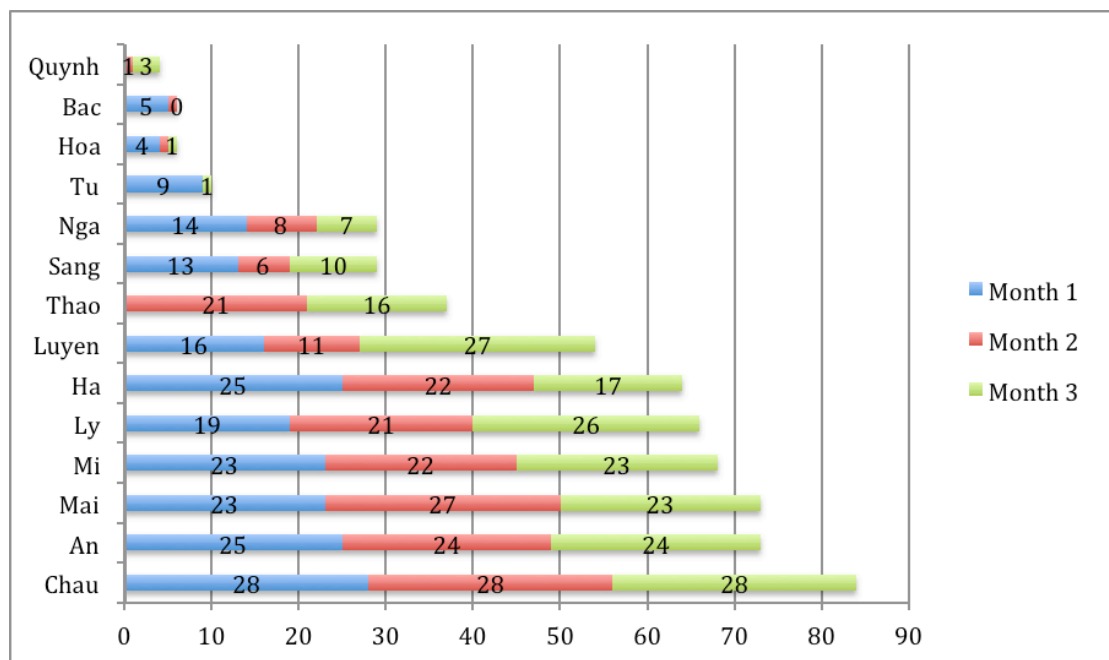
Table 4.7 shows the total number of interactions for all participants in each month. The types of interactions were categorised into six categories which were ranked in the order of the highest to lowest number of interactions: socialising (540), simple transactions (309), small talk (302), academic discussions (192), complex transactions (186) and learning English (10). An additional category - “others” – was provided for participants to include their own type of interactions which were not covered in the list. However, only Luyen used this, reporting “daily conversations” on two occasions. In the follow-up focus interview after the first four weeks, Luyen realised that her “daily conversations” (with friends) should be classified as socialising. Luyen subsequently recorded these types of interactions as “socialising” and her previous entries were re-categorised as socialising.

In general, the major types of interactions were: socialising (40.09%), simple transactions (22.94%) and small talk (22.42%). The results show that most interactions were quite simple and relatively undemanding and only approximately 20% of interactions were complex transactions and academic discussions. The formal learning of English was minimal, less than 1%. Detailed discussion of each type of interactions will be presented in the following sections. Given all participants were students in UK universities, it may or may not be surprising to discover that academic discussion constituted approximately only 10% of the total interactions. In addition, academic interactions experienced a steady drop over the three months, from 89 hours to 68 and finally to only 35. This was the sharpest

decrease of all types of interactions (apart from learning English – Table 4.7). This, however, was in line with the decreasing trend in the number of hours spent speaking the L2 (4.2.1) and in decreasing interactions with academic/university staff (4.3.3).

#### 4.4.1 Socialising

Socialising was the most popular type of interaction among participants with 540 interactions (1.5 times higher than the next highest category). It was defined as forming and maintaining friendships and acquaintances (see the Guidance).



**Figure 4.10 Socialising in three months**

There was a rather big gap in the number of socialising interactions between the highest and the lowest participants. Chau, as the highest ranking, obtained 84 interactions, while the lowest one, Quynh, achieved only 4. This is in line with findings that participants varied largely in the total hours of interactions (4.2.1).

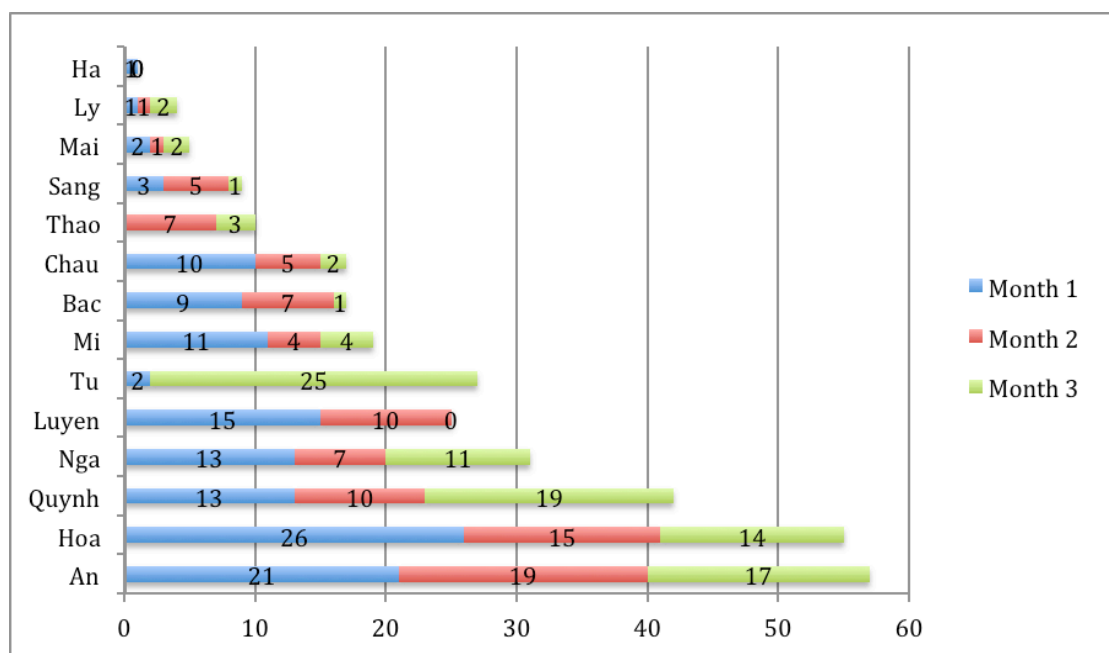
Individual routinisation in socialising interactions was also observed. Most participants reported a relatively stable number of socialising interactions over the three months. This is also in line with the finding in section 4.2.3 that participants routinised in their total hours of interactions. Only two exceptions were Nga and Luyen. Nga dropped from 14 in the first month to 8 and 7 in the second and third



months respectively. Luyen, on the other hand, almost doubled her interactions from 16 and 11 to 27 in months 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

#### 4.4.2 Simple transactions

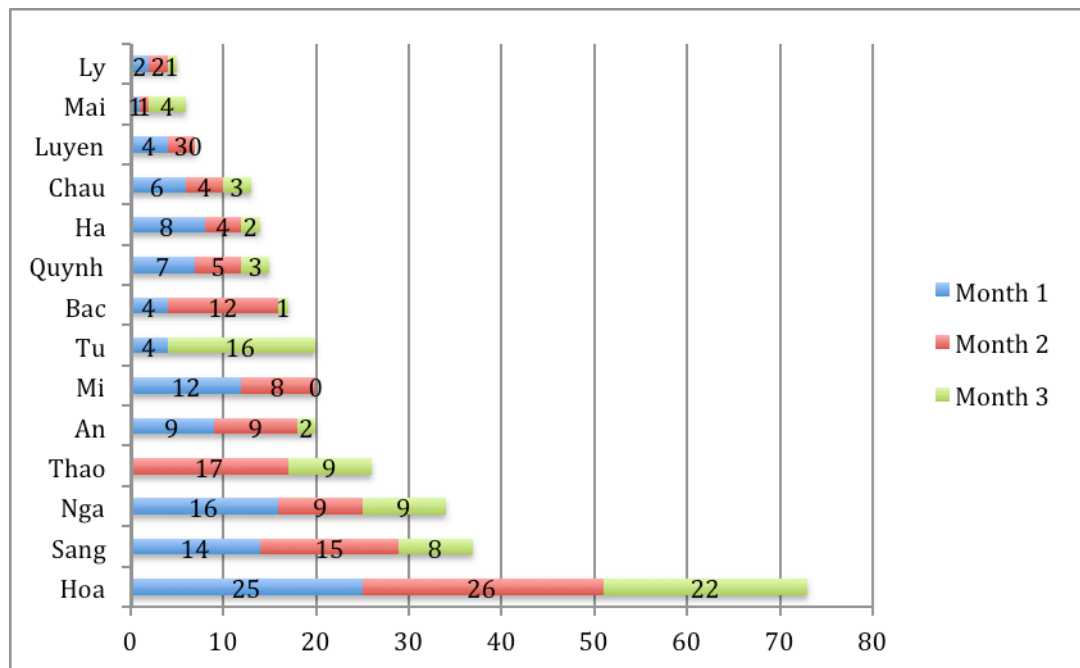
Simple transactions and negotiations were the second most common type of interaction recorded by participants. Simple transactions and negotiations include interactions such as shopping or ordering food in a café and when a relatively straightforward ‘objective’ or desired outcome is sought (see Guidance on how to complete the diary).



**Figure 4.11 Simple transactions in three months**

Similar to findings from socialising interactions, there are two general observations from simple transactions: individual variation and individual routinisation. The gap between the top, (An with 57 interactions) and the lowest, Ha (only 10) was reasonably big, though this gap was smaller than that in socialising interactions. The second observation: individual routinisation was also observed. However, simple transactions were on a general decreasing trend for the whole period.

### 4.4.3 Small talk



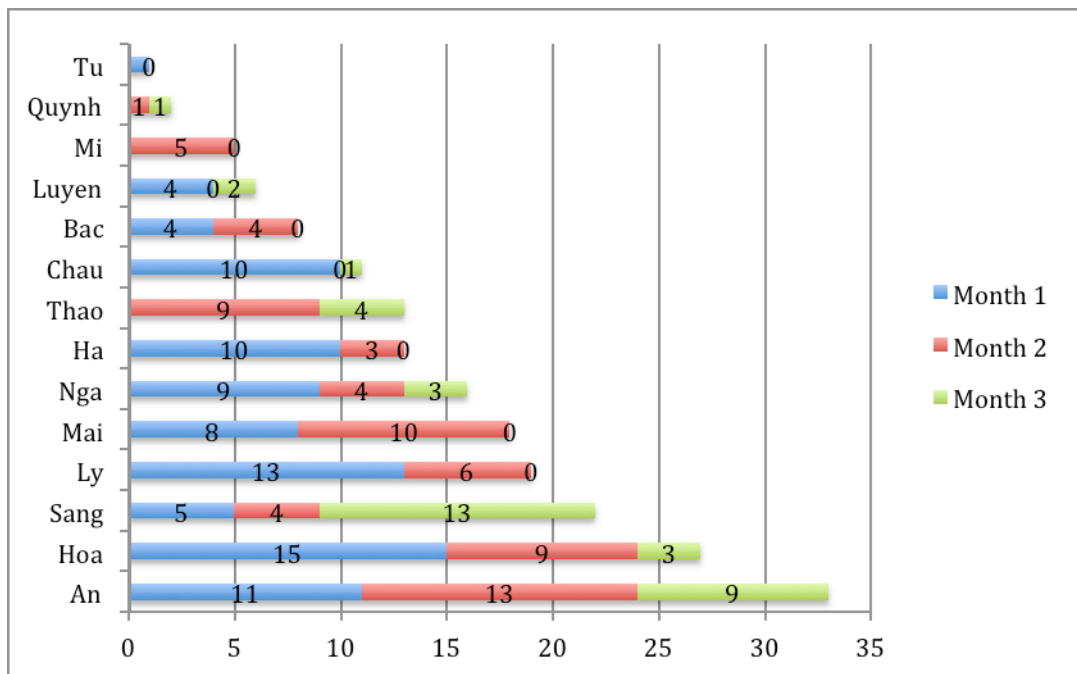
**Figure 4.12 Small talk in three months**

Apart from Hoa (as an outlier) most participants reported relatively few Small Talk interactions. Between-subject variation was still present, however, most participants' small talk interactions gradually declined over the three months. 'Small talks' went down sharper in the last month (from 112 to 111 and 79).

Small talk illustrates an example of the complex relationship between the types of interactions and types of interlocutors. Small talk is defined as random conversations mainly with strangers and they decreased gradually over the study period. But interactions with strangers remained relatively stable over the three months (4.3.5). This 'mismatch' suggests that interactions with strangers were not necessarily of small talk nature. In other words, the nature of any interactions cannot necessarily be predicted by the types of interlocutors.

### 4.4.4 Academic discussions

Academic discussions involved any conversation for academic purposes such as debates, group works, etc. As discussed earlier at the general description of types of interactions of section 4.3, academic discussions experienced one of the most dramatic decreases across all types of interactions (also see table 4.6).

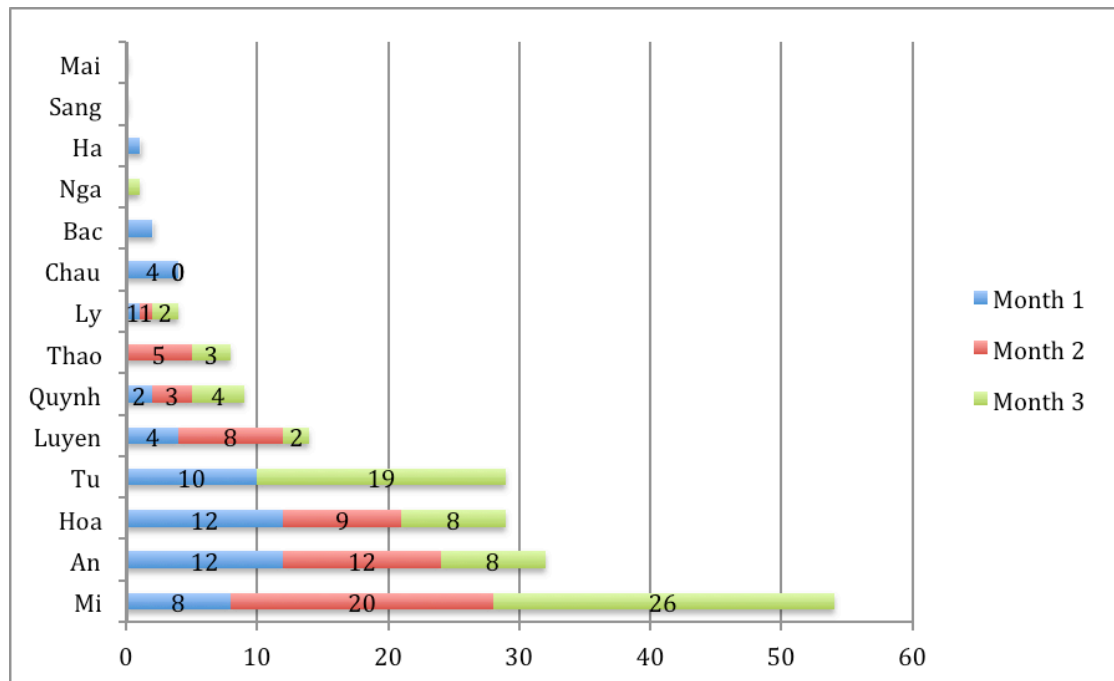


**Figure 4.13 Academic discussion in three months**

The university's closure in the last month (April) of the data collection period was one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of academic discussions. However, it should be noted that academic discussion only ranked fourth out of the six reported interaction types (see Table 4.6 at the beginning of section 4.3). This ranking is considered modest given all participants were full time students. A further observation regarding academic discussion is that the variation among participants was smaller compared to other types of interactions such as socialising (4.4.1). This suggests a substantial amount of 'dependence' on the university for L2 interactions. In addition, most participants also experienced a reduction in these types of interactions over three months, which is in line with the overall trend of interactions. Sang was the only exception – he doubled his number of Academic Discussion interactions from 5 in Month 1 to 13 in Month 3.

#### 4.4.5 Complex transactions

**Figure 4.14 Complex transactions in three months**



Complex transactions and negotiations were one of the least reported types of interactions. Nine out of 14 participants reported a total of less than 10 interactions over the three months. In particular, Sang and Mai reported engaging in no complex transactions and negotiations at all. Mi is clearly an outlier, recording 54 interactions, whereas the next highest, An, recorded only 34. This shows a big variation among participants in the total number of complex transactions. Similar to findings so far on other interactions, complex transactions also saw a decline trend over the three-month period.

#### 4.4.6 Learning English

Learning English was limited to 10 interactions throughout the three months (see table 4.6). Only Ly occasionally attended ESL classes for international students. The rest of the group did not report any learning English opportunity.

#### 4.4.7 Data from Pilot study

Table 4.8 shows the frequency of types of interactions that participants had during the pilot week. The most common category was small talk with 34 interactions, followed by socialising (17) and simple transactions (14). This is similar to the findings from the main study in that most interactions were of simple nature: such as socialising, simple transactions.

**Table 4.8: Pilot diary study- types of interactions in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Small talk	7	6	7	7	7	34
Simple transactions	4	2	2	3	3	14
Complex transactions	2	-	-	1	2	5
Academic discussions	2	-	2	1	-	5
Socialising	5	-	4	4	4	17
Learning E.	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-

Complex transactions and academic discussions were reported the same number of times (5). This also confirms findings from the main study that academic and complex discussions were modest, given participants were full time students. None of the participants had any ‘learning English’ opportunities in a formal English class. In summary, data from pilot study resembles data from the main study.

#### 4.5 Participants’ judgement of their L2 experiences

Question 4: How do you rate your experience of speaking English today in general?

Participants were asked to rate their experience of speaking English each day, with responses based on a six-point Likert scale: very positive, positive, mixture of positive, neither negative nor positive, negative and very negative. There was also an option of recording “no comments”. The reason to include ‘neither negative nor

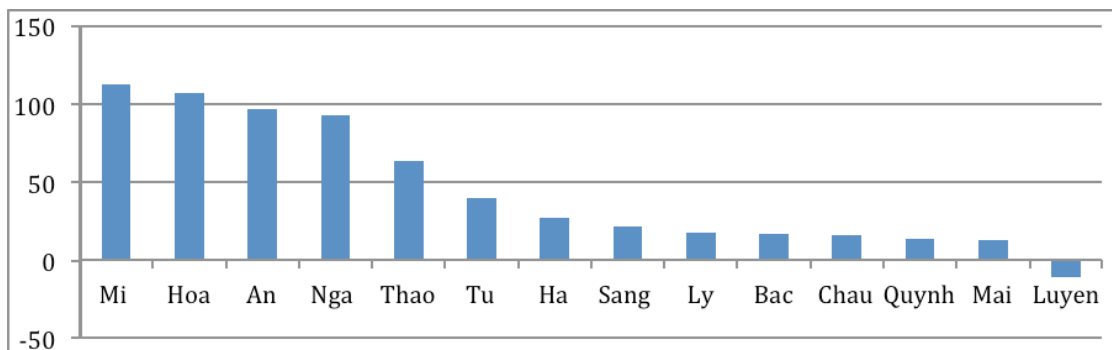
positive’ in the main study diary template was discussed in section 3.9.7.2 – Chapter 3. The rating of experience is a ‘record’ or impression of how participants *felt* about their performances during L2 interactions rather than an objective measure of their L2 proficiency.

**Table 4.9 Rating experience in three months**

Participants	Very (+)	Positive	Mixture of (+) and (-)	Neither (-) nor (+)	Negative	Very (-)	No comment
Sang	0	29	27	18	5	1	3
Nga	41	11	1	0	0	0	31
Mai	0	26	19	18	13	0	8
Ly	0	1	0	58	12	0	13
Chau	0	16	44	24	0	0	0
Ha	2	24	7	29	1	0	21
Ly	0	19	1	60	2	0	2
Tu	1	39	14	0	1	0	29
Quynh	0	17	46	0	3	0	18
Hoa	35	38	3	6	1	0	1
An	22	53	2	1	0	0	6
Mi	39	35	9	0	0	0	1
Bac	1	15	19	0	0	0	49
Thao	14	18	13	3	0	0	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>197</b>

The general rating has more ‘positive’ and ‘very positive’ than ‘negative’ over the three months. Most ratings fell between the range of “very positive” to “mixture of positive and negative”, in which the highest number was observed in “positive” with 341 ratings. It was followed by “neither negative nor positive” (217) and “mixture of negative and positive” (205). “Negative” (38) and “very negative” (1) ratings were reported comparatively rarely. However, the ‘no comment’ column was rather high (197), which were mainly contributed by Bac, Nga, Tu and Quynh. Those participants belonged to the lower scale of the total hours of interactions (4.2.1). Diary template that have completed by those participants show that they often marked ‘no comments’ on days when they had limited interactions or did not

have any interactions at all. However, if we look at the rating per each individual, the rating is not as high as it looks in Table 4.9.



**Figure 4.15: Rating scores of each participant**

Figure 4.15 shows the rating scores of each participant. I gave 2 and -2 for the two top and bottom ratings (very positive/very negative respectively), 1 and -1 for positive and negative in the order mentioned, the middle rating (neither and mixture of negative and positive feelings) received 0 score. Figure 4.15 shows a big variance in the rating of L2 experience among participants. Luyen had the most negative experience rating (-20). On the contrary, Mi and Hoa enjoyed the highest rating of the whole group, followed by An and Nga. Thao stayed at the middle ranking, while the rest of the group (8 participants) rated experiences quite low.

Unlike with results of the main study, most participants in the pilot study seemed to be happy with their L2 experiences: 5 ‘very positive’, 25 ‘positive’ and 5 ‘mixture of positive and negative’. No ‘negative’ or ‘very negative’ interactions were reported.

**Table 4.10: Pilot diary study: rating experience in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Very positive	2	-	1	1	1	5
Positive	5	5	5	5	5	25
Mixture of positive and negative	-	2	1	1	1	5
Negative	-	-	-	-	-	-
Very negative	-	-	-	-	-	-

In summary, data from both main and pilot studies suggest a similar finding that Vietnamese participants felt positive towards their L2 interactions in the UK. This is to note, however, that their positive ratings of the experience did not mean satisfaction with progress in L2 speaking skill. The expectation and assumption of progress in the English speaking skill were explored through focus groups and presented in Chapter 5 – section 5.5.1.

#### **4.6 Social roles occupied by participants**

Question 5: Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week? Please rank them in order from 1 to 11.

The 11 social roles are listed in Table 4.11 below. Most participants reported/ranked three social roles per week (An and Hoa occasionally ranked a fourth and fifth social role). During the diary training participants asked how they could conclude which social role(s) they felt they had occupied each week. Hoa and An, for example, mentioned that by the end of the week they might have forgotten how they felt at the start of the week. One suggestion which emerged from these discussions was to record the social role daily, and add them up at the end of the week in order to rank them. However, I emphasised that this “solution” was optional: there was no rule of thumb as such. Participants were also encouraged to add any social roles which were not covered by the list (Hoa indicated “tourist” and Mi, Chau and Tu indicated “lover, boyfriend/girlfriend” on several occasions). Nevertheless, Tu, Ha and Quynh did not rank the social roles in the way I expected. They indicated which roles they had occupied, but did not rank them. I did not want to treat this as “missing data” because they play an important part in the whole data set. I contacted Tu, Ha and Quynh and retrieved the missing the data (although their data is excluded from the table below).

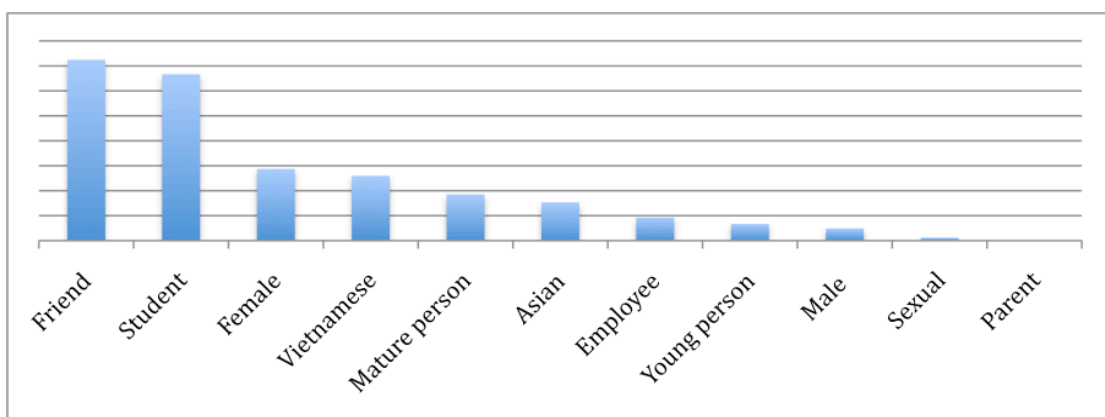


**Table 4.11 Social roles ranked first in twelve weeks**

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
Female	2	4	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	21
Male	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexual	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Parent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Friend	5	4	6	5	4	5	6	3	2	5	4	2	51
Employee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vietnamese	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	7
Mature person	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	0	8
Student	3	2	3	3	5	5	4	1	2	1	2	5	36
Asian	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Young person	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2

Table 4.11 lists only the top ranking roles over twelve weeks of data collection. The social roles remained fairly stable over time. The highest ranked role was ‘Friend’ (51), of the participants chose it as the primary role. ‘Student’ was ranked first only 36 times, lower compared to the top social role (Friend). ‘Female’ was the third ranking (21) while none reported the social role of ‘Male’. Only three participants were male (section 4.1), therefore it might explain the absence of ranking ‘Male’ in diary data. ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Mature person’ were ranked first 7 and 8 times respectively.

I listed 11 social roles in the Diary and requested participants to rank them in order of importance. The 11 social roles seemed to adequately embrace the participants’ experiences during the main study.

**Figure 4.16: Overall ranking of participants' social roles in three months**

Vietnamese participants were asked to rank from 1 to 11 the social roles they felt they had occupied each week. Each ranking was then given a mark, which was then added up to produce the above Figure. Two social roles, Friend and Student, were ranked the highest. The role of ‘Friend’ is not necessarily bound to campus or university life whereas being a ‘Student’ is more likely to be experienced within the context of university and campus life. ‘Friend’ is a much broader concept than ‘Student’ and embraces a much wider range of activities (some of which may overlap with being a ‘Student’ – helping a classmate plan his or her essay for example).

The lowest ranking roles were ‘Sexual’ (20) and ‘Parent’ (0). ‘Parent’ was not ranked because none of the students had children. ‘Sexual’ was referred to twice by Tu. Tu explained that he chose ‘Sexual’ because of his role as a boyfriend. No Vietnamese females reported any sexual harassment. Polanyi (1995) described the harassment of American female learners in Russia and how this impacted negatively on their SLA. In week 10 Hoa noted in her diary that she was offered a job and a house if she moved to London with an Arabian man that she had met. Hoa did not describe the situation as harassment but she was clearly disturbed by his pestering, which eventually stopped. She described in her diary (original emoticon):

*I am very annoyed with the guy who phoned me up again today. He said when I finish my degree, just move to London, he will find me a job and an accommodation. I said to him that stop daydreaming, he can't use money to buy me. I shut him up on the phone. Poor guy ☹*

When I asked her if she would like to tell me more she said it was “over” and she did not have anything else to say about it. Hoa never ranked ‘Sexual’ in her identity list even during the period when the incident took place.

The second-highest ranking group includes social roles of Female, Vietnamese, Mature Person and Asian. However, the ranking was less than half compared to the ranking for Student and Friend. This suggests Vietnamese participants mainly adopted two social roles, Student and Friend, which was a shift from the roles that they used to adopt before they arrived in the UK. As discussed in section 2 of this

Chapter, participants were professionals with middle class backgrounds in Vietnam. Norton (2000) argues that the decline in social and economic status of the immigrants in her research had influenced their identities adversely. I would not argue that Vietnamese participants had undergone a similar decline in social status; however, it is safe to say that their social roles had changed dramatically. They had limited roles (mainly Friend and Student) which were bound to university life. In terms of fully participating in UK social life, Vietnamese students had not yet achieved full membership. Their daily routine was defined by university schedules. Financially they had left behind white-collar jobs and privileged middle class life styles, entered a new social setting and were mostly reliant on personal savings in one of the world's most expensive countries.

Similar ranking of social roles was found in the pilot study (Table 4.12). The highest ranking was 'Student' (4). 'Friend' was only inserted after reviewing the pilot (see Modification of diary template 3.9.7.2 – Final box) so there was no comparable data with regards to this social role. 'Female' was ranked first by one participant. The second ranking included 'Asian' (2) and Man (1). 'Vietnamese' was ranked fourth only once.

**Table 4.12: Pilot diary study– Ranking of Social role in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR
Male	-	-	2	-	2
Female	1	-	-	-	-
Student	-	1	1	1	1
Asian	-	2	3	2	3
Mature person	-	-	-	3	-
Vietnamese	-	-	4	-	-
Parent	-	-	-	-	-
Employee	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual	-	-	-	-	-
Young person	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-

Due to time constraints, the pilot diary study was carried out within one week. For that reason, it was not possible to observe temporal changes.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has provided a detailed description of data collected from the main diary study, with some reference to data from the pilot study. There are six important findings which have emerged from the data. (1) The amount of time spent speaking English, was on a downward trend and was limited, with participants typically speaking the L2 for just 11 hours per week (see 4.2.1). Here, there was a large between-subject variation (see 4.2.2), and less within-subject variation over time, suggesting routinisation (see 4.2.3). (2) In terms of whom participants spoke English with (or Interlocutor ‘Types’), the number of L2 interactions with specific interlocutor types also declined over time. ‘Friends’ are the most common L2 interlocutors by a large margin; followed by ‘Student’ and ‘University/Academic Staff’. Interactions with other ‘types’ of interlocutors were all very rare. Within-subjects variation is limited for ‘Friends’, but more pronounced for ‘Students’ and ‘University/Academic Staff’ (see 4.3). (3) With regards to whether participants spoke English with NS or NNS, the majority of L2 interactions were with the latter. The gap between NS and NNS interactions narrowed by the end of Month 3 however, but this was due to a reduction in interactions with NNS rather than an increase in interactions with NS (see 4.3.8). (4) In terms of Interaction types, ‘Socialising’, ‘Simple Transactions’ and ‘Small Talk’ are the most common types of L2 interaction. The amount of ‘Socialising’ increased over time. There is between-subject variation but also evidence of less within-subject variation (see 4.4). (5) With regards to participants’ own perceptions of their L2 communication experiences a majority of participants reported being different in their L2 speaking experiences (see 4.5). Most participants (8) ranked their experienced relatively low. (6) Finally, in terms of Social Roles, ‘Friend’, ‘Student’ and ‘Female’ are the most common social roles reported by a wide margin. Other social roles are acknowledged, but only rarely. (see 4.6). The following chapter explores participants’ L2 experiences using data acquired from the focus groups before a substantive discussion of the findings (and triangulation) to be presented in Chapter 6.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Focus Groups Analysis and Findings**

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This chapter presents the findings from the focus groups in the Main study. The chapter commences with a brief discussion of the process of recruitment and administration. The actual data analysis is divided into two sections: with the first addresses issues concerning the quantity and quality of participants' L2 interactions of the second part examines individual variations in L2 interactions. Throughout the chapter, there are also references to the findings from the pilot focus groups.

#### **5.1 Recruitment, administration and data analysis**

##### **5.1.1 Recruitment of participants**

The method of recruitment was discussed in the Pilot study (see Chapter 3 – Methodology) and Diary analysis (Chapter 4). To aid the following discussion, some of the main characteristics of the recruitment method used and participant's profiles are presented again here. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis via the Vietnamese Societies in Leeds and York.

Fourteen MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year agreed to participate in the research – to maintain a daily diary over 12 weeks and attend regular focus groups in February 2009. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Ly and Ha were based in York, and the remainder lived and studied in Leeds. Table 5.1 above presents the participants' profiles.

**Table 5.1 Main study – participants’ profiles**

Participants	Age	Gender	Major	Part-time job
Ly	25	F	Social Science	N
Ha	24	F	Business and Finance	Y
Sang	29	M	Natural Sciences	N
Luyen	25	F	Business	Y
Quynh	23	F	Business	Y
Tu	27	M	Business	N
Nga	24	F	Business	N
Hoa	24	F	Business	Y
An	26	F	Science	N
Mi	24	F	Social Science	Y
Bac	27	M	Business	N
Thao	25	F	Business	N
Chau	25	F	Business	Y
Mai	27	F	Business	Y

Participants were aged between 24 and 29, with a mean age of 24.14. The majority (10/14) were studying for an MA in Business. Of the rest, 2 were majoring in the physical sciences and 2 were majoring in social science. When data collection began eight students (57.1%) had a part-time job. Almost 80% (11/14) of the sample were female.

### **5.1.2 Focus group schedule and administration**

Ten focus groups were conducted between 10 March 2009 and 21 June 2009. For practical purposes, and to facilitate data collection, the 14 participants (12 in Leeds and 2 in York) were divided into three focus groups. Each group was interviewed once every four weeks (see Chapter 3 – Methodology for the main study focus group schedule). The first three focus groups were held in mid-March 2009, by which point

participants had kept a diary for 5 weeks (diary-keeping commenced on 02 February 2009). As discussed previously (Chapter 3 – Methodology), the focus groups were retrospective and mainly discussed issues raised in participant’s diaries over the previous four weeks. Figure 5.1 below illustrates the focus group and diary schedule.

Feb.09	Mar.09	Apr.09	May.09	Jun.09
Diary				
	Focus groups			

**Figure 5.1 Main study fieldwork schedule**

The total number of focus groups remained the same (10) as planned but the interview schedule was extended by three weeks into late June 09 (see research design in Chapter 3 for original scheduling). The extension was necessary because participants sometimes could not agree on appropriate dates and times for the focus group. Originally, I expected and attempted to ensure that all participants within each group attended all their focus groups. However, after the first three focus groups, I realised that this was unrealistic because if I kept on waiting for a convenient time and date to be agreed by all the members of a group the research progress would be considerably slowed. Therefore, I decided to be more flexible in order to maintain progress of the main study and because the timing of the focus groups was crucial in terms of facilitating identifying temporal shifts in attitudes and behaviours etc (see Chapter 3 - Methodology). I therefore adopted a ‘mix and match’ approach – attempting to agree dates with each group but prepared to in-fill with members of other groups according to availability. This strategy made it easier in terms of administration and created opportunities for participants to interact with different members. It should be added that the approach did not result in individual members interacting with strangers - all participants had been socialising with each other for at least 6 months. This issue naturally did not emerge in the cross-sectional pilot focus groups.

### 5.1.3 Dealing with missing data

All focus groups were digitally recorded, uploaded to my computer for storage, and backed-up. The data was not accessed by any other parties. In addition to the difficulties associated with identifying dates and times for particular sets of students I

had to address missing data caused by ‘no-shows’. The two participants in York did not miss any focus groups. Table 5.2 summarises the focus groups in Leeds.

**Table 5.2 Focus groups in Leeds**

	Set 1			Set 2		Set 3		Number of focus groups missed
	10 Mar	15 Mar	23 Mar	3 Apr	18 Apr	20 Jun	21 Jun	
Hoa	√			√		√		0
An	√			√		√		0
Tu	√				√	x		1
Mai	√			√			√	0
Nga	√			x		√		1
Sang	√			√			√	0
Thao		√			√		√	0
Quynh		√		√		x		1
Luyen		√		√			√	0
Bac			√	x		√		1
Mi			√	x		√		1
Chau			√		√		√	0
Total	6	3	3	6	3	5	6	5

Each participant was asked to attend three focus groups during the main study period, which amounted to an expected total of 42 attendances. Table 5.2 shows that 5 participants each failed to attend one group (or 11.9 %). These participants shared no particular characteristics. The main reasons cited for not attending were: study



commitments, social events and travelling. To recover missing data, as recommended by Kruger (1998), I contacted absentees and conducted telephone and/or e-conversations. Most participants (Tu, Quynh, Bac and Mi) chose to hold telephone conversations with me. Nga, however, opted to use e-mail and instant messaging. I made copies of the diaries completed by Tu, Bac and Quynh which I posted to them, in advance of the subsequent conversation, so that they could be used as a memory aid (Nga and Mi had retained electronic copies of their diaries so they could refer to these). I explained that even though they had missed a focus group, their future attendance was important. All conversations and correspondence were recorded as normal as it is recommended by Krueger (1998:75) that no information is disregarded. I was aware of the fact that any comments or opinions given in such circumstances should be noted as having occurred in a one-to-one context when being analysed.

#### **5.1.4 Transcribing, coding and translating**

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, focus groups were conducted in Vietnamese. The interviews were also transcribed and coded in Vietnamese for analysis. Additionally, I recruited a Vietnamese MA TESOL graduate – otherwise unconnected to my research - to act as an independent transcriber and translator of my transcriptions. This was to minimise any mistakes that I might have made during the transcription and translation process. The MA TESOL is experienced in transcribing and translating Vietnamese/English and currently teaches English in Vietnam. The total number of hours of the focus group interviews are summarised in table 5.3 below:

**Table 5.3 Summary of main study focus groups**

Month	Date	Location	Length	Number of participants
1	10 March 09	Leeds	1h35 minutes	6
	15 March 09	Leeds	1h14minutes	3
	20 March 09	York	48 minutes	2
	23 March 09	Leeds	1h09 minutes	3
2	3 April 09	Leeds	1h11minutes	6
	26 April 09	York	35 minutes	2
	16 May 09	Leeds	52 minutes	3
3	9 June 09	York	35 minutes	2
	20 June 09	Leeds	36 minutes	5
	21 June 09	Leeds	50 minutes	5
	Total		10h 25 minutes	

## 5.2 Quantity of L2 interactions

According to the focus groups, most opportunities that participants had to speak English originated from two main sources: university-related interactions and off-campus social interactions. Amongst the two main sources, university played a more important role in that it generated the majority of opportunities to speak English for the majority (10/14) of participants. Only four students (An, Hoa, Mi, and Chau) managed to obtain social interactions which took place outside campus. The interactions accounted for most variation in the frequency of interactions between individual students. The following sections will deal with the quantity of interactions on campus before describing the quantity of interactions off-campus.

### 5.2.1 Interactions on campus

At the point of data collection, participants had been in the UK for at least six months. Opportunities to speak English on campus were considered as the primary source of interactions for most participants. Even so, participants considered such opportunities to be “*surprisingly limited*”, as Nga put it.

Many participants (Chau, Nga and An) believed “*there is not enough opportunity*” for them to take advantage of. However, others (Sang, Luyen and Bac) believed this was because they “*did not tap fully the opportunity*”. They felt there were opportunities available which they had not fully taken advantage of. None of the participants were satisfied with the quantity of interactions generated on campus. The following section discusses in detail the two main reasons for such limited interactions on campus as mentioned by participants: not enough opportunities *per se*, and difficulties in accessing (the limited) opportunities that did exist.

### **5.2.1.1 Not enough opportunity to speak English on campus**

Evidence for this comes from both the main and pilot focus groups. Findings from the main study will be discussed first. Chau believed universities did not generate many opportunities to speak English:

*It is terribly wrong when many (Vietnamese) people believe that they can improve their English by going to the university everyday. I find more opportunity to practice English when I go out.*

Chau emphasised that most of her contacts and interactions occurred outside her studies and off-campus. She explained that most students speak relatively rarely during seminars. In seminars, no matter how enthusiastic they were, they could only speak for 5 or 10 minutes at most because they had roughly one hour to share among the group. Nga agreed with Chau claiming that there were no discussions in lectures and that speaking opportunities at seminars were minimal:

*I just sit and listen in lectures. There is no discussion with teachers. I mainly talk with classmates but only few minutes and then I go home.*

For An, talking with her tutors was the only chance to speak English on campus but these opportunities were rare:

*I think I don't speak much English when I'm at the university. The only time I can think of speaking English is with my supervisor but such a meeting is not often.*

An's report of infrequent meetings with her supervisor was supported by other participants during the focus groups.

#### Pilot study data

Participants in the pilot study believed that research students had fewer opportunities to speak English compared to undergraduate students. P considered the chances to practice English had declined since he became a PhD student:

*When I was doing MA I had lectures from 9 to 5 with lots of speaking so my skill developed dramatically then. Because everyday I was having lots of speaking opportunities, both from academic debates to small talks during break time. Once I start the PhD I just go to the office, saying hi, and without much debates or discussion because other PhD students are working so I feel like I'm taking up their time, really, if I talk to them, and the number of students that I meet is also smaller so...*

As P pointed out the limited opportunity to speak English was resulted from the time participants had to spend on independent research/study, and therefore fewer interactions in classrooms, etc. However, HA, another PhD student (Table 3.2-Chapter 3) described equally limited interactions in classroom settings:

*In general, there is limited interaction in the classroom. There are several questions and answers during seminars. I came to classroom 5 minutes earlier and hanged around 10 maximum after that, so speaking with classmates is not a lot, and we hardly use technical terms which are used by the lecturers. So it does not really help me with the technical terms.*

HA believed the limited opportunities in the classroom was also the reason for his limited English academic vocabulary. Undergraduate participants were thought to enjoy the most favourable conditions: they had more interactions with NS in and outside the classroom. They were also younger and more outgoing, arguably finding it easier to learn new things and more willing to get involved in the full range of University social activities, many of which deliberately or accidentally attract a younger audience.

In sum, accounts from participants in pilot group confirm some of the main findings in the main study. First, most participants were dissatisfied with the quantity of interactions. Second, the interactions on campus were limited, therefore if one wants to open interactions he/she will have to identify off-campus opportunities. Research students (MA and PhD) reported fewer interactions in English because they had to spend more time in independent study, and consequently had less time for interactions, especially those outside campus. In addition, findings from the pilot focus groups also suggest that younger graduates had more interactions, because they had a more active social life and a lighter academic workload.

### **5.2.1.2 Difficulties in taking advantage of opportunity to speak English**

University both facilitates and constrains opportunities to speak English. One reason for not being able to “*tap opportunities fully*” is the university academic regime itself. Being a student interfered with opportunities because of academic workloads, pedagogic specificities and the requirement to prioritise academic needs. Quynh cited the curriculum and academic pressure as an explanation for her limited interactions:

*My MA course requires a lot of self-study at home or in the library. I don't have time to go out and talk to people.*

Nga described her typical day as ‘*just university and then work at home. There is no more opportunity (to speak English)*’.

Luyen offered an explanation for the impact of university life on participants’ interactions. According to Luyen, it took the Vietnamese up to two months to get to know their classmates and to reach a level of familiarity which permitted regular socialising. But just as they reached this stage, more and more of their time was being filled by the academic demands of their courses. This was supported by Thao who described how she had to study even during holidays:

*My hours of speaking English will decrease because all of my classmates will go home on holiday. I will be busy writing so I have no chance to go out.*

Academic pressure also shaped Thao’s daily routine:

*After lectures I have to sit in the library for the rest of the day, come home late, cook something to eat and then next day the same routine starts. I don't have time to go out and practice my speaking.*

Some participants clearly decided to put their academic needs first, before the need to practice speaking English. Thao and Sang admitted that opportunities to speak English must be balanced against the pressure of academic deadlines and assignments. Thao said:

*There are quite a few opportunities here to practice speaking English but I have not made full use of them. I have other commitments.*

Sang also had to balance his SLA progress and his academic progress:

*My speaking is not improved much as I expected but I guess I have to balance between my academic study and my English level, so I don't feel too bad.*

Bac and Tu also mentioned this 'sacrifice' couched in terms of the hours they spent studying in the library which left them with little time for anything else:

*The priority is given to other things rather than just improving English, like I might decide to spend 3 hours a day in the library to read all the books on the suggested reading list that was given by the teacher.*

The second difficulty involves the costs of socialising. Tu found it hard to socialise because it costs money: *"I might not be able to socialise as much because I want to save a bit of money"*.

Tu was not the only Vietnamese student who had to sacrifice opportunities to practice English in order to save money. Bac had moved to cheaper accommodation, which reduced his chances to speak English. His new housemates were all Vietnamese whereas he used to share with several (non-Vietnamese) international students. Bac never regretted moving because it enabled him to save some money and the new house was closer to the university. Mai, though keen to improve her speaking skill, could

only afford to attend one social event at the university due to the cost. Both Hoa and An could only attend free social events organised at university. Quynh mentioned that the university charged a large fee for an activity she was interested in (visiting English families to understand more about the target culture) which she was consequently unable to attend.

The third reason for limited interactions on campus was that of “*letting opportunities slip away*” as Ly put it. According to participants this was due to the ‘transient’ nature of university. Ly comments:

*Sometimes I meet new people who seem quite interesting but then we did not have a chance to meet again.*

University life comprises a multiplicity of short-lived encounters, which according to Ly are difficult to sustain. Ly blamed herself:

*Our contacts are limited because we don't try to open them by going out. I guess it is my weak point. Sometimes I have some friends to talk to but just limited to small talks. ...*

Similarly, Ha acknowledges that she failed to maintain regular contact with the people she befriended:

*I think my weakness is I don't open my contacts. I have very limited interactions.*

Both Ha and Ly described feeling “*trapped in a box*” which constrained their interactions. Ly agreed with Ha that she did not experience any significant interactions with the students on her course. Ly described how her fellow students were allocated to study groups randomly at the beginning of the year and the majority of interactions occurred only with members of her group. Ly and Ha both felt it difficult to establish new contacts in order to develop new opportunities to speak English. They described a situation of being “trapped”:

*The opportunity was set up randomly at the beginning of the academic year. I was placed in a study group by chance. Activities among groups*

*were almost nothing... If one does not take the initiatives to go out, he/she will be confined in one group. Originally it was for the study purpose, then it trapped you there.*

Ha and Ly described themselves as passive. They did not do anything to improve the situation even when they recognised the “trap” forming around them. Crucially, both wanted to “get out” and to make more contacts, but never did. When asked why, Ha and Ly both said that it may have reflected their individual personalities. However, interestingly, in another conversation Ha revealed that she had lots of friends in Vietnam and spent considerable time on Facebook keeping in touch with them. Ha was thus able to socialise successfully with Vietnamese friends in a virtual community but could only maintain a sub-optimal level of socialising in the UK. Therefore, Ha and Ly may not have been as passive as they described themselves. In another account they described organising a BBQ to deliberately attract British students so that they would enjoy more opportunities to socialise with the “*local people*”. They also criticised their university for not supporting international students e.g. by organising social activities after classes.

Pilot study data:

Findings from pilot study also confirm the limited opportunity to speak English on campus. Most participants reported only limited opportunities to speak English. In addition, language was also reported as a problem in interactions in the classroom:

*I have to admit that when I first arrived, I got tongue tied, really, it was the truth. It was really difficult to listen to lecturers...at least for the first 1 or 2 months I did not understand a single word.*

(HA-Male, second year PhD in social science)

*Yes, I remember in the past, when the teacher was lecturing. I was sitting with my mouth wide open... he (the teacher) clearly understood what he was saying but I had no clue.*

(S-Male, last year Foundation course)

*I remember sitting silent from the beginning to the end of lectures and seminars during the first couple of weeks. I did not understand what people*



*were saying. So I was sitting in silence.*

(P-Male, last year PhD in science)

In short, interaction opportunities associated with university life were considered limited. Opportunities to speak English were eroded by academic demands even during holidays. Participants felt that their university's needed to do more to encourage extra-curricula inter-cultural events, and for these to be financially accessible. At the same time, there is evidence that some participants needed to work harder to access the limited opportunities that were available.

### **5.2.2 Interactions outside campus**

As mentioned earlier, ten participants' main source of interactions was based around their university regimes, whilst only four participants (Chau, Mi, Hoa and An) managed regular interactions off-campus. This section will discuss the quantity of interactions outside campus, including socialising and in employment.

#### **5.2.2.1 Dependency on university for interactions**

For most participants (10/14) interactions on campus accounted for the majority of total interactions that they experienced. This means that university served as the main source of interactions, which also implies that interactions outside campus accounted for a modest proportion. Data from the focus groups shows how participants considered the university's closure to have a negative effect on the quantity of their L2 interactions. Nga remarks:

*My interactions will definitely go down because the university is going to close for holidays.*

Nga did not report other L2 speaking opportunities outside campus so for her the end of term affected negatively her hours of interactions in English. Similarly, Luyen chose to stay at home during the holiday:

*I think from next week (April 2009), my speaking hours will decrease because the university is going to close. And you know, it means I will literally stay in all the time, even not walk out of my door. I will not go anywhere at all, so I won't have a chance to talk to anyone either.*

Ha considered university as the primary source of her L2 interactions:

*If we don't have to go to the university, we will just stay at home. The university does not organize activities to involve people gatherings when we don't have to go to lectures or seminars.*

Ha just stayed at home and was critical of the university for failing to offer international students extra-curriculum L2 interaction opportunities. Ly agreed:

*The university is where I come along for study purposes only. There are no other social activities for us to meet after class.*

In sum, data suggests that most participants experienced the end of term as a major reduction in their L2 interactions.

#### **5.2.2.2 Social events**

Ha and Ly both made regular efforts to befriend English students but did not have any English friends at the time of data collection. As Ly described, she joined international social events in York to socialise. However, she did not see British students there, and the events were mainly attended by international students. The English students were largely uninterested, even in events such as barbecues, which were considered to be popular amongst the English. Ha and Ly complained about the lack of social activities on campus in York. Their criticism can be understood as the need for more social activities. Meanwhile, Leeds participants refused to take part in the activities organised by their university. The main criticisms were: the activities were not interesting enough (Chau, Bac); they were unaffordable/costly (Hoa, Mai, Tu) and/or they were held at unsuitable times and/or on unsuitable days (Sang). Mai, on the other hand, said that she felt uncomfortable socialising in large groups and with strangers. For Thao the topic or themes of many of the events were unappealing. Luyen chose not to take part because they tended to be “full of non-native speakers”.

Whether or not social events were available, participants experienced a lack of opportunities to speak English outside campus. The end result was that Vietnamese students in both York and Leeds rarely participated in social activities, which presumably took place during term time only. At the end of the main study only Sang was ‘socialising’ regularly (at bible classes organised by the Christian Union in Leeds).

Ha and Ly did want to meet more people but could not due to the lack of social activities at their university in York. Most participants in Leeds did not attend social activities for various reasons. Hoa and An did not participate in some events because of the cost, but when the Ghanaian society organized a free festival they attended and did meet new people. Hoa and An did not refer to a decline in their interactions during the focus groups: unlike the rest of the group they did not believe the university closure would cause much of a problem because they were very proactive and tried to “*stay positive*”.

Participants reported feeling ‘put off’ by the nature of social events organised by British students. Many of the clubs and societies run and organised by British students revolved around pubs and alcohol and/or featured party themes and certain styles of music either unpopular in Vietnam or incompatible with Vietnamese sexual and cultural values. According to Mi:

*They (westerners) are keen on drinking which I am scared of. I came only once and then I never joined any such event again as it takes me several days to recover from such a drinking event. I did not find it fun at all.*

### **5.2.2.3 Opportunity to speak English at home**

Five Vietnamese students (Chau, Mai, Quynh, Hoa and An) shared accommodation with British or non-Vietnamese international students. The rest shared with fellow-Vietnamese, so Vietnamese was spoken at home (except for Mi and Tu). Nevertheless, neither Chau nor Mai experienced regular or sustained interactions with their NS housemates. Chau described how her British housemate made no effort to accommodate Chau’s L2 shortcomings and never expressed any interest in her cultural background – despite studying a Masters Degree in Asian Studies.

*He (the English housemate) sometimes sees me in the kitchen. I thought it would be OK for us to start chatting a bit but he does not pay any attention. He came in just to check his cooking potatoes for example, disappeared in his room, came out again and then disappeared again without saying anything to me... We wanted to cook some Vietnamese meal to invite him but he was never available for that... towards the end we just ignored each other.*

Chau said that at home she only managed to speak English with two European international students. Similar to Chau, Mai also shared a house with two British students but they never became friends. Mai met them sometimes in the kitchen and their conversations were minimal. But Mai did become friends with two other Asian housemates, who became her main source of L2 interaction. Therefore neither Chau nor Mai experienced regular or sustained interactions with their NS housemates.

An and Hoa lived in the same house which they shared with a British student and both report slightly more success in engaging him in conversation. However, Hoa emphasised that her interactions with him were still minimal (they never became friends for example). Both Hoa and An attempted to befriend him by doing his washing up in the kitchen and even offered to cook for him (he declined, politely):

*I tell him that he looks quite skinny recently. If he is too busy to cook for himself I can help. However, he just said thanks and that he can look after himself. (Hoa)*

Even towards the end of the data collection period, Hoa and An had failed to improve their relationship with the housemate or increase the amount of time engaging with him: “*He still remained very quiet*” (An said). In fact, none of the participants shared a house with UK students with whom they became friends, but they did make friends - and speak English - with non-Vietnamese international housemates.

Thao shared a house with other Vietnamese students, which also meant she spoke Vietnamese when she was home. The ‘pull’ of the Vietnamese ‘community’ seemed strong, as Quynh admitted:

*Vietnamese people always tend to stick to each other. And when we are together we just speak Vietnamese, of course. It is easy to understand why because we speak the same language and share many things in common.*

Quynh shared a house with an English chef and some Vietnamese students. She said that interactions with the British housemate were limited. Quynh mainly used Vietnamese with her Vietnamese housemates. However, Tu and Mi took a different view. Tu spoke English with his Vietnamese girlfriend at home while Mi and a Vietnamese housemate (not a participant of this research) agreed to communicate with

each other in English at home: Tu and Mi were prompted to do this after realising how limited the actual opportunities to speak English were. Quynh, Ha and Ly did not believe that the time they spent speaking Vietnamese was at the expense of time spent speaking English, so they preferred speaking Vietnamese with other Vietnamese students.

In general, most participants had limited domestic opportunities to speak English, especially with British housemates. If English was used at home, it was with international students (even when NS housemates were available) as in the cases of Chau; Hoa; Quynh; Mai and An; or, in the cases of Mi and Tu, with other Vietnamese housemates.

Data from the pilot study also suggests limited interactions at home among participants whose housemates are English speakers. TH (in York) moved out to live with fellow Vietnamese after an unsuccessful experience with British housemates.

*They (housemates) were working people so we did not share common topics. In London, I was sharing a double room with a friend. Landlord was living in the same house but in fact we hardly ever talked. They were actually isolated with us.*

TH considered himself ‘different’ from his housemates. Feeling “*isolated by the landlord*” TH later decided to move out and live with Vietnamese housemates. Similarly, HA moved out of the house which he used to share with English people. He was sharing a house with three other Vietnamese females at the time of data collection. HA remarks:

*I used to share a house with English speakers too. I thought it would create more interactions but in fact we did not have time... only 10 minutes everyday... just basic social exchanges.*

Most participants emphasised the need to be able to “get on well” with housemate over the opportunity to speak English.

#### 5.2.2.4 Opportunity to speak English at work

Seven participants reported working part-time at the beginning of data collection process (Table 5.1 in section 5.1.1). Participants did not consider L2 interactions at work as a reasonable opportunity to practice English. First of all, participants did not work many hours. All participants worked less than 12 week. Luyen worked as a tutor only one hour per week. The second reason for limited L2 speaking opportunities at work was that most of the time the jobs themselves did not involving speaking. Ha, for example, was a cleaner and a lone worker and there was limited interaction with other people at work. Sang, Mai and Chau all worked in catering and also did not have to speak very much. Sang and Mai also added that the pressure at work prevented them from chatting with work colleagues. Mai recalled an occasion, when she was trying to talk to one of the chefs in the kitchen. He told her to stop talking and let him concentrate on his work:

*Mai, I know you are a friendly girl but I need to concentrate on my work so can you please not trying to talk to me.*

Though chef's request was polite and reasonable Mai reports feeling embarrassed and concluded that work is not an ideal environment to practice speaking skills. She admitted that since that exepreicne Mai never dared to initiate a conversation with that chef even in a more relaxed atmosphere such as when they were on a break.

Chau's experiences support those of Mai's. As a waitress Chau spent most time bringing food from the kitchen to tables, and communicating with customers was mainly the responsibility of front of house staff. Chau remembered serving food to some customers who made fun of her accent/pronunciation:

*They repeated what I said in a stretchy voice. I knew I was not saying the word right but they made me so embarrassed.*

Chau therefore also did not find work to be a good environment within which to practice her speaking skill. As a waitress, Chau's job offered some opportunities to speak English, but she found it a limited and de-motivating environment.

Participants in the pilot study also reported L2 communication difficulties at work. LA, a female final year PhD student, remembers one exchange with a customer in the café where she worked:

*The first time when I was at work, they asked me to give them a “cup”, just a simple word, a “cup” to drink tea from, but I did not figure out what they wanted.*

LA reported feeling extremely embarrassed when, in a public setting, she was not able to understand a simple word. Busy workplaces are not ideal environments for participants to improve their L2 communication skills.

### **5.3 Quality of L2 interactions**

The quality of interactions in English is influenced by two factors: language (as a barrier) and culture. The influence of these factors are discernible in both academic and non-academic contexts.

#### **5.3.1 Language barrier**

The language barrier was described as the biggest problem for participants in academic discussions. Academic discussions reportedly involved study groups, presentations, seminars, etc. when participants had chance to speak English with their classmates and supervisors. However, Vietnamese participants did not consider themselves especially active in such discussions and attributed this to their L2 proficiency. In particular: inadequate level of vocabulary and (perceived lack of) fluency in speaking skill, listening comprehension and pronunciation.

In terms of vocabulary, especially in academic contexts Luyen comments:

*Sometimes during the middle of a discussion, I have to pause for not being able to recall a technical term. And you know, when this happens I have to tell others to wait till next time after I look it up again.*

Luyen believed that in situations like this she “*had already lost in the debate*” even though she believed she had strong arguments. Sang agreed, saying that in most debates those with more fluent English speaking skills tended to dominate the discussions, leaving the less-fluent with minimal opportunities to express their ideas,

even though the former did not necessarily possess the best arguments. Sang suggested that he sometimes felt he had the better ideas but that his English speaking skills were holding him back. Luyen and Sang found such situations extremely frustrating and intimidating.

Nga and Tu described their language problem slightly differently: they found it hard to express their ideas concisely. Both felt that Vietnamese people tend to present and develop ideas in a less direct manner compared to Western people. Since seminars were relatively short Nga and Tu felt under pressure to make themselves understood more quickly. According to Tu, his “*lengthy presentation style*” meant he lost his audience’s interest and patience. Tu did try to amend his speaking style and make more concise contributions, but it did not come natural to him and, again, he felt under pressure. Nga also admitted that the ‘*pressure to present well*’ in academic discussion made her nervous. Towards the end of the research Nga even reported that the situation “*is getting worse*” and she realised that her problem was not purely language related:

*I find myself mumbling in front of people, I don't understand why. It is getting worse... I only have that problem in English not in Vietnamese... I think it is due to psychological problem...*

Nga admitted to a fear of being judged when speaking English to native speakers even though she never actually experienced any negative comments or attitudes from them. Inadequate vocabulary and fluency in speaking skill placed Luyen, Sang, Nga and Tu at a disadvantage because they believed they could have participated in academic discussions more successfully if only their L2 was better. Ha also feared being judged and reported remaining silent most of the time in seminars. Ha also thought that her natural soft voice made it hard for people to hear and understand her well, and she chose to be silent to be ‘*on the safe side*’. Even though

Bac also considered himself frequently ‘*lost in debates*’ due to his listening comprehension:

*Their (his classmates) English is better than me so in academic debates I often lose because I can not understand them.*



Bac described following others' arguments with difficulty and this prevented him from participating effectively. Bac believed there was a significant 'mismatch' between English language education in Vietnam and real-life (spoken) English. The English accent that Bac became familiar with in Vietnam was different to the real-life accent(s) he often encountered at university. Several other participants (Hoa, Nga, Chau, Tu and Mi) also admitted problems with their listening skills, with some blaming it on their unfamiliarity with the British (Yorkshire) accent(s). Mi, Chau and Hoa learned American English and seemed to have the most problems. According to Mi:

*...to be honest I'm kind of "allergic" to British accent. I can't understand till now. I just can't understand what they say... I have been trained in American English since I was much younger... and people here they speak Yorkshire accent...oh my God, I can't make any sense.*

Mi describes feeling frustrated at sometimes not being able to understand what was happening in the classroom. Mi considered this very embarrassing because she passed the TOEFL test in order to study in the UK. However, she said TOEFL is a test of American English which she understands better. Mi was shocked when she arrived in Yorkshire and could not easily understand the local people's accent. She questioned her L2 skills and felt humiliated. Mi says she "shut the door", refusing to make any effort to understand English and avoiding spending much time with her new English acquaintances. In fact, she considered the English accent spoken by English people uncomfortable to listen to. S, a participant in the pilot study, reported similar difficulties, even in everyday situations:

*The first time when I got on a bus, the driver asked me something but I couldn't catch it. I just repeated the word "pardon?" all the time.*

Apart from listening skill, Vietnamese participants also reported problems with their pronunciation. Bac said that even in a more relaxed environment, such as a one-to-one discussion with his supervisor, Bac's pronunciation caused difficulties for the teacher. Typically, after several attempts of re-pronouncing the same word(s) Bac gave up:

*When I talk to my teacher the other day, I was trying to say things but he could not understand me. After repeating several times, I gave up.*

Luyen reported problems in pronouncing technical words. Luyen explained that sometimes she knew exactly how to spell a term but could not pronounce it correctly, which made her speaking less fluent and, she believes, less interesting.

The language barrier was also a problem in non-academic discussions. Non-academic discussions involve any conversations/interactions outside campus or not for academic purposes and include socialising and communicating at work. Lack of vocabulary remained a problem for Thao outside the classroom. She was keen to tell her friends about Vietnamese cuisine (which she was very proud of) but she did not have enough vocabulary to describe it:

*Sometimes I feel so angry that I can't get my message across. When I was trying to tell a friend how tasty 'Pho' (Vietnamese noodle) is I used only words like delicious or very nice, etc. but in fact 'Pho' deserves far more beautiful adjectives than them. It was so frustrating...*

Mi also reported problems when she went shopping, but would sometimes ask her friends to accompany her and help her communicate with shop keepers.

#### Data from pilot study

Also similar to data from main study as discussed above, participants in the pilot study believed they were disadvantaged by the 'mismatch' between how English is taught and experienced in Vietnam and actual spoken English in the UK. The first 'mismatch' was the unfamiliar accent of local English people. Vietnamese students have generally only encountered standard British English or American English throughout their education in Vietnam. They were not aware of variations in accent, style and vocabulary as used in Leeds and the North of England in general.

*Actually, the spoken English in this region sounds different with what we have been taught at home. So it is really confusing.*

(LA, last year PhD in social science)

The speed at which native speaker's spoke was also a problem: participants considered it too fast, and they had not experienced this in Vietnam.

A second 'mismatch' concerns the grammar-oriented teaching of English in Vietnam. In the pilot, P, a male PhD student, indicated that English teaching in Vietnam focused too much on grammar. However, his experience in the UK suggested that a more simple grammatical structure was common and more emphasis in Vietnam should have been placed on acquiring listening and speaking skills. Accordingly, he believed that Vietnamese students had been "mis-coached" and were ill-prepared for the language challenge in the UK.

In addition, two other female participants (HI and HY) and one male participant (V) described themselves as "defective products" of Vietnam's English education. They blamed their errors in pronunciation on their Vietnamese teachers: they were taught incorrect pronunciation. This had resulted in difficulties in understanding NS. At the time of the focus group they were consciously trying to correct these mistakes, which they had practised for so long that they often lapsed into them unconsciously. The 'shock', accompanied with frustration, became greater as they realised, through their encounters in the UK, that they needed to make multiple amendments to their speaking in order to be coherent.

### **5.3.2 Cultural problem in interactions**

The cultural problems in interactions are best revealed through interactions with British people, and interactions with international students. Cultural differences were considered as a hindrance in interactions with British people while cultural similarity was reported as a 'propeller' in interactions with other international students (mainly Asian). The discussion below will start with the cultural issue in interactions with the British people, then it will

#### **5.3.2.1 With British people**

Cultural differences were believed to be the main obstacle in interactions between Vietnamese participants and their NS interlocutors. This was true in both inside and outside classroom contexts. Within the classroom setting, Hoa noticed a physical 'divide' between international and 'home' students in the classrooms:

*British and other western students often sit in a group, often at the back of the class. Asian students often sit together in the front, mainly so that we can listen to the teacher better.*

The above may be attributable to different learning/linguistic needs, but such an arrangement also functioned to limit the interactions between international students and British students. There were insufficient opportunities to mix with British students in a classroom context, let alone outside classrooms. Hoa tells an interesting story:

*... he ( a British classmate) sat next to me just because I said 'hi' to him first when he walked in. However, we never really talked to each other. The following classes, as soon as a German student joined us, he (British) started talking to him (German) straight away. Sitting at the same desk with us were three more Indians who speak perfect English but he just not talked to them either ... **I think it is not due to my English which might be not good enough, they (British people) simply prefer people from Europe.***  
(Emphasis added)

Hoa here suggests that British students may purposely choose avoiding speaking to Asian students. Even though Hoa was not sitting at the front (with the majority of Asian students) and did initiate a conversation with the British student she was ultimately unsuccessful. Such attitudes of the TL speaker may be attributable to racism or cultural distance. So the limited interactions between Vietnamese and British students may sometimes be attributable to an unwillingness on the part of the latter.

Luyen had the most negative experience with TL speakers. She was the only one who described British students' behaviour towards international students as "discriminatory":

*I think there is a discrimination among the British students towards international students. I can tell you evidence. They never join us on any social event or activities in the class. I can understand why. They don't feel like the atmosphere, the culture, food, etc. ... They will have to spend time and efforts explaining a lot to us. They are not interested in other*

*communities, cultures, etc. I can understand all of those but it even makes the gap between us bigger.*

Similar to Hoa, Luyen believed the ‘gap’ between British and Vietnamese students was mainly due to the ‘uninterested’ attitude from the British people. Luyen explained that such an attitude made her feel ‘inadequate’ or a ‘nuisance’ in interactions with English people, especially when seeking clarification. Luyen said that she had generally stopped asking British people questions, because she could see that they were not happy answering her.

Towards the end of the data collection process, Luyen became more critical of British people and her interactions with them. Luyen withdrew from interacting with one British friend because she found him very ‘unhelpful’. During conversations, Luyen was asking for repetition and clarification of some ‘slang’ words but the British friend just told her to “leave it”. Consequently, Luyen lost confidence and became unwilling to talk to him, because she was afraid that she could not understand him or make herself understood. This withdrawal represented a *volte face* in Luyen’s attitude: at the beginning of the data collection process, Luyen preferred interactions with native speakers - when she mentioned her reason for not attending social events she said it was because they were ‘full of international students’ whereas Luyen preferred interacting with TL speakers.

Ly and her classmates (all international students) organised a barbecue. They assumed that barbecues are very ‘British-friendly’ and would attract native speakers. To their disappointment, the British students did not attend:

*We have organised barbecues sometimes and invited the British classmates but they never turned up. Only international students did.*

This was similar to Luyen’s observation that British students rarely attend international students’ events.

Similarly, Mai felt as if she was an imposition during interactions with British people:

*I feel like I’m wasting their (British people’s) time when I talk slowly or ask them for repetition or clarification.*

The perception of being a nuisance discouraged Mai from getting access to interaction opportunities with TL speakers. Mai mentioned that she only dared to access such opportunities when she felt ‘safe’ in doing so. She recalled talking with a passenger on a coach for two hours. She said she started talking to him because he was middle aged:

*... if he was the same age with me, I would not have done. The younger British are not patient as the olders.*

Mai believed that younger British people were more “arrogant” and “less interested in other cultures than older British people”. She described older British people as “kinder and more patient” in their conversations. Younger people did not listen carefully or repeat words or explain things properly to Vietnamese interlocutors. During the focus groups, Mi and Luyen also agreed with Mai, describing situations in which older British people would be very helpful whilst the younger ones (often the same age as the Vietnamese) would ignore them.

Mai considered the above encounter on a coach a success and described it as two hours of practising English whilst travelling. She told a similar story involving her housemates. Most of the interactions took place in the kitchen and were very brief. She felt as if she was imposing on the British housemates and convinced herself that they did not wish to talk to her - so she deliberately kept contact to a minimum.

Quynh described how she exercised care when in conversation with her chef housemate. Their conversation focused on Vietnamese cuisine because the chef was interested in Asian cooking. Quynh refrained from talking about other topics because she could see that the housemate was not interested. Their relationship therefore could not develop any closer. Quynh was ‘luckier’ with another friend who is African British, and always showed ‘sympathy’ for the difficulty that L2 learners have when talking to NS. Quynh felt touched when her African British friend listened to her carefully and politely corrected her mistakes. Quynh clearly wanted to be treated similarly by native speakers but she reported this only happened to her once. Quynh believed that the African origin of her friend helped her develop insights into the difficulties of a L2 learner like Quynh, so she was willing to help. Quynh and her British African friend therefore challenge some SLA research (see Chapter 2) by suggesting that interactions with native speakers are more beneficial than those with

non-native speakers. Quynh was clearly supported to improve her English by her African friend, whilst left feeling inadequate and irritated by conversations with NSs.

Part of the reason why Vietnamese students found British people ‘*uninterested*’ can be discerned from participants’ accounts in the pilot study. Throughout the discussion, participants in both York and Leeds revealed a belief that most English people knew little about Vietnam. The participants told stories of how English people still asked if Vietnam was still at war or still divided into a North and a South (the country was unified in 1975). P mentioned that some NS he met were even not sure which continent Vietnam belonged (e.g., Asia or Africa). Britain’s colonial history has extended all over the globe, but Vietnam was never part of this. And, of course, Vietnam was the country that fought a legendary (televised) war against the Americans.

As well as problems caused by the “*unfriendly or uninterested attitude*” from British people (as perceived by Vietnamese participants) data also suggests problems rooted in participants’ own Vietnamese centric perspective. During the first focus groups, Thao considered cultural differences as the major problem:

*Cultural differences are the main reason to really put me off. Sometimes after 5 minutes of discussion I just want to leave. The cultural clashes just make it so hard to see an agreement...*

Thao believed that a lot of disagreements in group work resulted from her judgements based on Vietnamese cultural practice. Thao described a situation when she volunteered to be coordinator of a group discussion, just to find her classmates were “*very rude*”. They turned up, discussed and then left straight afterward, not even expressing thanks or showing appreciation of her efforts. Thao was very disappointed because such behaviour was unacceptable in Vietnamese culture. Outside classroom contexts, Thao also faced problems in understanding cultural references such as jokes. She found “*their (British) jokes nonsense, everyone else was laughing while I felt it was not funny*”. Thao mentioned that such a situation made her uncomfortable because she had to either ‘*force a smile*’ or ‘*just sit like an idiot*’. Thao confirmed that her discomfort was not due to the English language -she understood the joke perfectly - but rather could not relate to it culturally. However, towards the end of the data collection,

Thao understood that cultural differences could be interpreted and approached as learning opportunities, not just communication obstacles:

*I just realise now that not everything different from your culture is sub-standard. The way people act differently from you does not mean they are wrong or weird. I didn't think like that when I was back in Vietnam.*

This shift in Thao's beliefs was not limited to her understanding of social contacts, it also influenced the way she thought academically:

*In Vietnam, we have been trained that there are things which are always wrong and certain things which are always right. Since I came here I have found out that there are no such things. It all depends on how good your arguments sound. If you fail to defend your idea, you are simply wrong.*

Thao's account suggests that the "cultural clashes" were mainly due to her original Vietnamese-centric judgments about things.

Changing attitudes towards British culture were also expressed by Sang. During the first interviews, Sang considered British people and society arrogant and hierarchical. However, towards the end of the data collection period Sang enjoyed spending leisure time with his NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying on in the UK for several years. Sang said:

*I used to not really enjoy the talks when we had a drink with friends here (UK), it is not the same in Vietnam. In Vietnam, when I went out for a drink, it felt different. I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually, it has its own right.*

Sang's initial discomfort with socialising in the UK stemmed from unfavourable comparisons with socialising in Vietnam – he typically evidenced extreme criticism. However, towards the end of the main study, Sang stopped comparing things with Vietnamese practice:

*You know, last time I told you that I would not consider living in this country after I finish the MA course but now I think I will want to do so.*



There seems to be a link between the way Sang adapted to cultural difference and his communication: as Sang socialised more with his friends (both natives and non-natives) he started to enjoy the conversations with them.

Conversely, many clubs and societies run and organised by UK students revolved around pubs and alcohol, and as Mi put it:

*They (westerners) are keen on drinking which I am scared of. I came only once and then I never joined any such event again as it takes me several days to recover from such a drinking event. I did not find it fun at all.*

However, Chau had a different view on the British people:

*They (British) are just reserved. It does not mean they are not friendly. They need to spend time with and get to know each other. Then they can be very helpful.*

But Chau also suggests that “*Asian people are in the last priority*” for the natives to make friends with, because “*Asians are not funny or crazy enough*”.

Similar to findings from the main study, participants in the pilot study also reported limited interactions with British people. Most participants agreed that the difference between the two cultures was a barrier to communication. Topics related to lifestyle, entertainment, and celebrities etc. were especially difficult to cope with, requiring a degree of cultural understanding - the participants experienced problems in ‘catching up’ with and relating to their interlocutors. More participants in Leeds were studying postgraduate degrees than in York (see pilot participant profile Table 3.2 - Chapter 3). Anecdotal evidence suggested there was a relative lack of social opportunities for slightly older postgraduate students than for undergraduates. Undergraduates in York therefore had more experience of small talk with NS.

### **5.3.2.2 With international students**

In contrast with the often difficult and limited interactions with British people participants reported closer/deeper relationships with non-native speakers of English. Participants reported greater cultural and experiential commonalities with international students, especially with students from Asia who shared a similar cultural background.

Chau, though claiming to have an extensive network of British and non-British friends found it “*more difficult*” to communicate with British people or Westerners (a term used loosely to describe all non-Asians) than with other Asian students: *I have to admit that it is somehow easier to find topics to talk with Asians...* Similarly, Bac claimed he was comfortable engaging with international students while feeling anxious in interactions with British people:

*If I meet up with Indonesian or Malaysian, we can always find things to talk about, but with the English I have to stay quiet for a while. Last time I met an English classmate in our department party, I did not know what to say to him. He did not start the conversation with me or neither did I. Eventually we just proposed a toast and split up.*

Mai was also sharing a house with two British and two Asian students. However, Mai only developed a relationship with the two Asian housemates and had very limited interactions with the British:

*I get on well with my two Asian housemates. Though we have just met since I came here but we become as close as my best friends back home. We are planning to go to the university and make a video about us for memory.*

Mai compared favourably her relationship with her Asian housemates to that with her ‘*best friends back home*’. Such a level of attachment was not reported by any other participants *vis-a-vis* British friends. Relationships with British people were either deeper as boyfriend (as in the case of Chau) or as social friends (Hoa and An).

In general, participants did not believe interactions with non-native speakers could contribute to their speaking skills. Ly said:

*Talking with them (non-native speakers) is fun but their English is just like ours, more or less, they can't correct us if we make mistakes. I don't really think we can learn much from them.*

Similarly, An did not consider speaking English with international students to benefit her speaking skill because her mistakes were not corrected:

*I think they (international students) are no better than us in terms of English so we don't know if it is us or them make a mistake.*

Hoa, however, considered speaking English with international students to be part of making friends - she did not consider this an opportunity to practice English:

*I never consider talking in English with other international students as a way to improve English. I just need friends around as I used to in Vietnam.*

In short, interactions with non-native speakers were clearly not viewed as potential learning experiences among Vietnamese participants.

However, data from pilot study suggests an opposite point of view from that of the main study above. There were no preferences in interactions with NNS or NS among the pilot study participants. They did see the NS as model speakers, but they also valued practising English with other international students. Most participants in the pilot study agreed that they found it easier to listen and talk to international students. Their accent, though imperfect, was not an obstacle because they spoke discernibly slower. However, Vietnamese students compared their English speaking skills to be better, in general, than that of several other national groups.

#### **5.4 Individual variation in L2 interactions**

So far the quality and quantity of L2 interactions have been described. In general, participants were dissatisfied with both the quality and quantity of L2 interactions. Problems and difficulties in their interactions were described and categorised throughout sections 5.2 and 5.3. However, there were exceptional cases (Chau, Mi, Hoa and An) who managed to achieve more interactions than the rest. Two other participants, Sang and Tu, also reported an increase in their interactions towards the end of the data collection process. The next section is devoted to a discussion of these 'success stories'. Their success reflects two different 'pathways'. The first one was based on more L2 interactions accessed via partners (boyfriend/girlfriend). The second concerns participants adopting positive attitudes towards their interactions.

### 5.4.1 L2 interactions via partners - Chau and Mi

Chau and Mi enjoyed extensive interactions with friends outside their studies and off-campus, which were secured and operationalised via their boyfriends. Mi described her boyfriend as ‘a bridge’ to help her establish contacts and get to know people. Chau insisted that without her boyfriend’s help she would have been unable to establish her extensive network of friends. Chau said that she had more opportunities to speak English by going out compared to campus life. Chau and Mi both reported a dramatic increase in their interactions in English since they started dating their boyfriends, which began three months before the data collection period and before which both reported only very limited interactions. Chau said her opportunities to speak English were so rare that each time she did so she became ‘*tongue tied*’ and considered her English speaking skills to have deteriorated compared to in Vietnam. Mi also mentioned that opportunities to speak English prior to meeting her boyfriend were so limited that she relied on a Vietnamese housemate to practice English with. Mi said:

*Before having my boyfriend, I was trying to get out and gain new contacts but I had never been able to.*

Chau also experienced a similar situation:

*I used to have very limited interactions before I met my boyfriend.*

During the first 3 to 4 months of residing in the UK they reported very limited opportunities, and both felt their English speaking skills had deteriorated dramatically during this time. Mi had to practice English with her Vietnamese housemate in order to maintain an acceptable standard. Their opportunities to speak English improved dramatically when Mi started dating an American and Chau started dating a fluent English-speaking Pakistani. Mi and Chau felt more confident when speaking English if their boyfriends were also present and participating. Mi believed that her boyfriend had served as a ‘bridge’ to make her more confident.

*...boyfriends and girlfriends serve as a bridge, clearly we need it. We need the bridge not to have access to other relationships but to build up our ability at the start so that we can have other relationships. (Mi)*

The confidence that Mi was referring to positions her boyfriend as a ‘rescuer’ figure. Chau echoes this belief and describes how her boyfriend helps her:

*When I’m out in a group of all natives I feel left behind because my English remains limited. At first the natives might be polite, slow down or repeat things for me to catch up but then I start to feel like being forgotten... but when I have my boyfriend... people might not care about me as they consider me a friend... but my boyfriend takes care of me by explaining things so people are reminded that I need support.*

Neither Chau nor Mi felt they could successfully impose the right to be heard on a group of NS unless they were able to draw on the identity resource of “girlfriend”. Chau and Mi confirmed that they did go out and make contacts but their interactions only really increased since meeting their boyfriends. Chau described that her partner helped her keep up with the conversation, which in turn reminded the interlocutors that Chau needed extra support. According to Chau “... without my boyfriend I feel easily neglected”. Chau thought her inability to impose the right to be heard was gender-related:

*I think girls often find it more difficult to find opportunity to get out than boys. Boys have games, sport, pool to mix with each other. Without a decent level of English... girls find it more difficult not having her boyfriend there with her.*

Chau suggested that gender played a key role in defining her opportunity to interact. Therefore, as a female, she negotiated access through a male. The most suitable male figure is ‘boyfriend’, because he would be particularly willing to help. Mi avoided holding conversations with British accent speakers and experienced shock and doubted her English skills when she first arrived in the UK because she could not understand the accent. She then felt humiliated at not being able to communicate in English. She ‘shut the door’, refusing to make much effort to understand English and avoided spending much time with her new English acquaintances. In fact, she considered the English accent spoken by English people uncomfortable to listen to.

*I just look for American-English speaking people on campus to talk to or those who can understand my American accent*

Perhaps the most obvious example of how Mi ‘just looked for Americans’ to speak with was the fact that she started dating an American man. It is even more interesting that the American man was not based in Leeds. Mi ‘met’ him through a chat room on the internet. At the time of data collection, Mi was also visited by an American friend who travelled all the way from America to see her.

*Here (Leeds) does not provide chances for me, I had to seek them elsewhere, my (American) friend has been invited round here, he is not here already for me to talk to. I had to find him.*

Mi sought opportunities to practice American English because she felt “more valued” when she spoke to Americans because they could understand her better and she understood them more easily. It would be incorrect to describe Mi as more motivated or active in creating opportunities than Chau. Chau, too, was actively seeking opportunities to speak English. But unlike Mi she was prepared to seek out the opportunities that existed in Leeds. Chau was fascinated by topics about other cultures, not just English culture. Her circle of friends was not limited to those with links to the university campus, having expanded due to her socialising and employment. Her opportunities to speak English were therefore less influenced by the university and course regimes. In general, Chau was more willing to immerse herself in English culture and society, whereas Mi considered the English as “other”. Chau attributed her extended opportunities to ‘luck’ - thanks to the help of her boyfriend in Leeds. Mi and Chau may have adopted subordinate Vietnamese female roles and were dependant on their partners to locate and access opportunities. Mi and Chau’s contacts were based at their boyfriends’ locations. As Mi’s boyfriend was residing in America, all of her contacts were based there. Chau’s boyfriend resided in Leeds, and she went out to mix with other English people (while Mi spent time in chat rooms at home).

In short, Chau and Mi accessed greater interactions through their roles as girlfriends who then were in the position - through their boyfriends - to impose the right to be heard. Without the help of their boyfriends, Chau and Mi may have experienced more

limited interactions as per the majority of the group. Chau termed this situation as ‘lucky’ because she did not perceive it as evidence of initiative on her part.

#### **5.4.2 L2 Interactions via partner - Tu**

Similar to most participants, Tu reported very limited interactions in English during the first 6 months of residing in the UK. However, his interactions in English changed when he started dating a Vietnamese student. Tu’s girlfriend was studying in Birmingham and Tu visited her there every Friday afternoon, returning to Leeds University on Mondays. Tu decided to practice speaking English with his Vietnamese girlfriend in order to compensate for the limited opportunities he had thus far encountered.

Tu’s actions – electing to speak the L2 with a fellow L1 native speaker (who is also a significant other) - can be interpreted in two ways: he was making positive efforts to create opportunities to practice English (in this case with his girlfriend); or he was desperate and was failing to maintain interactions. Discussions with Tu in the focus groups suggest the second interpretation is most applicable. Tu’s girlfriend provided him with a ‘fall-back’ that no longer required him to proactively seek interactions with NS. Tu was not actively looking for more interactions during his three days in Leeds. He spent most of his time studying, watching TV, and reading.

*Now that I am in a relationship, I don’t feel like going out and get mixed up with others too often. We (Tu and his girlfriend) need to spend time together instead.*

Like Chau, Tu’s hours of speaking English were increased via interactions with his girlfriend/partner. But unlike Chau and Mi, Tu’s relationship cannot be conceptualized as a ‘bridge’ with which to achieve more substantive or varied interactions.

#### **5.4.3 Being proactive**

Some participants were particularly proactive in seeking out L2 interaction opportunities, remaining positive and creating opportunities to speak English themselves, which took place either on or off campus.

### 5.4.3.1 Hoa and An

Whilst some participants considered language as the major barrier to their success in academic debates (see 5.3.1) Hoa and An adopted a different point of view. Hoa and An did not feel inferior about their inadequate English skills. They believed that one does not need perfect English to be able to perform well in academic situations. Hoa provided an example of how she managed to ‘tutor’ her classmates regarding a complex problem. She knew that she had some problems with vocabulary and pronunciation at times but her classmates still understood her:

*My classmates somehow believed that I know better than them in solving some math problems so they often asked me to ‘tutor’ them. At first I thought my English is not good enough and I also lack vocabulary. However, I managed to make myself understood by using simple words, though my pronunciation is not clear at times.*

Hoa’s limited vocabulary and imperfect pronunciation did not cause her problems. Her peers understood her, and Hoa considered this a success. Hoa therefore adopted a similar attitude in academic debates where she believed arguments mattered most. An also reported problems with her pronunciation and grammar; however, she believed these were not so serious as to prevent her communicating effectively and make friends. An said she tried to think positively about her ability to speak English and believed that confidence (in communication) was the key to opening up more interactions. Hoa too was aware of her limitations in pronunciation and vocabulary, but did not perceive them as signs of “inadequacy” in interactions. Hoa related a story in which an English classmate talked to her for 15 minutes about how his motorbike was stolen, but when they said “goodbye” she asked him where his bike was - only then did she realise that her friend’s bike had been the main topic of conversation. However, Hoa was not embarrassed; she just laughed and told her friend to make sure she understood him next time. Hoa was also unembarrassed by her poor pronunciation: she downplayed and/or ignored her limitations.

Similar to Hoa, An described her meetings with her supervisor as “*perfectly fine*” regardless of her grammar and pronunciation problems. An also reported a recent



conference trip to Birmingham where she found she could function perfectly well. An's belief was that language differences would not play a decisive role in academic discussions which are predicated on ideas.

An and Hoa and actively made efforts to expand their network of friends, both native and non-native speakers. Although Hoa did not perceive any improvement in her pronunciation or grammar, she was untroubled by this. Her goal was to be able to communicate well enough with the people around her and to make more friends. Hoa did not view making friends with NS as a means to improve her speaking skills: she was simply used to having lots of friends in Vietnam, and so she tried to replicate this in the UK.

As a result, Hoa and An regularly socialised with a number of English speaking friends who they met at the start of term. Hoa enjoyed and valued these interactions and friendships:

*I often hang out with friends in pubs, restaurants or cinema etc. We talked a lot and generally have a great time. Now wherever they go, they will drag me in with them. Can you believe that I even get on so well with my friends' housemates than my friend herself?*

Similarly, An spoke with English speaking friends on a regular basis. In fact, An and Hoa socialised in the same network of friends:

*I think I have made quite a few friends here in the UK. It's really fun to be out and about. I can't imagine my life without hanging out with friends.*

#### **5.4.3.2 Sang**

Sang considered British people and society arrogant and hierarchical. However, towards the end of the data collection period they both enjoyed spending their leisure time with their NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying on in the UK for several years.

There seems to be a link between cultural adaptation and accommodation, opportunities for interactions in the TL and perceptions regarding communicative

competence. As Sang socialised more with his friends (both NS and NNS) he started to enjoy the conversations with them:

*I used to not really enjoy the talks when we had a drink with friends here (UK), it is not the same in Vietnam. In Vietnam, when I went out for a drink, it felt different. I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually, it has its own right.*

Sang's initial discomfort with socializing in the UK stemmed from unfavourable comparisons with socializing in Vietnam – he typically evidenced extreme criticism. However, towards the end of the main study, Sang stopped evaluating.

There is also evidence from the pilot study suggesting that some participants were more proactive than others. For example in response to P's complaint that '*the English people don't have time for us*', V explained that "*the English people actually want to talk to us but we need to initiate the conversation*". V commented that Westerners saw Vietnamese students as more or less identical to Chinese who, he believed, "*tend to keep to themselves*". In his experience, once V introduced himself as Vietnamese and started a conversation with British people, he felt the British treated him "*more special*". V emphasised that English speakers wanted to speak to Asian people too, but feared that doing so would take up too much time. The stereotype of seeing all Asian people as Chinese and an accompanying belief that Chinese people prefer to keep themselves to themselves was also raised by other participants. V agreed with P that in conversation with British people Vietnamese students always had start the conversation first. Commenting on this, V said he believed it was worth the effort because British people are "*nice and polite and willing to talk too*": they just needed message signal that they would not be interfering etc. However, the participants expressed a reluctance to take the initiative all the time. One conclusion is that students can persist with their 'investment' to initiate small talk, and will consequently be relatively successful in creating chances to practice English; but they must persist and overcome inevitable feelings of tiredness and/or shyness - otherwise future chances will slip away.

This topic was also raised separately in the pilot focus group in York, by HNG, an undergraduate female. HNG referred to stereotyping by the Vietnamese:

*The distance (between English and Vietnamese) is made up by us as well as them. For example, we also call them (English) “westerner” (“Tay” in Vietnamese language).*

HNG believed the chances of speaking English would be improved if one could “*adapt fully to the life style in the UK*”. HNG “*hanged out*” with NS by going to pubs. She said that by going there and by drinking she could remain in their network and, therefore, maintain lots of opportunities to practise English. She believed that it was necessary to change one’s “*mindset*” in order to continue to mix successfully with native speakers. In Vietnam women are not encouraged to visit pubs: those who do are considered ‘bad girls’. Indeed, ‘good girls’ are not even supposed to drink alcohol. HNG, however, overcame the “*mindset*” in which she did not evaluate the English pub culture based on her “*Vietnamese mind*” to gain access to practising English. However, HNG did not “*fully integrate*” by dropping Vietnamese values and lifestyle:

*I think the best way (to improve speaking skill) is to adapt to the lifestyle over here (the UK). But I advise against the idea of fully integrating so that we lose our Vietnamese life style.*

Even though she admitted that her speaking skill was “*held back*” by not fully adapting to the lifestyle in the UK, HNG did not regret her choice. Clearly, HNG wanted to be adaptive in order to maximise her opportunities to make friends and speak English, but also considered it important to hold on to her ‘Vietnameseness’. Since it is actually very difficult to change fundamentally one’s ‘self’ the limits to change may in fact be natural and more-or-less fixed limits rather than conscious decisions. She certainly did not choose “*Vietnamese woman*” when she spent time in pubs with NS. In order to continue being able to socialise with NS and to practice English, HNG discarded an extremely powerful code of conduct associated with the traditional Vietnamese female identity:

*I think the best way is to be yourself. There are both good and people in any country. Just be yourself and they (NS) can’t think otherwise.*

The sense of “pride of being Vietnamese” was also present in HN’s account, another undergraduate female in York. HN “*always introduced myself as a Vietnamese*”. HN remembers one occasion when, after she introduced herself as Vietnamese, her interlocutor “*shouted oh my God...I was told that your people are living in poverty and your government is corrupt... Is it all true?*” This did not offend HN but, rather, prompted her to be more active in ‘correcting’ her interlocutor’s misconceptions of Vietnam. HN “*spent loads of time fixing the image and suggested him visit Vietnam*”. Unlike the rest of the group who described how interlocutors’ ignorance of Vietnam made them feel distant (see 5.3.2.2) HN was “*quite excited to meet such a person*” because she could help them understand more about the modern Vietnam.

## 5.5 Expectation and judgements of L2 interactions

### 5.5.1 Assumption of progress in speaking skill

The assumption that Chau mentioned above made a number of participants hold high expectation (Mai, Bac, Sang) towards progress in speaking skills. Among them, Mai had the most ambitious goal of all – to sound like a native-speaker. She imagined herself as ‘*the returning student*’, returning to Vietnam from the UK, where she would be expected to be able to evidence the linguistic and cultural benefits and knowledge of a protracted stay in the UK. She admitted she wanted to speak like a native speaker as much as possible. She admired a younger Vietnamese colleague, a former student in the UK, who she described as “sounding like a native speaker of English”. Mai believed that this was a product of enhanced opportunities to speak English during her colleague’s stay in the UK:

*There is a new trainee Vietnamese at my company in Vietnam, she graduated from a university in the UK. She can speak English just like a native speaker. I really want to be as good as her.*

Mai had never actually asked her colleague to establish precisely the contribution that living and studying in the UK made to her L2 skills or her L2 proficiency prior to studying in the UK.

Such a motivation/aspiration was shaped by the fact that in Vietnam she worked alongside a Vietnamese graduate trainee who had graduated from a UK university and spoke English like a native-speaker. Mai also admitted that prior to studying in the UK she had succumbed to the commonly held belief that living and studying in the target

language culture would result in a “*magical improvement*” in English language skills. Other participants in Mai’s group thought this was too ambitious. An, especially, was more “realistic”. An did not believe in “magical improvements” before departing for the UK, and on her return to Vietnam claimed that she would denounce this belief for the benefit of future generations of Vietnamese students contemplating studying abroad. An believed there was no “magic”: improvement depended upon one’s personal circumstances and efforts.

As suggested by the data, Mai anticipated the identity of a ‘triumphant’ near-native-like English speaker returning to Vietnam from the UK. Wishing to confirm the expectation that she would speak English like a native speaker, Mai tried hard to improve her accent and vocabulary. Sang and An however, believed that acquiring a near-native accent was impossible. They pointed out the fact that there were variations in accents among the English themselves. Sang believed that even though his English speaking skills would not improve as much as he expected, upon his return they would still be superior compared to peers who had never been to the UK. Sang was satisfied anticipating the identity of a returning student who could simply speak English discernibly better than most Vietnamese and did not strive for or require fluency. It is interesting to observe that before leaving Vietnam Sang had similar expectations to Mai about his speaking skill potential. However, he had realised that it was impossible to achieve fluency and adjusted accordingly. Sang said:

*Before I came to the UK I thought my speaking skill would be cool after one year but now I understand that it is not going to happen.*

English language improvement was not a primary goal, therefore the rest of the group was more relaxed because they had adopted less ambitious expectations of foreign students pursuing a MA degree in the UK. Participants were enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year, which meant that before the interviews they had stayed in the UK for at least 6 months, which would have been adequate for them to detect any possible improvements in speaking skill. However, none of them expressed satisfaction with their improvement in speaking English compared to their expectations in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, levels of dissatisfaction seemed to reduce towards the end of the main study, except for Mai who remained frustrated. Those who were reasonably happy with their progress (Luyen, Hoa, Mai, Sang, Chau and Thao) provided two explanations. First, they had seen some progress in the later months. Second, they had or were coming to terms with the fact that they needed to lower their expectations about what they could achieve. They realised that over the past six months they had not made any considerable improvements in their speaking skill, so it was unlikely to happen in the remaining four months or so. Data from the focus groups showed that after 6 months of staying in the UK the participants' expectations regarding improvements in their speaking skills was purposely lowered and rationalised. Sang said:

*My speaking skill is not improved as much as I expected at home. I was unhappy about it before but now I understand that I have got to balance things, I have to share time for my academic work so I don't feel too bad.*

Together with their reduced expectations, the students were also less motivated. Whilst at the beginning of their stay in the UK some participants attached significant importance to the goal of improving their English after 6 months it had paled into insignificance compared to the importance of doing well in their formal studies:

*Before I came to the UK I thought my speaking skill would be cool after one year but now I understand that it is not going to happen.*

Vietnamese participants had to lower their expectations in order to keep up with their academic workload. As a result, the motivation to improve their English decreased. This was interesting in that it showed the realities of student life. Pressure to read in English and write in English and to do well in these – in order to pass their exams and return to Vietnam a success – may actually impede their L2 (speaking skill) acquisition.

Data from pilot study also suggests that participants shared similar assumptions about the richness of opportunities to speak English in the UK and the progress they would consequently be able to make:

*It is often expected among Vietnamese that when we are over here, our speaking skill will become perfect but in fact...*

(HA-Male, 3rd year PhD student in Social science)

*We are expected to be as perfect as English speakers, right? ... (laugh) ... It should be admitted that I was thinking like that before I left Vietnam, I assumed that when I return my speaking should have been really good.*

(P-Male, 4th year PhD student in Science)

Opportunities to speak English were not solely dependant on the effort each participant made to negotiate access to NS.

Nevertheless, most participants agreed that once settled in the UK, they realised that they had overestimated opportunities to become immersed in numerous opportunities to practice English:

*HA. we don't have chance for lots of talking*

*P. I thought going over here (England) would create many opportunities to practice speaking but it turns out not true. P. Back in Vietnam everyone thinks that once we are over here, we will definitely speak better but it is not always the case.*

*HA. yes, absolutely. We have to try hard, to take advantage of opportunities.*

*P. it requires lots of self efforts, not just for granted*

So physically being in the UK does not guarantee chances to speak English. Opportunities to do so are not displayed like items in supermarkets for students to peruse and pick up at will. Students had to negotiate access. The assumption of “superior” opportunities in naturalistic context has been challenged by several SLA researchers (see Block, 2003 for a detailed discussion and is further confirmed in this research.

### 5.5.2 Assumption of the ‘richness’ of TL environment

Much of the assumption about the progress in speaking skill comes from the assumption about the ‘richness’ of opportunity to practice the TL language in the UK. Participants assumed that they would interact with more British people and therefore would benefit from such interactions. The university environments populated by the participants appeared to contain just as many international students as domestic ones – so just as many NNS of English as NS. This runs counter Vietnamese participants’ assumptions. Thao said:

*I don't have chances to talk to native people because most of people in my course are Asian students: Indonesian, Malaysian or Chinese, etc.*

Ha also found “*Most classmates are international students*”. Most participants spoke English most frequently with non-native speakers. This was due to the fact that many of their classmates (the main source of daily interaction) were also international students. Hoa shared similar experience:

*I think except law, most other subjects are attended by students from other parts of the world rather than the native English.*

There was discernable surprise and unhappiness about the lack of native speakers to interact with, which may be explained by the strength of the assumptions regarding the extent of opportunities in the UK. Ly even said:

*Where are the English people? I asked myself such a question when I came to my first lecture.*

Vietnamese students were even more surprised to see international academic staff (although contact with native staff was three times higher than with non-native staff):

*Some of my tutors are non-native speakers, for example my tutor of economics is from Nigeria (Chau)*

Chau indicated her unhappiness when she discovered that several of her tutors and professors were also non-native speakers of English (Chau did not appear to be aware that English is the official language of Nigeria). Her argument was that as an international student she had paid a lot of money to be in the UK and for some reason therefore expected to study alongside and be taught by English people. Clearly, Chau possessed powerful assumptions regarding the benefits of interactions with native speakers and even adopted a rather narrow definition: ‘proper’ English is only spoken by British people. She believed that listening to non-native



tutors did not help her improve her listening and speaking skills. Chau believed that English spoken by non-natives is sub-standard, and reported difficulties understanding the Nigerian tutor's accent. However, in other accounts (see 5.4.1) Chau revealed that she also had difficulty in understanding British people too and was reliant on her boyfriend for clarification. Experiencing difficulty in listening comprehension in conversations with both native and non-native speakers, Chau nevertheless preferred interactions with native speakers. This supports SLA research that suggests native speakers are considered superior. Other Vietnamese students shared these feelings. In general, they did not believe interactions with non-native speakers could contribute to their speaking skills. Ly said:

*Talking with them (non-native speakers) is fun but their English is just like ours, more or less, they can't correct us if we make mistakes. I don't really think we can learn much from them.*

An believed that her English is even better than other international students so she would not be able to 'learn' from them:

*I think they (international students) are no better than us in terms of English so we don't know if it is us or them make a mistake.*

Hoa also shared similar idea in that interactions with non-native speakers were clearly not viewed as potential learning experiences. However, Hoa was different with the rest of the group in terms of motivation for her interactions:

*I never consider talking in English with other international students as a way to improve English. I just need friends around as I used to in Vietnam.*

### 5.5.3 Credentialism

There is data to suggest that Credentialism existed among Vietnamese students, and the UK universities were seen as a good choice. To illustrate, An expressed this view in one of her accounts:

*In Vietnam, a degree from a UK university means you are very good, you can be more competitive. Also a degree in the UK implies that you can speak English well which makes you even more qualified. I chose to come over here because of those.*

An's view is shared widely among other Vietnamese students: to get a UK degree and improve their English.

Four participants - Sang, Thao, Nga and Ly - were in receipt of scholarships. Scholarships in Vietnam are rare and the application process is highly competitive. Students in receipt of scholarships are generally under considerable pressure by their sponsoring organizations to work hard and acquire new skills, which, upon their return to Vietnam, adequately 'compensates' the organizations for their original investment. The rest of the group were funded by their families. The brother of one participant (Quynh) was also studying in the UK (at the same institution) at the same time; both Quynh and her brother were funded by their parents. The tuition fee for a Non-EU international student ranges from £10,000 to £12,000 per academic year (2008-2009). Living costs are, of course, additional to this, and prospective students are typically required to provide evidence that they have sufficient funds available before being accepted. The University of York, for example, normally advises that students need at least £9,000 per year to cover living costs. The information is provided in the offer letters to international students. Therefore, to be able to afford the cost of MA degree in the UK, it is reasonable to conclude that Vietnamese participants are from middle class background, even though there was no direct questions to collect data on participants' economic background. Vietnam is a developing country, therefore studying abroad is certainly not an option for those from poorer social strata. Whether in receipt of a scholarship or supported by one's family, the size of (financial) investment associated with international study means that pressure and expectations of one form or another exist and those who willingly subject themselves to such forces can be assumed to have a strong desire to get a degree in order to consolidate their fledgling professional status. Students in receipt of scholarships are generally under considerable pressure by their sponsoring organizations to work hard and acquire new skills, which, upon their return to Vietnam, adequately 'compensates' the organizations for their original investment. Individuals supported by families may therefore also experience familial pressure to 'do well'.

#### **5.5.4 Changes in motivation and expectation in L2 progress**

Data from focus groups and diaries show that Vietnamese 'investors' soon considered that their beliefs about the opportunities to speak English in the UK were mistaken. When first interviewed in February 2009, after 6 months of living and studying in the UK, all participants expressed disappointment with their improvement in speaking English. They felt they had not improved their speaking skills as much as they expected to before departing for the UK. Their levels of frustration and disappointment can be examined through the high expectation and motivation level. The expectations stemmed mainly from prior assumptions concerning the 'richness' of opportunities in the target language. This 'richness' refers to both the quality and quantity of opportunity.

Bac said that once in the UK his motivation to improve his English actually reduced: physically being in the UK gave him a reason to not try as hard as when he was in Vietnam. Bac was similar to Mai in that he had a ‘built-in’ assumption that his English would improve naturally once immersed in the target language:

*Since I came over here (UK) I found myself less motivated to learn English. Because when I was in Vietnam my main goal was to pass IELTS or TOEFL test, now that I had achieved it, I will just need to work on my major at the university.*

Bac’s idea was shared by Hoa who cited lower motivation as the cause. She said that when she was learning English in Vietnam, she was highly motivated because she wanted to pass the IELTS test. Now that she had achieved the score to be admitted to a UK university, her motivation had diminished. In Bac’s and Hoa’s cases motivation was typically instrumental (passing the IELTS test). Bac also shared the similar idea with Hoa but added that he believed he would be able to improve his English by staying in the UK. In Vietnam, all participants attended formal classes. In the UK they assumed that the need for such classes would be more than compensated for by the “natural setting” so their motivation decreased. Mai, however, became frustrated about the fact that she had not improved her speaking skill as much as she expected.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed key findings from the focus groups based on data from the main study and has also incorporated findings from the pilot study. In general, Vietnamese participants reported limited quality and quantity of interactions in English. In terms of quantity, the main source of L2 interactions originated from university campuses (see 5.2.1.1). But participants reported surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (because they were engaged in independent study - see 5.2.1.2). Off campus, social events were rarely attended by Vietnamese students. Participants were critical of their universities for not organising more interesting and affordable events (see 5.2.1.2). Vietnamese students were keen to participate in events where they could meet British people but such events were often considered to be culturally unsuitable (see 5.2.2.2).

At home, interactions in the L2 were mainly with other international students, even when creating/accessing interactions with English NS were readily available, e.g. when sharing accommodation with British housemates (see 5.2.2.3).

Some participants had part-time jobs, but the work environment was considered poor in terms of providing opportunities to practice speaking English. This was due to the pressure of work and the fact that participants either worked very few hours or as lone workers (see 5.2.2.4).

In terms of the quality of interactions, language and cultural differences are cited as the two main problems impeding interactions in the L2. Participants generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation and inadequate listening skills (see 5.3.1).

Vietnamese participants believed there was impatience on the part of British interlocutors which sometimes deterred them from either initiating conversations or engaging properly (see 5.3.2.1).

Outside academic contexts, matters relating to culture were also thought to cause problems). This was a two-way street, with both Vietnamese participants and British people holding particular views about one another which may have shaped the content and conduct of their interactions (see 5.3.2.2). While cultural dissonance was considered a problem in interactions with British interlocutors, cultural and experiential similarity help to explain the more frequent and closer relationships with international students; but such interactions were not seen as beneficial learning experience for Vietnamese participants (see 5.3.3).

Six participants managed to access a significantly greater number of interactions than the others, mainly based on their interactions outside campus. They were proactive in their efforts to access L2 interactions (see 5.4.2) and/or accessed a greater number of interactions via key relationships (see 5.4.1). These six participants were reasonably content with their L2 interactions and SLA.

The remaining eight participants were, however, generally dissatisfied with the opportunities they had to practice the L2 in the UK and with the progress they had made. Prior to arriving in the UK most participants had high expectations regarding the

opportunities to speak English and improve the L2 in the UK and they had to revise these expectations when faced with the reality (see 5.5). The next chapter examines these key findings in greater detail and triangulates them with findings from the diary (Chapter 4) using the key SLA theories discussed in Chapter 2 to understand them.

## Chapter 6

### Discussions

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The chapter starts with a discussion of the main findings identified in Chapters 4 and 5, simultaneously drawing on relevant theories to make sense of the findings. The chapter then seeks to identify key relationships (between identities, interaction experiences and communicative competence) in order to answer the research questions:

- Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
- How-if at all- is identity implicated in Vietnamese students' interactions in the English language?
- Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how ?

#### 6.1 Key theories

I will use three theoretical frameworks to critically analyse and make sense of these findings: Norton's theories of social identity and investment; Barna's stumbling blocks in intercultural communication and Giles and Byrne's intergroup model. These theories have been described in more detail in Chapter 2, but the key assumptions are presented below in Table 6.1. Each theory helps to shed light on the actual interactions of participants from a different perspective. Norton (2000) argues that the success or failure of a L2 learning process depends on the social roles that learners take which help them impose the right to be heard; and become legitimate participants of social interactions. Barna (1998) attributes problems in communication among people from different cultures to six 'stumbling blocks', which may be rooted in cultural differences. Giles and Byrne's (1982) intergroup model emphasises the impact of group identification on individuals' L2 learning, asserting a dynamic 'border' dividing contrasting cultural and linguistic camps which some people may more successfully traverse than others.

**Table 6.1: Key frameworks and assumptions**

Theory	Assumptions	
	Interactions (quality and quantity)	Social roles
<b>Social identity and Investment (Norton, 2000)</b>	Mediated by power relations – reflects resources	New, ‘foreign’ learner
<b>Stumbling blocks to intercultural communication (Barna, 1998)</b>	Influenced by cultural differences	Vietnamese (Asian culture) in UK (Western culture)
<b>Intergroup Model (Giles &amp; Byrne, 1982)</b>	Dependent on dynamism between different groups	Vietnamese, Asian, Other

## 6.2 Identities of Vietnamese participants

As discussed in 2.3.2, Norton’s (2000:19) definition of social identity is used in this thesis. Norton emphasises that identity must be considered a dynamic concept; which may change over time and differs from one social context to another and/or when subjected to shifts in personal disposition. The discussion below will discuss the sources that were found to have influenced the formation of identities of Vietnamese participants. First, it discusses the social and cultural influences on participants’ identities. Second, it focuses on the identity re-construction process of Vietnamese participants while residing in the UK (over time or affected by particularities of community and experience).

### 6.2.1 Influence of Vietnamese social and cultural backgrounds

Hetch (1993:79) points out that “identities are a source of expectations and motivations”. First of all, information from participants’ profiles (see 5.1.1) suggests that participants were all more-or-less fully-formed adults by the time they arrived in the UK and each possessed individual personalities, expectations, skillsets and identities. These must be accounted for, since they represent the inputs or ‘raw materials’ of the SLA (SA context) process. Norton (2000) sees learners as investors who are willing to invest (time and money) and expect worthwhile returns.

Vietnamese students were clearly investing financially, and this is further evidence of high motivation and expectation which is again linked to credentialism at home. Credentialism in Vietnam remains important and a UK degree is highly valued in Vietnam's highly competitive economy and labour market (King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2008). As described in 2.6.5, Vietnam is a developing country and only the Vietnamese middle-class can generally afford the high tuition fees and living costs associated with study in the UK. As King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh (2008) suggest, the middle class in Vietnam are those who can afford and are most willing to invest in study abroad because it is considered a financial investment to improve their career prospects and consolidate their social status.

For the majority of participants, studying in the UK is a big investment financially and emotionally. Vietnamese participants, therefore, can be described as highly motivated to study in the UK. Participants were all employed as young white-collar semi-professionals in Vietnam. They gave up their jobs, and travelled thousands of miles to the UK, to pursue MA degrees in order to consolidate their skills or acquire better careers. Their motivation to study in the UK can be traced back to two reasons: the credentialism in Vietnam (see 2.6.5) and participants' assumptions regarding the progress in English language proficiency (especially speaking skill) considered achievable whilst studying in the UK (see 5.5.1 and 5.5.2). Evidence to support credentialism among Vietnamese participants is discussed in detail in 5.3.3. The expectation that a UK degree would further their careers was generally accompanied by a belief that a UK degree also demonstrates proficiency in English – and that studying in the UK would almost guarantee this. English proficiency is highly valued in Vietnam, and the UK is constructed as a destination full of opportunities. Some participants' beliefs regarding the L2 benefits of living and studying in the TL culture were greater than others, but prior to leaving Vietnam most generally believed that studying in the UK would improve their English proficiency (see 5.5.1) and that simply living and studying in the UK – even for a relatively short period - would consolidate and develop their speaking skills. Participants also had high expectations regarding the opportunities to speak English and improve the L2. UK universities therefore continue to exert a significant pull on young, early-career Vietnamese



professionals – and their sponsoring employers and families. Vietnamese students in the UK are generally highly motivated to get MA degrees from the UK, to improve their English language, consolidate their careers and enhance their social status. Their economic motivation is underpinned by a series of expectations regarding what ‘life’ as a student will be like in the UK in terms of interaction opportunities. Upon entering the UK as young professionals from middle class backgrounds, Vietnamese students encountered a range of experiences which can be understood in terms of their social positioning.

### **6.2.2 Social roles reported by participants**

Findings from section 4.6 show that ‘Friend’ and ‘Student’ are the most common social roles reported by a wide margin and the majority of participants’ L2 interactions occurred on campus where these two roles were foregrounded. Other social roles are acknowledged, but only rarely. This supports Norton’s theories (see 2.3.2) in which language learners’ identities are influenced by social contexts and key institutions such as universities. Participants made sense of their social roles through university as an institution and interactions around campus. According to Norton (2000), this can be explained by the fact that participants had experienced a major change in social setting (from Vietnam, in Asia, to the UK, in Europe) – social context could reasonably be expected to press hard on participants’ own processes of making sense of their new situation. This supports Norton’s understanding of the way that the ‘social’ influences identity i.e. by focusing on how it constrains the roles people can play in society. Norton (2000) describes how the deteriorating socio-economic status of immigrants affects their identities. There is evidence to support this. There is a clear ‘shift’ away from the social roles that Vietnamese students used to occupy before arriving. All participants were professional workers, with middle-class backgrounds. While residing in the UK, Vietnamese participants felt culturally different (see 5.3.2) and were also relatively financially impoverished (see 5.2.1.2). For example, there were accounts from participants who could not socialise as much as they wanted due to the costs. One, Bac, had to move out of his accommodation to save money which subsequently cost him opportunities to practice more English (also see 5.2.1.2).

The data is interesting for what it does not find as much as for what it does find. There was, for example, considerable difference between participants' perceptions of their own 'Vietnameseness' between the main study and pilot study. In the main study the social role of 'Vietnamese' was rarely reported, but participants in the pilot study reported strong feelings of 'Vietnameseness' during conversations with native English speakers. Sometimes participants were simply attempting to distinguish themselves from the Chinese whilst at other times participants were purposely expressing their culture and nationality – putting their 'Vietnameseness' on display for British people. This supports Norton's arguments *vis-à-vis* how social interactions and social roles are concatenated. However, Mi, a participant from the main study, is more typical and commented '*there is not a lot in the UK to remind me of my Vietnamese identity*'.

The difference between the pilot and main study groups in terms of Vietnamese identity may be explained by their differing lengths of stay in the UK. Participants in the main study had been in the UK for approximately six months, while the pilot study participants had already spent several years in the UK. It is tempting to assume that new arrivals to the UK may feel more 'other' than those who have been in the UK longer, and that one basis of their 'other' – their 'Vietnameseness' – may be particularly prominent. This would, for example, accord with Barna's concept of 'shock'. Alternatively, the research suggests that participants put their 'Vietnameseness' on hold – it took some time before they acquired the social and intercultural skills and confidence to express and project their cultural background and nationality. Norton (2000) would understand this as evidence of SLA as an often protracted social process of negotiation for meaning. Mi offers another reading. The Vietnamese community in the UK is relatively small and although formal and informal institutions and networks have coalesced (including VietSoc) it may have taken participants some time to either discover them and/or access them routinely (if at all) – these networks and institutions were important reservoirs of 'Vietnameseness' which new arrivals were unable to draw instantly from.

### **6.3 Implications of identities in social interactions**

The previous section has described the sources influencing participants' identity construction and the types of social roles they occupied while residing in the UK. This section will explore how such identities are implicated in L2 social interactions.

### 6.3.1 Limited social roles and limited social interactions

Diary data in 4.2.1 shows that the majority of participants spent less than 1.68 hours/day speaking English. Further, the number of hours speaking English was on a general downward trend. The diary data is reinforced by data from the focus groups (see 5.2.1.1) in which participants attribute their limited L2 speaking to insufficient opportunities for them to speak the L2 and/or obstacles preventing access. The limited hours spent speaking English can be explained by social roles.

There is considerable evidence suggesting that participants' identities were influenced by their social contexts. The second most commonly reported social role was 'Student' (see 4.6) and the second most common type of interlocutor was also 'Student' (see 4.3). If 'studentness' and interactions with students are so prominent one might expect 'Academic Discussions' to also feature high up on the list of interaction types; but it does not (see 4.4). In fact, participants described in the focus groups interviews how they generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their language skills (see 5.3.1) and although the university was considered the main source of interactions for the majority of Vietnamese students, campus still only offered limited opportunity to speak English (see 5.2.1.1) and participants certainly did not engage in regular academic discussion there, reporting surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (see 5.2.1.2). Opportunities to speak English on campus were not only limited but the number of interactions available there decreased over time. The prominence of 'studentness' therefore suggests that participants' social roles are influenced by context (and interlocutor-types) just as much by the content of their interactions: being on campus and/or talking to students – even about non-academic matters – is sufficient to foreground one's 'Student' identity.

Further evidence to support the relationship between social roles and social interactions comes from one of the least reported social roles. There was a link between the reporting of the lower ranked social role 'Employee' (see 4.6) and the equally less common interlocutor-type 'Colleague' (see 4.3). Ranking of the social role of 'Employee' was considered rare given that half of the participants occupied part-time jobs (see 4.3.6). Discussions in focus groups revealed that interactions with

work colleagues were minimal (see 5.2.2.4). Here, Vietnamese participants ranked 'Employee' low because they did not have frequent interactions with colleagues at work. Therefore, this suggests that participants ranked the social roles in relation to the frequency of types of interlocutors and types of interactions that they experienced, rather than context.

The relationship between social roles and social interactions is also found where participants' number of social roles seems to reflect the quantity of their L2 interactions. For example, the two cases (Chau and Mi) who claimed more social roles also reported more social interactions and spent more time speaking English (see 4.2.1). At the other end of the scale, Nga and Bac, who claimed only 'Student' and 'Friend' status, had the lowest total hours of speaking English (also see 4.2.1). This suggests a relationship between the number of social roles occupied and the extent of L2 interactions.

This suggests that the social roles that Vietnamese participants felt strongest were influenced by social contexts and social interactions. In other words, the identities that Vietnamese participants adopted were influenced by social forces. The social influences on identities of Vietnamese students can be explained by the fact that participants had experienced a major change in social setting (from Vietnam, in Asia, to the UK, in Europe). This was anticipated: *social* influences would make a significant contribution to any processes associated with identity construction and reconstruction among participants. This supports Norton's understanding of the way that the 'social' influences identity i.e. by focusing on how it constrains the roles people can play in society.

Except for Chau, Mi and Tu the rest of the participants mainly reported the identities of 'Student' and/or 'Friend' influencing their patterns of interactions. Again, Norton's theory of power relations can apply to low-interaction scenarios. There seems to be a link between limited - and limiting - social roles and similarly limited interactions. 'Student' status did not contribute positively to processes of accessing opportunities to speak English. Instead, being a student interfered with opportunities; because of

academic workloads, pedagogic specificities and the requirement to prioritise academic needs (see 5.2.1.2).

Vietnamese participants were therefore negotiating different levels of interactions by taking advantage of their social roles. Social roles seem to have played an important part in deciding the quantity of interactions of Vietnamese participants. It supports Norton's theory of power relations which suggests that the success of the L2 learning process depends on how participants can exploit their social roles, to impose the right to be heard and achieve full participation in the TL community.

### **6.3.2 Power relations manifested in social interactions**

Norton (2000) argues that L2 learners have a complex social identity, which can be understood through power relations. Power relations therefore are seen best through five social interactions which will be discussed below.

#### **6.3.2.1 In interactions with NS**

Vietnamese students were keen to interact with the TL community and attempted to participate in events where they could meet British people. However, many of these events were often considered to be culturally unsuitable (see 5.2.2.2) and participants deliberately avoided them.

#### 'Lion's share'

Norton argues that L2 learners have to perform the 'lion's share' during interactions with native speakers. Discussions from the focus groups seem to support this. Vietnamese participants felt obliged to put the 'lion's share' of thought and effort into interactions with native speakers simply because they have a stronger preference for interactions with native speakers.

At home, interactions in the L2 were mainly with other international students, even when interaction opportunities with English NS were readily available. Evidence from 5.2.2.3 shows that Vietnamese participants did not have many interactions with British housemates. Any L2 interactions at home were mainly with other Asian or international housemates. Reported interactions with British housemates evidence the 'lion's share' that the Vietnamese participants had to bear. For example, Quynh described how she exercised care when in conversation with her chef housemate.

Their conversation focused on Vietnamese cuisine because the chef was interested in Asian cooking. Quynh refrained from talking about other topics because she could see that the housemate was not interested. Their relationship therefore could not develop any closer. In Quynh's account, despite having performed the 'lion's share' her relationship with her British housemate still did not develop, neither did her L2 interactions at home. Quynh was '*luckier*' with an African British friend who always showed '*sympathy*' for the difficulty that L2 learners have when talking to NS. Quynh felt touched when her African British friend listened to her carefully and politely corrected her mistakes. Quynh clearly wanted to be treated similarly by native speakers but she reported this only happened to her once. Quynh believed that the African origin of her friend helped her develop insights into the difficulties of L2 learners like Quynh, so she was willing to help.

Quynh and her British African friend therefore challenge some SLA research by suggesting that interactions with native speakers are more beneficial than those with non-native speakers. Quynh was clearly supported to improve her English by her African friend, whilst left feeling inadequate and irritated by conversations with NS. Chau also emphasised the need to be '*patient*' in conversations with British. Chau believed British people are '*nice and friendly*' but they expect other people to take the initiative and talk first. In other words, in interactions with the British, Vietnamese people are expected to make greater efforts. This is also supported by participants V. and P. from the pilot focus groups (see 5.4.2.2). V and P believed that British people want to talk to them too, but V and P had to initiate the conversation. While both V and P experienced and understood 'the rules of the game' in conversations with British people, V said he did not mind, but P expressed his disappointment that he had to '*talk first all the time*'.

#### 'Ambivalent' attitudes of TL speakers

Norton also describes how immigrants in her research felt 'marginalised' by the ambivalent attitudes from the native speakers of the TL. Data from focus groups also supports this. Mi, Luyen and Mai believed that younger British people were more "*arrogant*" and "*less interested in other cultures than older British people*". They described older British people as "*kinder and more patient*" in their conversations.

Younger people did not listen carefully or repeat words or explain things properly to Vietnamese interlocutors. The discussion in 5.3.2.1 shows that Vietnamese participants' views of British people ranged from "*uninterested*" (as P described it), to "*discriminatory*" (as described by Luyen). Though the problems were attributed to cultural differences participants in general considered British people unsupportive. Towards the end of data collection process, several participants (Bac and Luyen) withdrew completely from interactions with British people. In a response to a suggestion from Chau that Vietnamese should be more understanding and patient in their interactions with the British, Bac commented "*it's not worth it*". Bac's point of view supports the literature regarding 'respect and responsibility' in Vietnamese culture (see 2.6.2). According to this cultural norm, interactions between people are equal regardless of their economic or social status. Bac, therefore, requires and expects equal effort from interlocutors, and was not comfortable taking the 'lion's share' in interactions with British people. Bac's behaviour also supports Kim's (1993) and Davis and Proctor's (1989) description of middle class Asian men as strong, responsible and demanding respect from their family, friends and wider society.

Another finding which possibly supports the 'ambivalent' attitude from the TL speakers is that the Vietnamese' relationships with British classmates was never as close as that with international students (see 5.3.2.2). The 'ambivalent' attitude from British people was also found at work (though not intentionally) from one of Mai's colleagues (see 5.2.2.4). Mai was told to 'stop talking' to a British chef in the kitchen where they were working together because he needed to concentrate. Though Mai understood the reason for this request, she was clearly upset by it and the fact that she could not talk to a colleague even during a break. Mai's account can help understand why half the participants had part-time jobs, but only one participant (Ha) reported regular L2 interactions at work (see 5.2.2.4). The work environment therefore was considered poor in terms of providing opportunities to practice speaking English. This was due to the pressure of work, the fact that participants either worked limited hours or as lone workers and because work colleagues were generally regarded as unfriendly (see 5.2.2.4).

The ‘ambivalent attitude’ from British people that Norton (2000) describes in her research caused problems in L2 interactions among Vietnamese participants and was undoubtedly a surprise to many participants given how much they preferred interactions with native speakers and their assumptions regarding the benefit of NS interactions before leaving Vietnam (see 5.5).

#### ‘Catch-22’

Norton also describes a Catch-22 in which L2 learners have to ‘perform’ while being judged by native speakers. This situation is also observed in Vietnamese participants. There is some evidence to suggest that participants adopted the identity of a learner when they spoke English in front of NS. Sang, for example, was hoping that his British friend would correct him when he made a mistake. At the same time, just like a student in front of a teacher, Sang was afraid of making mistakes. If the NS interlocutor did not correct him, he thought that person insufficiently supportive; but if corrected, Sang - although grateful – also felt embarrassed. Sang admitted he often lost confidence whilst interacting with native speakers. This is similar to the Catch-22 that Norton describes: L2 learners do not have enough ‘space’ within which to develop their skills because they constantly feel nervous about being judged by native speakers. In Sang’s case, to put himself at ease he chose to speak English with NS that he already knew and who had become accustomed to his inaccuracy.

The strongest evidence for the Catch-22 possibly comes from the participants’ accounts in section 5.3.1. Participants (Luyen, Nga, Tu and Bac) described how they felt ‘lost’ in academic debates due to their inadequate language, especially in comparison with NS classmates. Nga admitted to the fear of being judged when speaking English to native speakers even though she never actually experienced any negative comments or attitudes from them. The fact that English is their second language and making mistakes is a natural part of any learning process did not put participants at ease. They were clearly embarrassed and under pressure to perform well in front of NS.



### **6.3.2.2 Limited social interactions**

The majority of L2 interactions occurred on university campuses (see 5.2.1.1), but participants reported surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (because they were engaged in independent study - see 5.2.1.2). Off campus social events were rarely attended by Vietnamese students. The difficulties associated with accessing L2 interaction opportunities support Norton's suggestion that access to TL speakers occurs within and is patterned by specific social contexts (e.g. campus life and course regimes) and must be negotiated and managed - they are not automatic. According to Norton, the success of these negotiations will reflect asymmetries of power between language learners and the TL community.

### **6.3.2.3 More simple than complex interactions**

The three most common types of L2 interactions are: 'Socialising', 'Simple Transactions' and 'Small Talk' which together accounted for approximately 75% of all L2 interactions (see 4.4). Approximately 24% of encounters were complex transactions and academic discussions.

Vietnamese participants were engaged in minimal academic discussions. Data in section 4.4 shows that academic discussion accounted for about 12% of total interactions. This is a modest figure given that participants were enrolled in full-time MA courses. In addition, academic discussions decreased over the three months, together with interactions with 'University/Academic Staff' (see 4.3). Focus group data (see 5.2.2.1) suggests that this reflects the effect of the Easter holiday in the last month of data collection process. 'Complex Transactions' slightly increased in the last month. Evidence from the focus groups shows that a number of participants were holidaying, sightseeing and/or attending conferences during April 2009, which may have influenced the 'Complex Transactions' headline figure.

Most of the time participants were therefore engaging in simple and relatively undemanding conversational activities more so than complex ones. This may simply reflect participants' sub-optimal L2 skills (see above). An alternative, positive, way of understanding this is to see the acquisition and maintenance of simple and undemanding conversational skills as an essential requirement for day-to-day life. Rather than being restricted (against their wishes) to mundane conversations (by

forces beyond their control) participants are instead routinely exercising a skill which they have more-or-less mastered – one which functions to preserve their overall L2 confidence and compensates for shortcomings elsewhere. However, participants were generally dissatisfied with their communicative competence over the research period which casts doubt on this explanation.

There is nothing to suggest that such interactions were gradually being replaced by more complex conversations - as might be expected under Barna's framework - as participants acclimatized and overcame 'shock'. The persistence and relative dominance of 'Simple Transactions' and 'Small Talk' therefore endorses Norton's theories regarding L2 learners' failure to be considered 'worthy to speak' and/or 'worthy to listen' by attributing L2 interaction experiences to social forces and roles which individuals cannot quickly or easily amend/overcome. This view is reinforced by focus group data in which participants commented that some British people were reluctant to enter into meaningful conversation with the Vietnamese, displaying "*impatience*" and a desire to terminate any conversation as quickly as possible (see 5.3.2.1). This phenomenon is explored in more detail below.

#### **6.3.2.4 Limited types of interlocutors**

In terms of whom participants spoke English with (or Interlocutor 'Types'), the number of L2 interactions also generally decreased over time, mirroring the overall reduction in time spent speaking English. 'Friends' are the most common L2 interlocutors by a large margin; followed by 'Student' and 'University/Academic Staff'. Interactions with other types of interlocutors were all relatively rare. Within-subject variation is limited for 'Friends', suggesting participants were able to sustain certain key relationships and/or patterns of socialising, but more pronounced for 'Students' and 'University/Academic Staff' (see 4.3), possibly reflecting course regimes and university closures.

#### **6.3.2.5 More interactions with NNS than NS**

According to diary data in 4.4, the number of NNS encounters was three times that of NS encounters. The gap between NS and NNS interactions narrowed by the end of Month 3 however, but this was due to a reduction in interactions with NNS rather than an increase in interactions with NS (see 4.3.8) and is consistent with data from the

focus groups suggesting that most participants' classmates and friends on campus – participants' main interlocutors - were fellow international students (see Chapter 5). Very roughly, participants tended to speak to NNS whilst on campus and NS off campus, although there were obvious exceptions (such as when shopping). One less obvious exception includes participants' L2 interactions at home, where they mainly spoke English with other Asian housemates even if sharing accommodation with British students (see 5.2.2.3). Vietnamese participants mainly spoke Vietnamese with other Vietnamese or English with other (non-Vietnamese) Asian housemates (see 5.2.2.3).

The patterning of L2 interactions described above is generally compatible with the theories of Norton's (2000) power relations – of Vietnamese participants' inability to impose the 'right to be heard' by compelling interlocutors from the TL community to ignore and/or overcome their own reservations *vis-à-vis* intercultural communication. Since non-Vietnamese NNS were viewed in the same situation as the participants (see 5.3.2.2), power is more evenly distributed, facilitating communication.

#### **6.4 Stumbling blocks in participants' L2 communication**

Barna's (1998) six stumbling blocks were found helpful to make sense of the data collected regarding participants' social interactions. Five out of the six stumbling blocks (also see 2.7.3) were found relevant: Language differences, anxiety in communication, tendency to evaluate, assumption of similarity and stereotype. There is, however, enough data to confirm the last stumbling block which is non-verbal misinterpretation.

##### **6.4.1 Language differences and anxiety**

Inadequate L2 competence has been reported by Vietnamese participants as an obstacle preventing participants from engaging in L2 conversations. Accounts by participants in 5.3.1 show that their English proficiency remained a problem in communication for Vietnamese participants across a range of interaction types from simple transactions to academic debates. Even though all participants passed the English requirements to gain entry to UK universities, they reported 'shock' upon arrival in the UK. Vietnamese participants blamed this on being "*ill prepared*" for the

“*real English*” spoken in the UK. As Boxer (2002) suggests in her research of international students in America, international students, having passed English language tests, typically fail to understand the norms and rules of interactions in the TL environment. As a result, they failed to recognise and take advantage of opportunities to practice the TL language. Vietnamese participants had passed either IELTS or TOEFL tests before coming to the UK. They were confident about their English in Vietnam and expected it to improve further after one year of studying in the UK (see 5.5). However, Vietnamese participants soon discovered that the opportunities to practice speaking English were not as plentiful as they thought (see 5.2.1.1 and 4.2.1).

There is evidence to suggest that Vietnamese participants experienced high anxiety in communication in English, especially in interactions where native speakers were present. This may explain why participants found it difficult to access and function successfully in academic settings (including with their supervisors) i.e. in an institution which they have paid to receive a service from which should ostensibly afford them a degree of power. Further, several participants, such as Nga, reported experiencing anxiety during the focus groups but did not interpret these as negative L2 interaction experiences because they believed the problem was a personal one, not an inherent product of their L2 encounters. Anxiety on the part of the participants is therefore likely to explain certain unsuccessful L2 encounters. Accounts from the focus groups (see 5.3.1) show that Nga, for example, found herself “*mumbling*” in front of her classmates, whilst Ha chose to remain silent in academic discussions (although Ha attributed this to her soft voice which she thought would cause difficulties for her classmates). Bac avoided interactions with British people (see 5.3.2.1) and reported the lowest number of interactions among the group (see 4.2.1). After several attempts trying to make himself understood in conversations Bac would often just give up and withdraw completely. Bac also reported experiencing anxiety, possibly caused by the fear of being judged by NS.

Anxiety is viewed by Norton (2000) as the result of unequal power relations between NNS and NS. However, Barna’s concept of anxiety challenges the suggestion. Barna explains high anxiety as a common feeling when people from a different culture come

to a new culture/country. In this sense, moving to an alien country/culture is the main cause of anxiety in communication. For most participants (except Tu), studying in the UK represented the first time they had lived away from their homeland for a long period of time. Some participants, such as Thao, clearly evaluated UK culture from a Vietnamese-centric perspective, which according to Barna (1998) is the cause of another stumbling block – a ‘tendency to evaluate’.

#### **6.4.2 Stereotypes and the tendency to evaluate**

Data suggests that participants experienced two of Barna’s obstacles: stereotypes and the tendency to evaluate. Stereotypes happened when Vietnamese participants did not have as many interactions as they wished with the British. In fact participants’ views regarding the (un)friendliness of British people are themselves stereotypes. Some participants found British people in general ‘unfriendly’ whilst others felt that this mainly applied to younger British people. Another stereotype about the British people was the impatience on the part of NS. Participants believed this deterred British people from both initiating conversations and engaging fully in them (see 5.3.2.1).

This was a two-way street however, with both Vietnamese participants and British people holding particular views about one another and approaching interactions cautiously, ultimately shaping the content, conduct and frequency of their interactions (see 5.3.2.2). For example, Chau believed that the British considered all Asians to be “*boring*” and on the “*bottom list to make friends with*” (also see 5.3.2.1). In another account, V believed that British people think Vietnamese people look like Chinese and “*all Chinese tend to stick to themselves*” so the British would not initiate any conversations for fear of being a nuisance.

It is also important to note that there is also evidence of cultural learning occurring – of stereotypes being abandoned, of open mindedness and of ‘difference’ being accommodated and even celebrated. Sang, for example, initially considered UK socialising habits boring and less stimulating than those in Vietnam, but he persisted, concluding eventually “*I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually. It has its own right*”.

Sang’s account shows that Sang fell into the stumbling block of ‘tendency to evaluate’. Sang used to evaluate interactions in the UK and compare them

(unfavourably) with those in Vietnam. Therefore Sang was not happy because “*hanging in the pubs in the UK are not the same as in Vietnam*”. The most obvious changes in attitude towards British culture were expressed by Hoa and Sang. They actively evaluated British culture and also displayed a level of proficiency in adapting to it. During the first interviews, Hoa and Sang considered British people and society ‘*arrogant and hierarchical*’. However, towards the end of the data collection period they both enjoyed spending their leisure time with their NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying in the UK for several years. This shows that once participants stopped evaluating, they started to enjoy their interactions in the TL more.

#### **6.4.3 Assumption of similarity**

Barna’s first stumbling block– the assumption of similarities – asserts that people mistakenly assume that as humans we are all similar and consequently should be able to communicate relatively easily. Barna believes that the inevitable revealing of difference generates ‘shock’, hindering communication. Barna also argues that culturally different interlocutors are prone to stereotyping and a ‘tendency to evaluate’ which interferes with the development of mutual understanding. It follows that encounters with interlocutors who are (considered) less culturally and experientially different would therefore generate less anxiety and fewer opportunities to evaluate.

#### **6.5 Making sense of L2 interactions using Intergroup Model**

Similarly to the stumbling block of ‘assumption of similarity’, Giles and Byrne’s (1982) Intergroup Model emphasises the importance of cultural and/or linguistic similarity in patterning intercultural encounters – notwithstanding individuals’ abilities to transit between cultural and linguistic camps, the ready availability (or absence) of own- and like-group members, networks and institutions is likely to shape *inter alia* who people talk to and how frequently they do so.

Giles and Byrne’s intergroup model maintains that cultural and linguistic commonalities and differences are likely to facilitate and limit interactions between different linguistic and cultural groups. If the intergroup model is correct we would expect to see Vietnamese participants ‘drawn to’ and spending much – even most of – their time with fellow Vietnamese students and with other groups with whom they perceive themselves to share key linguistic, cultural and experiential reference points

etc. There is data to support the dynamism that govern interactions between cultural/linguistic groups that Giles and Byrne advocate. First, interactions between Vietnamese participants and British interlocutors were limited. Data from both focus groups and the diary suggest that Vietnamese participants had limited interactions in English (see 4.3 and 5.2.2.1). Participants also spoke English with more international students (mainly Asian) than British students. Most participants found it “*more difficult*” to communicate with native English speakers than with other Asian students. The most striking example is how Vietnamese participants only became (close) friends with other international housemates/classmates even whilst sharing accommodation with British people and attending MA courses with British students. Chau and her English housemate never developed a relationship as friends, instead maintaining a distance from each other. This was interesting because Chau and her housemate enjoyed favorable conditions to become closer. They shared a house, he was studying Asian Studies and Chau was keen to improve her English and learn more about British culture. Chau’s experience supports Giles and Byrne’s argument that ethnolinguistic and cultural convergence facilitates L2 interaction. The Vietnamese and British culture and language differences did not facilitate mutual attraction. The Vietnamese students seemed to be more comfortable talking with other international students because they had similar cultures and more common points of reference.

### **6.6 Identity and communicative competence**

First of all, data suggests that most participants were not satisfied with their L2 experience. Diary data in 4.5 shows that 9 out of 14 participants scored their communication experiences less than average ( $\bar{x} = 45$ ) with scores ranging from -11 to 113 (out of a maximum available mark of 168). Further, participants became increasingly dissatisfied with their L2 interaction experiences over the course of the study (although there was significant between-subject variation). Focus groups also suggest that participants were not happy with their progress in English speaking skill (see 5.5.1).

As discussed in 2.4, the sense of communicative competence can be investigated through: the frequency of L2 interactions, the management of stumbling blocks in

communication, and the self-identification in relations to groups, and the power relations in social interactions. Each will be discussed in detail below.

### **6.6.1 Frequency of L2 interactions**

MacIntyre & Charos (1996) believe communicative communication is manifested in L2 communication frequency. In which, the more opportunities L2 learners have to practice the TL language, the more satisfied they would feel with their communicative competence. According to this, the low rating of L2 experience among Vietnamese participants can be understood in terms of the limited social interactions they had in the UK. Evidence from both the diaries and focus groups confirm this (see 4.21, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.2). In addition to the limited opportunities, Vietnamese participants also experienced problems in taking advantage of opportunities even when they became available ones (and even on campus). University and campus life provided the majority of L2 interaction opportunities but participants reported several obstacles preventing easy access to them. ‘Hard’ external obstacles include: demanding academic workloads, the high cost of socialising and inadequate support from university authorities. However, participants also cite ‘soft’ cultural differences and their own sub-optimal L2 skills as additional obstacles (see 5.2.1.2). With regards to the latter, participants generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation and inadequate listening skills (see 5.3.1). Cultural differences and misunderstandings undermined the appeal and success of various initiatives designed to transcend national and cultural barriers and occasionally functioned to erect invisible barriers between different geo-cultural student groups limiting intermingling and/or L2 interactions. A mix of social, cultural and individual (cultural and skill-centred) factors are therefore implicated in participants’ precise L2 interaction experiences.

Another reason for the dissatisfaction with their L2 interactions was the fact that interactions with NNS were far more common than interactions with NS, while participants valued interactions with NS more than with NNS. The results suggest that participants’ interactions with NNS were not considered useful learning experiences - because they themselves were thought to have sub-optimal L2 skills – resulting in fairly high levels of persistent dissatisfaction. Relatively low satisfaction scores might also reflect participants’ irritation at their continued inability to successfully access



NS and the TL community. The overall downward trend in satisfaction ratings can then be understood as linked to the decrease in NNS encounters relative to encounters with NS over the course of the study – participants see tricky encounters with hard-to-reach NS as the litmus test for their communicative competence, with more-or-less easy-going encounters with NNS serving to offset any disappointments. Data from the focus groups confirms that participants were both unhappy with the limited L2 speaking opportunities they had in the UK and with aspects of the actual encounters themselves.

The majority of Vietnamese participants reported limited interactions in their diaries (see 4.2.1) and lower level of dissatisfaction. They also admitted overestimating both the L2 interaction opportunities available in the UK and improvements to their L2 skills associated with prolonged exposure to the TL community (see 5.5). The fact that these high expectations were not met may explain their high levels of dissatisfaction – in contrast, those with more conservative expectations report more L2 interactions and higher satisfaction (see 4.2.1 and 5.2.1.1).

The unhappiness about the L2 experience can be understood in light of the identities that were observed in section 6.2 earlier. With high motivation and expectation to study in the UK, Vietnamese participants were hoping to experience ‘golden’ opportunities to improve their English proficiency, especially speaking skill (also see 5.5.1 and 5.5.2). The reality of real life in the TL environment therefore explains why participants rated their L2 experiences low. This also links in with the concept of investment (Norton, 2000), which will be discussed in the following section.

### **6.6.2 Imposing ‘the right to be heard’**

As discussed in the previous section, the low rating of L2 experience can be explained by the concept of investment (Norton, 2000). Vietnamese participants are considered investors who invest their time and money to study in the UK and in return expect to achieve MA degrees and improved English speaking skills. However, the ‘investors’ soon experienced difficulties with fully tapping into opportunities in the TL environment, which according to Norton (2000) can be attributed to the unequal distribution of power. Norton (2000) believes that power relations help to explain the social roles that learners can claim - social roles assist learners to negotiate access to

interactions, to impose the ‘right to be heard’ and to become legitimate participants in social interaction. The more successful in imposing the right to be heard, the more competent one is in his/her communication. As discussed in 6.3.2, power relations are manifested in the social interactions of Vietnamese participants.

There is, in fact, both evidence to support and challenge the influence of social roles on L2 interactions. This chapter has illustrated how some Vietnamese participants occupied social roles that enabled them to access more interactions. The chapter – and, indeed, the thesis as a whole - has described how key formal and informal social settings and institutions can constitute a structuring backcloth patterning L2 interaction opportunities. Discussions throughout section 6.3.2 shows that the majority of Vietnamese participants did not avoid successfully ‘being marginalised’ in social interactions due to unequal power relations.

As Norton (2000) suggests, the success or failure of L2 learning depends on how well learners negotiate interactions (through their social roles) and impose the ‘right to be heard’, therefore becoming a legitimate subject of, and party to, a conversation. In this sense, the low rating of L2 experiences of participants can be understood as they had yet to become a full participant in social interactions, or successfully use their social roles to impose the ‘right to be heard’.

### **6.6.3 Overcoming stumbling blocks in intercultural communication**

The discussion in 6.4 shows that Vietnamese participants experienced five out of six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication as suggested by Barna (1998). Communicative competence, according to Barna (1998) is an inner capacity to overcome those stumbling blocks in communication (also see 2.7.3). Therefore, this helps explain why most Vietnamese participants were not satisfied with their communicative competence. However, Barna (1998) does not point out how to build the inner capacity as such; in other words, how to overcome those stumbling blocks in communication. Barna (1998) sees anxiety as a matter of fact when two people from different cultures meet. Norton (2000), however, understands anxiety as a result of unequal power relations. As discussed in 6.4.1, anxiety is most observed in communication with NS. Accordingly, anxiety will not exist when there is an equal relation of powers. The evidence to support this comes from participants’ interactions

with NNS. The suggestion that feeling ‘equal’ in communication can help individuals to manage their anxiety is found in accounts by Hoa and An (see 5.4.3.1) and Sang (5.4.2.2). For Hoa, the most important point in academic debates is how good the arguments or ideas are. Hoa admitted to language problems but she did not let them distract her from her objective of making herself understood. An also adopted a ‘positive’ attitude and was confident in her communication. Neither Hoa nor An treated their interactions as opportunities to learn English; but, rather, as socialising events, through which they developed a network of friends as they used to do back in Vietnam – they therefore placed themselves under much less pressure. Sang changed his view towards “*Western people*” since arriving in the UK. Whilst working in Vietnam, Western people were believed to be experts at work, earning much higher pay than Vietnamese nationals. However, since arriving in the UK, Sang realised that he was just as clever and competent as his British classmates. As a result, Sang felt more confident in interactions with NS.

Similarly, the finding that more interactions with NNS than with NS is attributed to unequal power relations can also be understood from the point of view of cultural differences in communication. Cultural dissonance was considered a problem in interactions with British interlocutors, and cultural and experiential similarity help to explain more frequent and ‘deeper’ interactions with fellow international students (although interactions with NNS were not seen as beneficial learning experience by Vietnamese participants [see 5.3.3]). Barna (1998) does not refer to cultural differences explicitly (all the six stumbling blocks are ‘anxiety’, ‘language and nonverbal misinterpretation’, ‘tendency to evaluate’, ‘assumption of similarity’ and ‘stereotypes’). Data therefore suggests Kim’s (1991) range of ‘stumbling blocks’ is also relevant. According to Kim (1991:259), intercultural communicative competence refers to “the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely cultural differences, and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, and the accompanying experience of stress” (also see 2.4). Discussion in this section (6.6.3) shows that there is data to confirm the ‘cultural differences’ and the ‘accompanying stress’. The ‘inter-group posture’ resembles Giles and Byrne’s (1982) Intergroup Model, and will be discussed in the next section.

#### 6.6.4 Self-identification in relations to groups

Barna (1998), by attributing L2 success or failure to individuals' abilities to overcome and manage 'shock' and to cultural distance in part reintroduces the centrality of 'the individual' to his/her L2 progress. Intergroup Model blends social level perspectives with individual level explanations and would explain variation in terms of the attractiveness of own-group formal and informal institutions and networks which either function as a bridge to intercultural interactions or a barrier to them. Variation in time spent speaking English – particularly the between-subject variation which is more pronounced – suggests that it is individuals themselves who exercise most influence over their L2 communication experiences albeit within a social world which constitutes a structuring backcloth and natural limits.

Yet there is also evidence that the different linguistic and cultural 'camps' identified in this research do interact – they are not sealed from each other. In fact the boundary is dynamic and Giles and Byrne (1982) is primarily interested in understanding the processes governing the interactions and movements that occur here – why, for example, are some people able to traverse the boundary more so than others? Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) consider moving to a new culture/country as a challenge to one's self identification. According to Miller (2003), the identities of L2 learners are often linked to their first language when they travel away from their homeland. However, data collected runs contrary to this suggestion. The social role of 'Vietnamese' was ranked very low among participants in the main study (see 4.6). This can be explained by the fact that Vietnamese participants had difficulties relating to and expressing their Vietnamese identity during their early time in the UK. The finding that 'Vietnameseness' was not an important social identity supports Giles and Byrne's (1982) suggestion that the dynamism between two groups is strongest when they share similar cultural and linguistic features. However, diary and focus groups data suggest that participants in the pilot study, having resided in the UK for a longer time, claimed a stronger sense of 'Vietnameseness': once acclimatized, they were in a stronger position to express their cultural identity. There is data from the pilot study to show that 'Vietnamese' was chosen as one of the most important social roles (see 6.1.2). According to Phan Ngoc (1998), Vietnamese people have a strong sense of community (see 2.6.1). The personal identity of a Vietnamese person is shaped by

his/her relations with surrounding people. Upon travelling to the UK, Vietnamese students instantly experienced more limited interactions with other Vietnamese people: their interactions were divided unevenly between English and Vietnamese languages. Their sense of Vietnameseness was challenged by the unequal power relations in interactions with British people (ignorance about Vietnam, uninterest etc.) and made participants feel ‘inferior’ in their communication. Accounts from 5.4.2.2 show that only two participants (HN and HNG) asserted their Vietnamese identity during their L2 communications.

### **6.6.5 Individuals autonomy in L2 communication**

Six participants (Chau, Mi, Hoa, An, Sang and Tu) managed to access a significantly greater number of interactions than the others, mainly based on their interactions outside campus. They were proactive in their efforts to access L2 interactions (see 5.4.2) and/or accessed a greater number of interactions via key relationships (see 5.4.1). Mi, Hoa, and An are among the top three participants who ranked their L2 experience much higher than the rest of the group (see 4.5).

#### **6.6.5.1 Challenging the relationship between social roles and social interactions**

There is evidence asserting the importance of individual agency. To illustrate, Hoa and An reported occupying similar roles as other participants but they both report particularly high levels of L2 interactions. Similarly, Tu reported a higher than average number of social roles and L2 encounters, but only modest hours speaking English (see 4.2.1), whilst several other participants who also reported a higher than average number of social roles instead reported high levels of L2 engagement. These examples suggest that the influence of social roles on L2 interactions is probabilistic, not deterministic – either individual factors are likely to be influential or, alternatively, perhaps certain social roles are better than others in ‘unlocking’ speaking opportunities.

Norton (2000) does not discuss explicitly the issue of which social roles matter more in terms of accessing interaction opportunities, just that social roles are important because they facilitate or constrain learners’ efforts to impose the ‘right to be heard’. For example, taking the social roles of ‘Friend’ and ‘Boyfriend/Girlfriend’, it would

seem that the ‘right to be heard’ can be more comfortably asserted on boyfriends/girlfriends, compared to normal friends or strangers.

Diary data (see 4.2.2) therefore shows that individuals vary from one another in the number of hours of interactions over three months. The influence of social roles on the quantity of interactions is here challenged by the variation in hours spent speaking English among participants who reported identical or similar social roles. If social roles were significant in deciding if L2 learners can impose the ‘right to be heard’ (and therefore gain better access to the TL), Vietnamese participants who share similar social roles might be expected to report roughly the same level of interactions. However, Hoa and An do not fit this template. They managed to achieve more interactions (see 4.2.1) by being confident, positive and friendly, rather than by occupying a particularly efficacious role (see 4.6 and 5.4.3.1). Unlike Chau, Mi and Tu - who gained more access and/or L2 experience through their partners - Hoa and An were successful in opening up contacts via their ‘normal’ ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ status.

The above pattern suggests that the influence of social roles on Vietnamese student’s interactions does not ‘press’ evenly on participants. Non-student roles seem to be implicated in Chau, Mi and Tu’s total hours of speaking English because the figures for all three increased even during the Easter holidays. Data from the focus groups shows that their main interactions did not originate from the university, as was common with the other participants, and their speaking opportunities were not confined to university friends. Chau, Tu and Mi’s main sources of interactions were social events and speaking English with their partners. The significant between-subject variation coupled with relatively low within-subject monthly variation in L2 speaking hours suggests that participants were on their own individual and routinized interaction pathways.

Data to support Norton’s belief in the importance of social roles in daily interactions is especially pronounced in the cases of Chau, Mi and Tu - who were mainly reliant on partners for interactions. They did not experience a decrease in hours even when the university was closed (see 4.2.1). In fact Chau’s hours stayed the same while Mi’s

increased from 86 to 143 and to 202 in three months. A similar upward trend was found with Tu (33, 59 and 85). Their increased interactions can be explained by the fact that their main source of interactions came from their partners, which is immune from the closure of university. However, the importance of social roles *vis-à-vis* the quantity of interactions seems less important for the rest of the group (12 participants) who claimed ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ as their major social roles. Out of the 12 participants, seven did not experience considerable changes over the three months (including the last month). This means that their interactions were not affected by the shrinking availability of opportunities. Diary data (see 4.2.1) shows that there was reasonable stability amongst all 7 participants (Sang, Nga, Mai, Ly, Quynh, Thao and Chau) over the three months of data collection. This further confirms the above suggestion that participants constructed or slipped into personalised ways of gaining interactions, which seem to challenge the determinism of social roles. Habituation at the time participants were completing their diaries cannot be ruled out, but the data also suggests that the participants had routinised their lives and therefore their interaction patterns.

In contrast, the university closure does seem to have affected the rest of the group who also identified with the social roles of ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’. Five participants (Luyen, Ha, Hoa, An and Bac) experienced a decrease in the number of hours speaking English over three months (see 4.2.1). Most interestingly, this group includes those reporting both high and low levels of L2 encounters. Hoa and An - who were the most active in exploiting their social roles (as discussed in previous sections) - seem to have suffered significantly. Hoa’s interactions decreased by approximately 50% at the end of the three months, while An’s decreased by 30%. The decrease for those reporting low interactions was also dramatic. Ha’s interactions reduced by almost 50% and Bac’s by almost 90% (see 4.2.1). It is worth noting that the decrease in actual interactions over the three months was not significant (although it was perceived to be by participants themselves), which suggests a weak relationship between social roles and the quantity of interactions.

These variations in L2 interactions - in terms of quantity of interactions (see 4.2.1), the types of interlocutors (see 4.3) and the types of interactions (see 4.4) - shows that

sharing the same social roles can still produce different level of interactions. This suggests that acquiring certain social roles only is not enough to ‘impose the right to be heard’. In sum, the number of social roles reported does not unproblematically associate with either time spent speaking the L2 or the number of L2 encounters – this is not a crude numbers game. Participants reporting similar social roles also report very different L2 experiences. And finally, individual level variation remains pronounced – i.e. individual level explanations (of differing L2 experiences) may offer a better understanding than explanations adopting a social level perspective. For example, while Chau, Mi and Tu’s roles as partners made them feel ‘worthy’ to impose the ‘right to be heard’ on their boyfriend/girlfriend, Hoa and An felt confident in doing so with just their normal friends. Hoa and An had no particular explanations for their self-confidence; each remarked they had “*always been like that*” in interactions, whether interacting with Vietnamese or British people. Therefore, I suggest that individuals’ personalities/characteristics seem to play an important role in their construction of identities and accessing of interaction opportunities.

However, much variation in L2 encounters may also be attributed to individual agency. An exhaustive account of the individual characteristics likely to influence L2 interactions reported by participants in this research is beyond the remit of this thesis but includes: existing L2 skills; porosity to/interest in UK culture; motivation (to improve the L2); resourcefulness; resilience and the capacity for cultural learning – and even good luck.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Chapter 6 has discussed key observations regarding the quantity and quality of interactions. The observations were explained in light of three theories: power relations (Norton, 2000), six ‘stumbling blocks’ in intercultural communication (Barna, 1998), and the Intergroup Model (Giles and Byrne, 1982).

Social roles were found helpful in explaining the quantity of interactions. Most participants had experienced limited hours of speaking English. This was linked to their interactions on campus, which in turn is shaped by their ‘studentness’. Some participants, however, were found to have accessed greater opportunities than the rest



of the group. They had made efforts to negotiate additional social roles ('Friend' and 'Boyfriend'/Girlfriend') to tap into further layers of interactions. However, there are aspects of the patterning of interactions that cannot easily be explained just by social roles: the individual variation in interactions over time, and the individual stability in interactions regardless of the reduction in opportunities to speak English. A relationship between social interactions and social roles is observed, but not *vis-a-vis* all participants; which suggests the relationship may not be significant or deterministic and is certainly not felt equally across the researched sample.

Giles and Byrne's Intergroup model (1982) is supported by much of the data. There is clear evidence that the Vietnamese participants were spending disproportionately large amounts of time with fellow Vietnamese students and with other international students with whom they believed they shared key linguistic problems and cultural reference points. Data has also shown that Vietnamese students felt culturally distant from British people. But Giles and Byrne also acknowledge that intergroup mingling also occurs - different cultural and linguistic 'camps' are not sealed from one another. The data shows that certain Vietnamese participants were able to move in and out of these 'camps' more easily than others for various individualised reasons. Evidence that linguistic and cultural differences shaped the patterning of intergroup relations was quite strong. The Vietnamese participants alluded to a range of practical language related problems which acted as a deterrent to greater interactions with native speakers. There was also evidence of cultural stereotyping at work, with participants believing that some British people were impatient and uninterested in Asian and Vietnamese cultures, etc.

Barna (1998) claims six 'stumbling blocks' which influence the communicating patterns by affecting the extent to which individuals perceived a particular interaction to be successful and therefore influencing his or her propensity to seek out further interaction opportunities. Of Barna's six stumbling blocks, five blocks - 'language differences', 'anxiety', 'tendency to evaluate', 'language', 'assumption of similarity' and 'stereotypes' - were particularly helpful in explaining participants' interaction experiences. Focus group data, for example, suggested individuals struggled to communicate ideas, particularly complex ones, and much interaction was confined to

undemanding exchanges. There is also much evidence of individuals struggling to understand what native speakers were saying. However, Vietnamese participants felt more relaxed speaking English with other non-native speakers. Barna's stumbling block of 'anxiety' may help to explain this phenomenon: the Vietnamese reported feeling more comfortable speaking English to other non-native speakers and less embarrassed at making mistakes. In other words, they felt as if they were on a much more 'equal footing' with NNS interlocutors compared to NS interlocutors.

This idea of feeling 'equal to' links in with Norton's belief that power is central to understanding social interactions, and that L2 learners must feel/must be considered 'worthy to listen' and 'worthy to speak'. For Norton, power is related to and flows from the social roles that people occupy. Since people occupy different social roles, we would therefore expect a complex patterning of interactions but at the same time commonality where people share the same key roles. The data shows that despite sharing similar roles, people reported different interaction experiences both in terms of quantity and quality of interactions. Individual testimonies are able to provide reasons for these variations. Indeed, the most striking observation concerns the extent of individual variation coupled with an apparent routinisation of interaction over a protracted period. This suggests that the power to make oneself heard may not stem purely from social roles but rather may also be attributable to – or filtered via – individual characteristics and the specificities of individuals' lived realities.

## Chapter 7

### **Conclusions and Implications**

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#### **7.1 The research overview**

In Chapter 2 - Literature review, I discussed the current trend in SLA research that L2 learners' identities and the L2 learning process are related. In other words, the concept of identity is considered one of the 'keys' to 'unlock' the door to the understanding and explanations of the L2 learning experience. I have also explained one of the main aims of this research (see Chapter 1) is to respond to this trend in SLA research by exploring the relationship of L2 learners' identity and their language learning process by focusing on an under-researched group: Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments. This is 'opening the context of identity research' as called for by Block (2007). Unlike most research on identity and SLA - whose participants are mainly immigrants - this research focuses on young intellectuals with middle-class backgrounds, who were in a pursuit of MA degrees. The participants' backgrounds and the context of the research is thus fundamentally different from much SLA/identity-based research which is either focused on immigrants.

This research aims to explore the relationship between the identity of L2 learners and their self-perceived L2 communicative competence. Therefore, in Chapter 2, these two concepts - identity and communicative competence - were discussed and defined. For the concept of identity, much of the research is based on Norton's (2000) definition of social identity which maintains that individuals make sense of their L2 learning process in relation to social identity. SLA literature on identity is conceptually and terminologically confusing, but Norton suggests a good way to understand the concept of 'social identity' is to understand the power relations which are realised in normal social interactions. In other words, the 'fluidity' of identity - the source of much confusion - is 'captured' by understanding how 'power' is manifested in daily interactions. Here I have formulated two research questions.

1. Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments? (answered in 6.2)
2. How - if at all - is identity implicated in Vietnamese students' interactions in the English language? (answered in 6.3)

The first research question attempts to establish the types of identities reported by Vietnamese participants and is partly in response to the existing confusion regarding the types of identities that exist. The second question seeks to establish which identities are relevant to L2 learning and then to understand how these identities impact on the types of interaction that L2 learners have. However, interactions may serve as a filter only, as suggested by Norton (2000), and the final target of the research is to understand how identity is implicated in participants' communicative competence.

Here, Barna's (1998) definition is helpful. According to Barna, a person who can successfully overcome six key stumbling blocks is considered to have achieved communicative competence. This is the third research question:

3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual's own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how? (answered in 6.6)

In order to answer these questions, a mixed method approach is adopted. The justification of the use of mixed methods is described in Chapter 3 – Methodology. The use of quantitative methods is relatively uncommon in identity-based and SLA research. A pilot study on the use of a daily diary (see 3.9) was conducted. The result showed that quantitative data from self-completed diaries can be used to answer the research questions. Therefore, the use of self-completed diaries as a quantifiable tool was adopted again in the main study. The mixed methods approach is found helpful in answering the research questions. Qualitative data from focus groups and quantitative data from the diaries can be triangulated to test the validity of data collected from each of the sources (see Chapter 6). Not only is the reliability of the data reinforced but also the 'measurement' of the two key concepts - identity and communicative competence

- was capable of being expressed, presented and analysed in both numbers and words. This also means that the relationship between identity and communicative competence can be explored from both angles. However, due to a small sample size, extensive inferences based on quantitative statistical tests were not possible. This will be discussed further (see 7.4.1) in this chapter as a limitation of this research.

## **7.2 Main conclusions**

There are six main conclusions which will be discussed in detail below.

### **7.2.1 The link between identity and social interactions**

There are both findings supporting and contesting the relationship between identity and social interactions. On the pro-side, the first piece of evidence comes from the ranking of social roles that participants felt important (see 6.4.2.1). Social roles seem to be shaped by the social settings that participants occupied. Because most interactions were taking place on one of two university campuses, the highest ranked social roles were ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ (see 4.6). The second evidence is that some types of social roles appear to help participants to ‘impose the right to be heard’ and achieve more interactions (number of hours). Students who reported the social roles of ‘Boyfriend/girlfriend’ for example reported more social interactions than those who just reported the social roles of ‘Friend/student’ (see 6.4.2.1). However, the relationship between social roles and social interactions possibly appears weak (see 6.4.2.2) because only *some* social roles were positively correlated with *some* (aspects of) social interactions.

In fact there are several findings contesting the link between identity and social interactions. The first evidence is that the variation in total hours of interactions is marked more by individual differences, not just those based on occupation/non-occupation of particular social roles: participants who reported similar social roles were reporting wildly dissimilar interaction experiences (see 6.4.2.2). In fact the most striking observation is not that individuals who share the same social roles experience roughly the same L2 communication experience (see 6.4.2.2). Therefore, it is suggested social roles alone do not yet adequately explain the patterning of participants’ behaviours or the confidence they exhibit in their endeavours to gain

opportunities to speak English. Data shows that the influence of social roles on Vietnamese student's interactions may not have applied evenly to all participants (see 6.4.2.2). The individual variation (see 4.2.2) and individual routinisation in social interactions (4.2.3) suggest that few participants constructed and/or 'fell' into highly individualised modes of accessing interactions.

### **7.2.2 Implications of power relations in social interactions**

Norton (2000) describes four ways in which power relations can be reflected in social interactions. There is evidence that Vietnamese participants experienced unequal power relations (see 6.3.2). The first concerns the 'Lion's share' of effort which L2 learners must contribute when conversing with TL speakers. The second refers to the 'Ambivalent attitudes of TL speakers'. The third way is the 'Catch 22' (where participants reported that they felt being judged whilst practicing English). There is focus group evidence confirming the presence of the manifestations of 'power', especially in interactions with NS speakers (see 5.3.2.1). This confirms Norton's (2000) central argument that power relations are central to understanding social interactions.

Nevertheless, similar to the link between social roles and social interactions, power relations were not experienced or interpreted in the same way by all participants. For each of the four ways in which 'power' is manifest in interactions there were few individuals who 'bucked' the trend and saw things differently (see 5.4.3). This possibly suggests that those individual constructed identities which might help them 'escape' the power relations. Power relations undoubtedly exist within social interactions; and power relations can help understand the majority of participant's identities in relation to their L2 communication. However, just as social roles do not absolutely determine the types of interactions everyone will have, the power relations manifested during interactions do not mean that everyone will experience and interpret the same type of interaction identically. Thus participants with the same identity report different interaction experiences and even people with the same identities in identical interactions may possibly experience and respond to these encounters differently. So in terms of understanding the types of interactions that L2

learners have and their conduct within these interactions the conclusion is that identity remains a helpful tool, however there are few exceptional cases.

### **7.2.3 The link between social roles and communicative competence**

The inter-mingling of power relations and social roles in social interactions described by Norton have been observed in my participants' social interactions. Power relations and social roles - which are assumed to influence the L2 learners' identity and also to influence how L2 learners view communication process - are supported from the data. Immigrants in Norton's (2000) research were described as being upset and angry by their limited social roles and by the loss of their social status which was due to asymmetrical power relations in social interactions. The Vietnamese participants seem to have experienced similar asymmetry of power (see 6.3.2), and limited social roles (see 4.6) and in terms of outcomes they rated their experience of speaking English rather low for most participants (see 4.5). This is interesting in that as students, participants paid to be conditioned to study in the UK, but they still faced roughly similar problems in communications as immigrants. This supports findings from Boxer's (2002) research on the communication of international students in the TL environment.

### **7.2.4 Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication and communicative competence**

Of the six stumbling blocks that Barna (1998) identifies, five stumbling blocks have been found relevant to the experiences of Vietnamese participants: language differences, assumption of similarities, tendency to evaluate, anxiety and stereotyping (see 6.4). According to Barna communicative competence is the inner capacity of a person to overcome 'stumbling blocks' in intercultural communication. This is confirmed by those participants who reported fewer difficulties in overcoming the five stumbling blocks also reporting more positive self-perceived communicative competence (see 6.6.5). However, Barna does not provide an explanation of why some participants are able to overcome the stumbling blocks more successfully than others; and does not really acknowledge that different people may interpret each stumbling block differently. Accordingly, there is evidence that participants varied in the way they perceived Barna's 'stumbling blocks': Hoa (see 5.4.3.1) provides an

example of how different people interpret and respond to setbacks differently. Also Barna was not explicit whether or not the six stumbling blocks represent an exhaustive list. Discussion in 6.6.3 shows that there is one more stumbling block ('cultural differences'), suggested by Kim (1991), is supported by the data collected while not covered in Barna's (1998) list.

### **7.2.5 Giles & Byrne (1982) Intergroup Model**

The data (see 6.5) generally supports Giles and Byrne's suggestion that socio-cultural and linguistic factors can 'bind' people together, creating culturally-based linguistic 'camps' for people to belong to. Vietnamese participants did spend a lot of time with other Vietnamese students and also reported enjoying the company of other non-native speakers with whom they shared certain important cultural reference points and L2 problems. VietSoc is an example of how such 'camps' can become formalised. However, there is obviously movement in and out of these 'camps'. Some participants found it easier than others to step out of their linguistic/cultural camp and/or invite others in, reinforcing the view that these are 'camps' not fortresses. Nevertheless, given the research context – young Vietnamese early-career professionals with sub-optimal L2 in the UK – it is surprising just how little they report feeling 'Vietnamese' or 'Asian'. Similarly, there is evidence that some participants felt and experienced 'Other' during certain encounters but, again, this is remarkably limited. VietSoc was much better organised in Leeds than in York and the Vietnamese student population in Leeds was better resourced and established too, but there was no real evidence suggesting that the York participants L2 learning and/or interaction experiences were qualitatively different to the Leeds participants.

### **7.2.6 Individual autonomy in interactions**

Findings from focus groups (5.4.3) and from the diary (4.2.2) suggest there are few participants who escaped the general trends of L2 social interactions of the whole group. Section 6.6.5 shows that several individuals seek to exercise control over their social interactions. They do this with varying degrees of success and with various objectives in mind and by adopting various strategies. 'Power', identity, the strength of socio-linguistic ties and obstacles to L2 learning are experienced differentially.



Similarly, for each key finding there can be different interpretations according to which theoretical viewpoint is being adopted. For example, the disproportionately high level of interaction with other non-native speakers (see 4.3.8) accords with all three theories. Norton would view this as a tendency to avoid interactions with native speakers which would position the Vietnamese as underdogs in an encounter defined by asymmetrical power relations. Giles and Byrne's (1982) Intergroup Model would see this as a product of the dynamism that exists between a subordinate group (Vietnamese/NNS) and a dominant group (British/NS). Finally, Barna (1998) might interpret it as evidence of participants seeking to minimise or avoid altogether the effects of one or more obstacles to communicative competence.

### **7.3 Implications and suggestions**

#### **7.3.1 Suggestions for Vietnamese students**

There are four suggestions for Vietnamese students who would like to pursue a postgraduate degree in the UK or in an English – speaking country.

##### **7.3.1.1 Native English – speaking environment is not a ‘golden opportunity’ to improve oral proficiency as many believe**

Prospective Vietnamese students to a UK university should be aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘golden opportunity’ to practice English in the UK (see 5.2.1.1). They should understand that physically being in the UK does not mean that they are automatically exposed to lots of opportunities to practice English (see 4.2.1.1). Further, even if they are this will not automatically lead to an improvement in their English proficiency or speaking skills (see 5.5). After 6 months in the UK most participants remained unhappy with the opportunities to speak English that they had. Norton (2000) describes L2 learners as ‘investors’ who have expectations commensurate with their investment. This faulty assumption caused tangible disappointment and frustration (see 5.5.4). Norton believes that if investors do not get what they expect from their investment, they will stop investing. This was not universally so – individuals respond differently to setbacks – but withdrawals from interactions were observed in the cases of Luyen, Sang and Bac (see 5.3.2.1). Even though it was not proven statistically, the focus group data suggests that participants with the highest expectations experienced the greatest level of disappointment when

those expectations were not realised e.g. Mai (see 5.5.1). Prospective Vietnamese students need to be more realistic in terms of their expected outcomes and ‘vision’ of what life in the UK will be like.

### **7.3.1.2 Vietnamese students need to be active in communication interactions**

The second implication flows from that above. Prospective Vietnamese students must have a more realistic awareness of the actual L2-practicing opportunities that exist in the UK, and should be more active in their daily communication. Ha and Ly reported insufficient support from their university to be able to socialise more (see 5.2.2.1). Mai and Luyen felt unhappy with the British peoples’ apparent lack of interest in them and they expected a more hospitable host (see 5.3.2.1). These realisations clearly affected these participants, because they were amongst those with the lowest total hours of interactions (see 4.2.1). Their passivity was therefore not helpful. Instead of looking for external support from the host (here meaning the University and the British people) Hoa and An were proactive and initiated opportunities to practice English (see 5.4.3). Therefore, it is suggested that prospective students should be prepared to be more active in their communication interactions at university or elsewhere. In addition, Vietnamese participants should more readily accept responsibility for their own communication experiences in the UK.

### **7.3.1.3 Vietnamese students should better prepared for differences**

This suggestion is based on accounts from Sang, Thao and Mai (see 5.3.2). Sang reported that he had fairly extensive prior encounters with western people and cultures (through English language training and working in Vietnam), so he did not experience any ‘cultural shocks’ as such. However, it was still not easy to accept differences (cultural, values, etc.) from interlocutors. Thao and Mai found it impossible to understand and tolerate the cultural differences which were observed in the behaviours of Western students. Therefore, prospective students should try to see things from a non-judgemental perspective whilst studying abroad. This attitude will enable them to access more interactions, and be active participants in them.

#### **7.3.1.4 Vietnamese students should ensure their English proficiency is adequate before coming to the UK**

To be accepted at a UK university, all participants must have achieved a required level of English proficiency. However, passing the IELTS or TOEFL tests does not guarantee that they will not have any problems with the English language. Variations in the British accent, the speed at which NS talk and participants' own limited vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation are two main problems that participants reported in their communication (see 5.3.1). Bac and Thao also felt that their weaker language proficiency caused them to lose several academic debates (also 5.3.1). In daily conversations, although the participants' lack of English language proficiency was a source of frustration, it was only rarely viewed as a *major* obstacle except for those who already had one or more of the problems listed in 5.3.2. In these circumstances, limited English proficiency represented an additional burden. This is interesting also because it suggests a social model of SLA, in which communicative competence is perceived not as the product of individuals' own abilities, but rather the way he/she is viewed and treated and supported in the external environment.

### **7.3.2 Suggestions for Vietnamese and British educators**

#### **7.3.2.1. Better Institutional Support**

This suggestion is based on the accounts provided by some participants in 5.2.2.2 regarding the inadequacy of their university's support in terms of creating appropriate socialising opportunities for international students. Some participants reported that many events centred around alcohol consumption and were culturally-sensitive. They were therefore considered unsuitable and uninteresting by Vietnamese students. British universities – and their student bodies - should take into account the nature of socialising events for international students. For Vietnamese educators and those who are providing services for prospective students it may be useful to provide some kind of orientation to Vietnamese students *before* they leave Vietnam so that they acquire a better understanding of British culture, customs and practice. Currently, UK universities do organise orientation courses for international students before the start of term but these events often involve considerable time and expense and so are not easily affordable to Vietnamese students. It is suggested that UK universities link up with business partners in Vietnam to organise orientation courses in Vietnam which can be more easily accessed by Vietnamese students.

### 7.3.3 Implications for research on identity

Norton (2000) and other SLA researchers describe identity as a ‘fluid’ concept which is problematic to define and classify (see 2.3.1). The research confirms that identity is a difficult concept to work with. The first problem is that it is context –sensitive which means different contexts will foreground different identities. In fact, there are no two identical contexts (Block, 2003) which means *all* research on identity is contextually different and susceptible to generating unique results that are hard to generalise. It also means it is difficult for novice researchers on identity to incorporate results from other research into their own.

Even though a limited relationship between Identity and communicative competence has been established (see 2.5), findings in this research suggest a possibly weaker relationship between identities and communicative competence than it is emphasised in the literature. Evidence for this weaker relationship is found in the individual variation in their L2 communication experience (see 5.4.3 and 6.6.5). One possible explanation for this is that unlike other research on identity, my participants were not immigrants. They were students with middle-class backgrounds. Therefore, the power relations that Norton suggests as the key factor in understanding the identity of her immigrant participants, were less relevant in Vietnamese students whose social roles were already established. Although clearly ‘better-off’ than poor immigrants facing uncertain futures, my Vietnamese participants still had to struggle and negotiate. On this, at least, my research correlates with Norton’s: learning is a site of struggle.

### 7.3.4 Implication for methodology in research on identity

In terms of methodology, mixed methods are relatively uncommon in identity/SLA research. Most research on identity is based on qualitative methods (Chapter 3-Methodology). One possible scepticism over the use of quantitative methods in identity/SLA research is how can exact numbers be used to measure the ‘fluid’ concept of identity? Communicative competence however has been quantifiably measured by Macintyre and Charos (1996). Therefore, the research is an attempt to further test the workability of quantitative methods. Without the help of quantitative methods, the research could have not reached several interesting findings relevant to SLA research. In addition, the triangulation process between qualitative and

quantitative data (see Chapter 6) can be considered an effective means of testing the validity and reliability of the data. Therefore mixed methods are recommended for other future SLA research on identity.

## **7.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

### **7.4.1 Limitations of the study**

The first limitation of the research is the small sample size (14 participants in the main study). Chapter 3 justified the choice of a small sample size in order to enable an in-depth analysis of each participant over a period of 3 months. This suits the purpose for collection of data through self-completed diaries and focus group interviews on a regular basis. However, the small sample size also means that any quantitative tests can not be generalised. Any results, however, are still relevant in terms of explaining phenomena within the actual sample (Field, 2006). Even so, the small sample size made it impossible to conduct extensive inferential statistical tests which could have revealed more about the relationships between social roles, interactions and communicative competence (see Appendices I and J). Also explained in Chapter 3 – Methodology, participants took part in the research on a voluntary basis. However, they had to be committed to keep a daily diary. In addition, they were required to attend regular focus groups over a three-month period. As a novice researcher, I was more comfortable with handling smaller sample size during a process of three months.

The second limitation of the research is that the process of recruiting Vietnamese participants was conducted through the Vietnamese societies in two different cities in North of England. Due to limited resources, the researcher could not collect data from other locations (e.g. the South of England, Scotland or Wales, for example). The two chosen locations were within reasonable travelling distance of my home. It may be possible that the researcher's own resource limitations resulted in a sample comprising of participants who were not necessarily representative of the wider Vietnamese student population in the UK.

The third limitation of the research was that it was largely conducted by one researcher – so it can not avoid personal subjectivity. However, I overcame this to my best ability by recruiting a volunteer independent Vietnamese research student to

conduct a parallel exercise after which we compared results. It is, of course, possible to argue that it would have been better to employ a professional reader/analyst in the process.

#### **7.4.2 Suggestions for further research**

Research on SLA and identity should expand to embrace more contexts, more identities, more (and different) groups of L2 learners and different TL speakers. Also there should be more comparative research in the future between Vietnamese students in different courses (undergraduate, MA and PhD) in different locations in the UK; preferably across the UK. The aim should be to capture and understand the experiences of students with different backgrounds, ages, and lengths of stay in the UK, etc. which may be interesting variables with which to measure the relationship between their identity and communicative competence. Also future research could look at Vietnamese participants (both students and immigrants) in different English speaking contexts (Australia, Canada, America) to establish the dynamism between the main groups and subordinate groups; and to explore the importance of ‘stumbling blocks’ in communication.

In terms of methodology, more time-series research adopting mixed methods with a larger sample size is suggested. This will be difficult to manage especially with qualitative data, but quantifiable data may make it possible to explore the relationship between identity and communicative competence more systematically. Methodologically it may be a good idea to divide this research into two components, each using either qualitative methods or quantitative methods, but each featuring an appropriate (stratified) random sample of participants. Findings can be compared and contrasted to see which methods yield what kind of findings and which method is most efficient in answering the research questions.

To sum up, the findings of the research suggest that identity of L2 learners can help make sense of their communicative competence, though individual perspective should be taken into account. The interplay of power relations and social roles seem as important among Vietnamese, young, intellectual, middle-class students as the working class immigrants, as discussed in the literature. It is also suggested in this

research that identity is a context sensitive concept. Therefore, I advocate Block's (2003) call for widening the context in the field of identity to develop a better understanding of this concept and the link between identity (of L2 learners) and their language learning process.

## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment letter for Pilot study (translation from Vietnamese)**

Dear Vietnamese students,

My name is Tong Tuyet Dung, a PhD student in the department of Educational Studies University of York. I would like to invite you to a focus group of 6-8 students. It will be an informal discussion about your experience as an English speaking learner in the UK. The time and place are at your convenience but I am suggesting the last week of .... (May 2008). The session is expected to last within an hour but you can leave early if you wish.

Your ideas are very valuable, please do come along.

Please reply to:

Tong Tuyet Dung (07847572875)

Email: [tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk)

The Department of Educational Studies

University of York

Thank you and look forward to hearing from you soon.



## Appendix B

### Interview schedule for pilot focus group 1

1. How do you describe your experience of practicing English speaking skills in the UK?
2. Please tell me more about it ...
3. How often do you speak English?
  - When and where?
  - With whom?
4. How much do you think such interactions help you improve your speaking skill?
5. How do you feel when you speak English with: native speakers ?  
non native speakers?
6. In which situation or with whom do you feel most comfortable/uncomfortable speaking English? Why?
7. Do you think your English speaking skills have been improved? Why (not)?
8. What are the problems (advantages)?

- END-

## Appendix C

### Guidance for Diary Completion

I would like to know:

- how long you speak English per day (in total estimation)
- who you speak it with and if they are native or non-native speakers
- the type of interactions you had
- your overall rating of each day's experience of speaking English
- if you have any comments or anything you think it is important for me to know, Please put it down in "notes" column.

Detailed guidance

#### **Column 1: How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?**

Please tick the box that best describes how many hours in total you spent speaking English on this day.

#### **Column 2: Which of the following *best* describes who you spoke English with today?**

Please tick as many boxes as apply. Against those categories that you have ticked, please indicate whether they were native English speakers (N) or non-native English speakers (NN). If you are unsure whether someone is a native speaker or not, please circle (DN) for Don't Know. Again, please circle as many as apply. Native speakers are defined as those whose first language is English.

#### **Column 3: When speaking English, which 'types' of interactions have you experienced today?**

Please tick as many boxes as apply.

- small talk: is a short, polite and trivial conversation with a stranger or relative stranger
- simple transactions and negotiations: such as when shopping or ordering food in a café and when you have an 'objective' or desired outcome.

- Complex transactions and negotiations: such as when you are debating or arguing or explaining complex matters
- Academic discussion and presentation: typically associated with university/classrooms.
- Socialising: Forming and maintaining friendships and acquaintances.
- Learning English: self - explanatory.

**Column 4: How do you rate your experience today in general?**

Please indicate whether your experience for the whole day was positive or negative or in-between. The criteria you adopt for this assessment is up to you but *may* include:

- whether you felt confident to start speaking
- whether you felt listened to
- whether your views were respected
- whether you were adequately understood
- if you had any objectives, whether these were achieved
- whether your use of the English language was helpfully or unhelpfully criticised/corrected

The above is not an exhaustive list.

Use whatever criteria you choose, and feel free to use more than one.

You may find that a single encounter was a mixture of positive and negative experiences: for example, you may have felt you were understood, but your views not treated seriously. There is no formula for determining what mixture of good and bad leads an individual encounter to be judged positive or negative.

Similarly, there is no formula for determining whether 4 ‘very positive’ individual experiences offsets two ‘negative’ experiences elsewhere to produce an overall ‘positive’ rating for the day!

**Please use your judgment in both instances – there is no right or wrong answer. I will talk to you about your answers to these questions at the monthly meeting.**

At the end of the week, you are asked to indicate which social roles you feel you have occupied. A list of roles is provided. It is not an exhaustive list. Please feel free to add additional roles. You are asked to rank them in order of those you feel you have occupied the most.

I'm not simply interested in those roles that you choose for yourself. I'm also interested in roles that you think have been imposed upon you. They might be either wanted or unwanted. The interviewer will want to explore these issues with you when you meet.

-END-

(Note: This guidance is also available in Vietnamese language to offer participants of the research)

## Appendix D

### Interview schedule for pilot focus group 2

#### A. General background:

1. Can you all please briefly introduce yourself ?

#### B. Participants' evaluation of their speaking skill:

2. How much are you happy with your current speaking skill?

Why (not)?

What are the difficulties/problems (if any)?

What are the advantages (if any)?

#### C. Participants identity:

3. In which situation/conditions you think your speaking skill were improved most?

Why do you think so?

#### D. Opportunities to practice speaking English:

4 How do you evaluate the opportunities of practicing speaking English in the UK?

How much have you taken advantage of being in the UK to practice speaking English?

#### E. Participants' views of ideal ways to improve speaking skill:

5. What advice would you give to a Vietnamese who is planning to come over here or just arrives in order to help him/her improve speaking skill?

-END-

## **Appendix E**

### **Recruitment letter for main study (translation from Vietnamese language)**

Dear Vietnamese students,

My name is Tong Tuyet Dung, a PhD student in the department of Educational Studies University of York. I would like to invite you to take part in the research about the experience of Vietnamese students in improving English speaking skill in the UK.

The study involves daily diary completion in three months. I have designed a diary template which can be completed less than 5 minutes per day. I will travel to Leeds to meet you every 4 weeks to collect diary and hold an informal group discussion. Each discussion is expected to last within 1 hour but you can leave early as you wish. Time and place of meeting will be at your convenience.

I can ensure that none informants or information provided will be identified or identifiable.

Your participation in my research is very valuable.

Please reply to:

Tong Tuyet Dung (07847572875)

Email: [tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk)

The Department of Educational Studies

University of York

Thank you and look forward to hearing from you soon.

## Appendix F

### Consent Form

I agree to participate in the research about the experience of Vietnamese student in improving their speaking skill in the UK by Tong Tuyet Dung, PhD student in the Department of Educational Studies, University of York.

I understand that I can withdraw at anytime during the process of research.

I also understand that information disclosed by myself in the diary and interviews may be used in Tong Tuyet Dung's publications and presentations deriving from the research.

I hereby renounce any claim to copyright as the author of the information.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### Diary Template for Pilot Study

**Week 1:** commencing (dd/mm/2009)

	How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?	Which of the following <b>best</b> describes who you spoke English with today?  <i>(circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers)</i>	When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today?  <i>(tick as many as apply)</i>	How do you rate your experience <b>today</b> in general?	Note
<b>MON</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>TUE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative	



	less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>WED</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive <input type="checkbox"/> positive <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative <input type="checkbox"/> negative <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>THUR</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive <input type="checkbox"/> positive <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative <input type="checkbox"/> negative <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

	<input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)		
<b>FRI</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>SAT</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

		<input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)		
<b>SUN</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week?	
Please rank them, putting '1' alongside the role that most applies, '2' alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Man	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent
<input type="checkbox"/> Woman	<input type="checkbox"/> Employee
<input type="checkbox"/> Student	<input type="checkbox"/> Sexual
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Young Person
<input type="checkbox"/> Mature Person	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)
<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	-----
-----	

Thank you for completing the diary

-END-

## **Appendix H**

### **Diary Template for Main Study**

#### **Diary**

Name:

Thank you very much for agreeing to keep this diary

If you have any questions, please contact me:

Tong Tuyet Dung  
[tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk) or

07847 572 875 (just send me a text, I will phone you back) or

add my yahoo messenger name: tongtuyetdung

Thanks again

Dung Tong

Week:                    commencing (                    /                    /2009)

	How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?	Which of the following <b>best</b> describes who you spoke English with today?  <i>(circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers)</i>	When speaking English, which 'types' of interactions have you experienced today?  <i>(tick as many as apply)</i>	How do you rate your experience of speaking English <b>today</b> in general?	Please describe here briefly the reason why you have chosen the rating scales in the column on the left
<b>M O N</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses    N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty        N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)  -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Other (please indicate) -----	

<p><b>T U E</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<b>W E D</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines sses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Othesr (please indicate) -----	

<b>T H U R</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busine sses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)  -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Others (please indicate)  -----	



<p><b>F R I</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<p><b>S A T</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<b>S U N</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busineses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Others (please indicate) -----	

Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week?

Please rank them, putting '1' alongside the role that most applies, '2' alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.

<input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese
<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature Person
<input type="checkbox"/> Sexual	<input type="checkbox"/> Employee	<input type="checkbox"/> Student
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Young Person	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate) .....		

Is there anything you think important this week to let me know, please make a note here and I will discuss with you in details when we meet.

Thank you for completing the diary

-END-

## Appendix I

### Test of correlations

This is an attempt to explore the relationship between social roles, social interactions and (self-perception of) communicative competence is presented in three sections: (1) social roles and social interactions; (2) social roles and communicative competence; (3) social interactions and communicative competence. The tables report the Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients for a range of variables and their significance. Pearson's  $r$  is a parametric test suitable for normally distributed data (Field, 2007). Most of the variables were normally distributed. However, the sample size is sub-optimal (14), therefore the following analysis is presented here as a 'flawed experiment'.

#### 1. Understanding the links between social roles and interactions

##### 1.1 Social roles and 'types' of interlocutors

**Table 1: Correlations between social roles and interlocutors: overall results**

Interlocutors	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Students	.265	-.288	-.231	-.319	-.317	-.104	.242
	.360	.318	.427	.266	.269	.722	.404
University/academic staff	.551*	-.389	-.179	-.300	-.156	-.168	.401
	.041	.169	.541	.298	.593	.565	.155
Shops/banks/business	.550*	-.073	.295	-.319	.330	.205	.001
	.041	.805	.306	.266	.249	.481	.999
Government officials	.158	.307	.027	-.129	.368	-.143	-.230
	.588	.285	.927	.660	.196	.625	.429
Health workers	.650*	-.184	.533*	.099	.149	.406	-.280
	.012	.530	.050	.735	.611	.149	.332
Friends	.351	-.298	.166	.119	.172	.167	-.088
	.218	.300	.571	.684	.557	.568	.766
Strangers	.226	.495	-.102	-.239	.446	-.322	-.182
	.438	.072	.727	.411	.110	.261	.534
Colleagues	-.070	-.133	-.518	.580*	.015	.135	-.145
	.812	.650	.058	.030	.961	.645	.622
Native interlocutors	.377	-.166	.051	-.055	.358	.196	-.044
	.184	.571	.863	.852	.209	.502	.880
Non-native interlocutors	.693**	-.212	-.070	-.222	-.301	-.131	.057
	.006	.466	.812	.447	.296	.654	.846

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The two highest ranked social roles are 'Friend' and 'Student' (see 4.6). However, Table 1 shows that 'Friend' correlates with one type of interlocutor only: a medium positive correlation with 'Healthworkers' ( $r=.533$ ). 'Student' did not correlate with any interlocutors. In other words, the two most frequently reported social roles appear to be unrelated to whom participants spoke with. Instead, 'Female' seems to have the most (significant and positive) correlations. The overall three month coefficients show that feeling 'Female' is positively correlated with four types of interlocutors: 'University/academic staff' ( $r=.551$ ); 'Shop/bank/business staff' ( $r=.550$ ); 'Health workers' ( $r=.650$ ); 'Non-native interlocutors' ( $r=.693$ ).

'Male', 'Student', 'Vietnamese', 'Asian' did not correlate with any interlocutor types. This is surprising as they are all fixed and/or key social roles indicating participants' gender ('Male'), their reasons for being in the UK ('Student'), their ethnicity and nationality ('Vietnamese' and 'Asian').

No social roles correlated with the following types of interlocutors: 'Native interlocutors', 'Friends', 'Government officials' and 'Students'. This is interesting because daily interactions would almost certainly have exposed Vietnamese students to all of the above types of interlocutors. The results suggest that social roles were not shaping these interactions. In other words, both 'common' encounters (with 'Students', 'Friends' and 'Native interlocutors') and less common encounters ('Government Officials') evidence no relationship with social roles. This suggests that the social roles participants occupied did not influence *who* the participants spoke to and that social roles are largely independent from and insensitive to encounters – even commonplace ones. The only exception is observed in the positive correlation between social role of 'Employee' with 'Colleagues'.

## 1.2 Social roles and types of interactions

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients for social roles and six types of interactions: 'small talk'; 'simple transactions'; 'complex transactions'; 'academic discussion and presentation'; 'socializing' and 'learning English'.

**Table 2: Correlations between social roles and types of interactions in three months**

Types of interactions	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Small talks	.118	.030	.099	-.208	.265	.116	.063
	.689	.918	.735	.475	.359	.692	.832
Simple transactions	.422	.167	.222	-.360	.542*	-.055	-.026
	.133	.569	.446	.207	.045	.852	.929
Complex transaction	.312	.413	-.460	-.344	.097	-.600*	-.044
	.278	.142	.098	.228	.741	.023	.882
Academic discussions and presentation	.268	-.350	.514	-.126	.284	.577*	.113
	.355	.220	.060	.669	.324	.031	.702
Socialising	.387	-.331	.045	.181	-.406	.091	-.198
	.171	.248	.878	.535	.150	.756	.498
Learning English	-.217	0.67	-.073	-.461	-.174	-.429	.297
	.476	.828	.813	.113	.570	.143	.324

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regarding the two highest ranked social roles ('Friend' and 'Student'), 'Friend' did not correlate with any interaction types, whilst 'Student' is positively correlated with 'Academic discussion and presentation' ( $r=.577$ ) and negatively correlated with 'complex transactions' ( $r=-.600$ ). Both types of interactions can be conceived as requiring a fairly high level of engagement with the L2. One possible explanation why academic discussions/presentations correlated positively with 'Student' whilst complex transactions did so negatively may be because the topics of conversation in the 'complex transactions' category transcended purely academic matters – participants were not necessarily occupying the social role of student whilst engaging in them.

Unlike the social role of 'Vietnamese' is associated with the feeling of being 'other'. Table 2 shows that 'Vietnamese' positively correlates with 'simple transactions' ( $r=.542$ ): participants feel more Vietnamese when engaged in undemanding, day-to-day functional dialogues. It is possible that a combination of the simplistic nature of these encounters and occasional mishaps in making themselves understood acted as a reminder of the participants' status as 'other' – that they had yet achieved full membership of the TL linguistic community.

However, Vietnamese-ness did not correlate with ‘Small talk’ which, like simple transactions, may also be thought of as brief and relatively undemanding encounters. However, small talk is also relatively directionless and unlike simple transactions is not associated with the pursuit of a particular outcome (such as the purchase of a train ticket) – less is at stake and success or failure is more difficult to gauge. Under these circumstances the status of ‘other’ is less pronounced.

### 1.3 Social roles and hours of interactions

**Table 3: Correlations between Social Roles, total hours of interactions, and the range of interlocutors**

Interactions	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Total hours	.802**	-.026	-.136	-.294	-.329	-.257	-.216
	.001	.929	.643	.308	.251	.375	.459
Range of interlocutors	.467	-.043	.300	-.037	.621*	.386	.024
	.092	.883	.297	.901	.018	.173	.934

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

‘Female’ is strongly and positively correlated with the total hours of interactions. This can possibly be explained by the fact that Mi and Chau (who reported the highest number of hours of speaking English) are female. In addition, they were able to regularly access English-speaking opportunities via their boyfriends – a specific type of interaction where their ‘femaleness’ is likely to be foregrounded.

### 1.4 Social roles and range of interlocutors

Table 3 shows that the social role of ‘Vietnamese’ is positively correlated with the range of interlocutors ( $r=.621$ ): the more types of interlocutors participants interacted with (in the TL), the more Vietnamese they felt. This can be explained by the fact that the majority (60%) of interlocutors were friends and students (see 4.3). It may therefore have been a ‘luxury’ for participants to have interactions with other groups of people. Their exposure to different groups (outside university life) may have ‘reminded’ participants more about their national and ethnic origins by once more

foregrounding physical and cultural differences which may be felt less acutely in a multi-cultural university settings.

Interactions with non-Vietnamese interlocutors was not, by itself, sufficient to generate overwhelming feelings of Vietnamese-ness – if they were then given the frequency of contact with non-Vietnamese interlocutors we would expect to see Vietnamese-ness correlate highly with more types of interactions and more types of interlocutors. Different encounters foreground different social identities. However, on balance, it appears reasonable to conclude that *at an aggregated level* extensive contact with non-Vietnamese interlocutors is related to national identity and that one underlying dynamic is the concept of ‘other’.

#### 1.5. Summary of the links between social roles and interactions

The most obvious conclusion is that the two most frequently reported social roles – ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ - actually correlated with very few types of interlocutors and interactions. Does this mean that social roles have little utility in terms of explaining social interaction? Actually, it is possible to detect some logical patterning. For example, the social role of ‘Employee’ correlated with the interlocutor type ‘Colleague’; and ‘Student’ correlated with ‘Academic discussion’. These seem to support Norton’s belief that social roles help impose the ‘right to be heard’ and therefore access to more interactions. However, both these relationships make sense given their contexts – there is nothing particularly odd about feeling like a student whilst participating in classroom discussions and there is nothing odd about feeling like an employee when talking to work colleagues. Other correlations are more puzzling. For example, ‘Friend’ is positively correlated with interlocutor-type ‘Healthworkers’ and ‘Female’ with ‘University/academic staff’, ‘shop/bank staff’, ‘healthworkers’ and ‘non-native speakers’. The diary was a relatively blunt mechanism for collecting data and participants were not expected to record the identities/roles they felt/occupied during every single interaction they had. Some correlations – and that of ‘Friend’ and ‘Healthworker’ is a prime candidate - may therefore be statistical fictions. However, the correlations for ‘Female’ may be more or less rooted in reality. Females are more likely than males to attend health centers and may spend more time shopping. The key observation, however, is that social roles



appear to possess limited and ambiguous utility as a lens through which to understand interaction in the target language.

## 2. Understanding the link between social roles and self-perception of communicative competence

Social roles appear to offer only partial explanations of the types of interactions that participants accessed. But do the roles that people occupy and identities they express influence more clearly how participants *benefit* from interactions *vis-à-vis* progress in L2 learning? The variable ‘Self-perception of communicative competence’ represents participants’ own rating of their L2 speaking experiences. Participants were asked to provide a daily summative rating ranging from ‘very positive to very negative’.

**Table 4: Social roles and self-perceptions of communicative competence over three months**

Self-perception communicative competence	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
	.450	-	-.203	-.305	.186	-.164	.284
	.106	.035	.485	.289	.323	.576	.325
		.906					

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The social role of Female has a weak correlation ( $r=.450$ ) with the self-perception of communicative competence. As mentioned in the introduction, the analysis only includes medium and strong correlations at significant level. Therefore, the weak correlation between Female and self-perception of communicative competence is not included. In general, there is no correlation between social roles and the communicative competence evaluated by the participants. This suggests that social roles seem not to have a relation with how participant felt about their experience of speaking English.

Perhaps communicative competence is instead related to who participants spoke to; the type/purpose/context of interactions; the variety (range) of interlocutors and/or the number of hours spent speaking English. Correlations tests were run for 10 categories

of interlocutors; 6 types of interactions; hours spent speaking English and range of interlocutors. Table 5 below shows significant medium and strong correlations only (those not included in the table were weak correlations).

**Table 5: Correlations between social interactions and self - perception of communicative competence over three months**

Self-perception communicative competence	Social interactions			
	Uni/academic staff	Stranger	Native speakers	Small talk
	.820**	.553*	.661*	.603*
	.000	.040	.010	.022

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows that three types of interlocutors (‘university/academic staff’, ‘stranger’ and ‘native speakers’) and one type of interaction (‘small talk’) correlate with self - perception of communicative competence ( $r=.820$ ;  $r=.533$ ;  $r=.661$ ;  $r=.603$  respectively).

The number of hours spent speaking English and exposure to a wide(r) range of interlocutors seems to be unrelated to positive or negative feelings regarding L2 competency. Many participants anticipated that studying abroad would provide them with considerable opportunities to speak English but this finding demonstrated that this was not necessarily the case. But participants also felt that increased usage of the English language would increase their proficiency. The belief that there is a relationship between speaking more of the TL and becoming better at speaking/understanding it is pervasive across most L2 acquisition theories. ‘Self-perception of communicative competence’ is a ‘record’ or impression of how participants *felt* about their performances during L2 interactions rather than an objective measure of L2 proficiency. Nevertheless, the absence of a relationship between ‘hours spent speaking English’ and ‘Self-perception of communicative

competence' is surprising: purely *quantitative* measures of L2 engagement do not explain how participants feel about their L2 proficiency.

In terms of *who* participants spoke to, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that 'native speakers' correlated positively with self-perception of communicative competence – the ability to interact effectively with native speakers is the 'litmus test' of L2 competence and participants' L2 strengths and weaknesses are likely to be exposed and reflected upon during/after these encounters. Self-perception of communicative competence did not correlate with 'Academic discussion and presentations' but did correlate with 'University/Academic Staff'. Again, it is possible to argue that these encounters are fairly intellectually and linguistically demanding and are likely to stand out as a 'marker' of L2 proficiency. Encounters with 'Strangers' are highly likely to take the form of small talk or simple transactions, and the former correlates positively with self-perceptions of communicative competence – the more small talk engaged in, the more positive people feel about their L2 experience and vice versa. Vietnamese participants therefore appear to also attach importance to the ability to function in relatively routine, undemanding, day-to-day and informal conversations and not just in intellectually and linguistically demanding ones.

It is also worth observing that a high percentage of university/academic staff and strangers are likely to also be native speakers (see 4.3). This reinforces the view that interactions with native speakers are the litmus test. Evidence from the focus groups suggests that participants believed interactions with university/academic staff and native speakers are most likely to benefit their L2 progress, but that speaking English with non-native speakers was regarded as an inferior learning opportunity.

So *who* participants spoke English to and certain *qualitative* aspects of interactions appear to influence self-perceptions of L2 competence more than simply accruing L2 hours. In terms of L2 theory this is interesting. Focus group data appeared to support Barna (1998)'s arguments concerning 'shock' and anxiety associated with conversing with native speakers – Vietnamese participants felt much more comfortable interacting with non-native speakers with whom they believed they shared certain linguistic difficulties and cultural reference points. Statistical analysis, however, evidences a positive relationship between self-perceptions of L2 competence and NS

interactions: the more participants spoke to native speakers the more positive they felt about the L2; the less they spoke to native speakers the less positive they felt about the L2. Focus group testimonies and Barna's framework suppose a negative relationship – increased interactions with native speakers should expose the participants to higher levels of potentially debilitating stress (and vice versa). One possible explanation for this apparent dissonance is that participants continued to experience anxiety when talking to native speakers but learned to manage its impact on their L2 competence. Indeed, being able to manage any anxiety successfully would provide a further boost to participant's own evaluations of their L2 performance. Barna's framework may still be accurate but clearly 'shock' is experienced differentially and 'managed' by L2 learners.

The positive correlation between native speakers and self-perception of communicative competence appears to contradict Norton's theory of power relations regarding interactions between L2 learners and native speakers. Norton claims L2 learners experience a 'catch 22' where they both have to perform for native speakers and submit to their judgment. Also, according to Norton, native speakers acquire ambivalent attitudes towards L2 learners and may not consider them 'worthy to speak' or 'worthy to listen'. Interactions between native speakers and L2 learners will therefore develop according to asymmetrical distributions of power – L2 learners are 'underdogs', seeking resources from native speakers such as finance, friendship or understanding. Increased exposure to native speakers might therefore be expected to correlate negatively with perceptions of L2 communicative competence. Exceptions might include those interactions that do not feature strong asymmetries of power. Interactions with academic staff almost certainly feature built-in multiple asymmetries of power and cannot easily be explained. However, short, purposeless and undemanding small talk with native-speaking strangers are less likely to pivot around the concept of power.

According to Giles and Byrne (1982) one of the conditions for a subordinate group to achieve native-like language proficiency is when group-identification is weak – group members are therefore more likely to move out of their main language 'camp' and interact with native speakers. The intergroup model posits that interactions with native speakers can contribute to L2 proficiency if, *inter alia*, cultural differences are

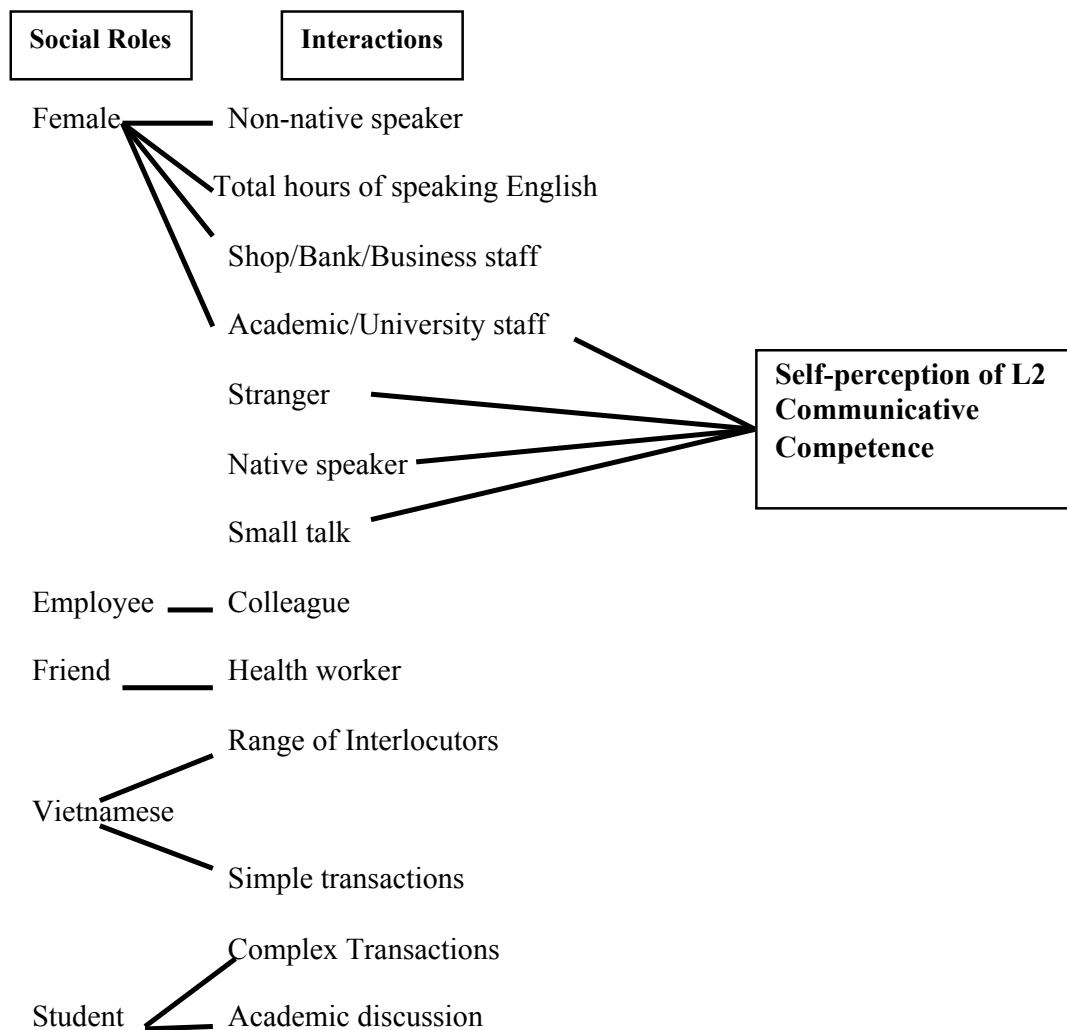
minimised thus creating spaces in which the L2 learner does not feel ‘other’. Section 2 of this appendix showed how ‘Vietnamese’ is correlated with ‘simple transactions’ (and ‘range of interlocutors’) and there is some evidence from the focus groups that suggest that Vietnamese participants regularly felt ‘other’ during interactions with native speakers. One should therefore expect to see a negative correlation between interactions with native speakers and perceptions of communicative competence. The positive correlation can be interpreted to mean that: intergroup model is faulty (‘other’ is less influential); participants are exaggerating their experience of ‘other’; ‘other’ is not a universal feature of all encounters with native speakers; or Vietnamese participants were not a typical subordinate group. It seems reasonable, however, to conclude that the importance of ‘other’ will vary according to the conduct, content and context of interactions.

### **3. Summary of relationship between social roles, social interactions and self-perception of communicative competence**

Figure 1, below, summarises all significant correlations (either medium or strong ). Out of a total of 11 social roles 5 correlate with certain dimensions/types of social interaction(s). The most influential social role is ‘Female’ (4 correlations) followed by ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Student’ (2 correlations each) and ‘Employee’ and ‘Friend’, (one correlation each).

There appears to be no *direct* relationship between any social role and self-perception of communicative competence and interaction with university/academic staff is the only social interaction that is both positively correlated with a social role (Female) *and* perceptions of communicative competence. As referred to above this may be because participants believed interactions with their supervisors/lecturers could help participants improve their speaking skill and because the nature of the encounters might constitute a litmus test. In addition focus group evidence shows that participants often felt supported in discussions with their supervisors. An, for example comments: “I met my supervisor today. He was really nice. I enjoyed his supervision”. However, there was no correlation between Male and ‘Academic staff’ - in fact, there was no correlations between Male and *any* social interaction variables (Tables 1, 2 and 3).

**Figure 1: Relationships between social roles, social interactions and L2 self-perception of communicative competence**



*\*(All correlation coefficients are positive, except the correlation between Student and Complex transaction which is negative)*

The previous section presented the correlations between social roles, social interactions and self-perception of communicative competence based on data for the entire three month case study. I want to see if particular several roles are less important *over time* in terms of influencing social interactions (hours, who, range of interlocutors, etc.). I have therefore provided a month-by-month breakdown. The data in the following tables differs slightly from that shown previously in that all correlation coefficients are shown regardless of the strength of the relationship or their

significance. This is to facilitate a temporal understanding of the importance of social roles: does their influence on certain aspects of participants' interaction experiences vary over time (and does the three-month data mask any particularly interesting relationships which might have occurred in individual months).

It is shown that the actual gender of participants is weakly and positively correlated with self-perception of communicative competence but is non-significant ('Female' was coded '2' while 'Male' was coded 1) - the positive coefficient means that female participants tend to rank their experience of speaking English more positively than males. So, both the 'feeling' of female-ness and actually being female generated roughly similar results. Table 6, below, also shows that the social role of 'Female' and female gender correlate with 'University/academic staff' ( $r=.551$  and  $r=.593$  respectively).

**Table 6: Correlations between interlocutors and Social roles (Female/Male) and Actual gender over three months**

Interlocutors	Social roles		Gender
	Female	Male	
Students	.265	-.288	.100
	.360	.318	.734
University/academic staff	.551*	-.389	.593*
	.041	.169	.025
Shops/banks/business	.550*	-.073	.154
	.041	.805	.600
Government officers	.158	.307	.021
	.588	.285	.942
Health workers	.650*	-.184	.346
	.012	.530	.226
Friends	.351	-.298	.555*
	.218	.300	.040
Strangers	.226	.495	-.019
	.438	.072	.949
Colleagues	-.070	-.133	.207
	.812	.650	.477
Native interlocutors	.377	-.166	.349
	.184	.571	.221
Non-native interlocutors	.693**	-.212	.390
	.006	.466	.168

In the focus groups Bac described how he was frustrated and distracted during conversations with his supervisor because he could not make himself understood properly and his supervisor struggled to understand Bac. Bac felt embarrassed and as a result he withdrew from the encounter. None of the females reported a similar experience (Bac's overall ranking of his L2 speaking experiences were significantly lower than the average). Therefore, although interactions with academic staff positively correlate with perceptions of communicative competence among females this is not the case for males.

Apart from 'University/academic staff', three other 'dimensions' of interactions (stranger, native speaker and small talk) are correlated with L2 competence/experience but none of these correlate with social roles. It appears that social roles are correlated only with a very limited set of social interaction 'dimensions' and that the influence of social roles does not generally feed through to contribute to self-perceptions of communicative competence. In other words, the social roles and identities that participants reported generally exercised little influence over key qualitative and quantitative measures of social interaction, and very few of these measures are related to L2 competence.

**Table 7: Correlation coefficients (and *significance* value) between Social Roles and who participants spoke English with each month and over three months.**

Interlocutor	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Student	M1	.250	-.006	-.211	-.291	-.040	.335
		.388	.984	.468	.313	.893	.242
	M2	.158	-.006	-.198	.002	.087	.469
		.590	.824	.497	.994	.766	.091
	M3	-.157	.173	-.336	-.141	.184	-.006
		.592	.555	.240	.630	.529	.984
University/ Academic staff	M1	.429	.073	-.322	-.156	-.099	.291
		.126	.804	.261	.593	.737	.452
	M2	.388	-.021	-.243	.048	.173	.396
		.171	.944	.403	.870	.554	.161
	M3	-.054	.341	-.126	.154	.388	.057
		.853	.233	.669	.599	.170	.847
Shop/bank /business	M1	.625*	.210	-.352	-.214	.055	.055
		.017	.471	.217	.462	.852	.852



	M2	.609*	.328	-.299	-.054	.219	.193
		.021	.252	.300	.855	.451	.508
	M3	.111	.199	-.158	.330	.337	.157
		.705	.494	.589	.250	.238	.592
<b>Government officers</b>	M1	.135	-.726**	.285	.371	-.557*	-.203
		.647	.003	.323	.191	.038	.486
	M2	.271	.283	-.247	-.083	.204	.061
		.348	.326	.394	.779	.485	.837
	M3	-.128	.093	-.157	.488	-.246	-.113
		.663	.753	.592	.077	.397	.700
<b>Health workers</b>	M1	.638*	.087	.017	-.212	.060	-.179
		.014	.768	.955	.466	.839	.541
	M2	-.075	.069	-.141	.165	-.129	.365
		.800	.815	.630	.572	.661	.199
	M3	-.021	.338	.575*	.212	.396	-.113
		.943	.237	.031	.467	.160	.700
<b>Friends</b>	M1	.427	.555*	.059	-.256	.371	-.106
		.128	.039	.841	.378	.192	.719
	M2	.751**	.424	-.038	.098	.513	.038
		.002	.131	.897	.740	.061	.898
	M3	.397	.134	.132	-.267	-.014	-.315
		.160	.647	.653	.355	.963	.273
<b>Strangers</b>	M1	.195	-.026	-.102	.447	-.260	.338
		.438	.931	.728	.109	.369	.238
	M2	.619*	.366	-.211	.310	.226	.155
		.018	.198	.469	.280	.436	.598
	M3	-.119	.085	-.220	.385	-.142	.052
		.685	.774	.449	.174	.629	.859
<b>Colleagues</b>	M1	.116	-.388	.334	.165	.079	-.044
		.693	.170	.244	.573	.789	.882
	M2	-.313	-.148	.735**	-.145	.136	-.128
		.275	.614	.003	.622	.644	.663
	M3	.017	-.629*	.345	-.264	.100	-.100
		.955	.016	.227	.361	.733	.735
<b>Native interlocutors</b>	M1	.527	-.058	.007	.279	.089	.318
		.053	.844	.982	.334	.763	.268
	M2	.510	.379	-.112	.094	.285	.278
		.063	.181	.702	.749	.324	.336
	M3	-.107	.131	-.143	.285	.351	.030
		.715	.656	.627	.323	.218	.919
<b>Non-native interlocutors</b>	M1	.367	.341	-.234	.514	.067	-.100
		.197	.233	.420	.060	.819	.735
	M2	.640*	.152	-.134	.001	.386	.322
		.014	.603	.648	.999	.172	.262
	M3	.460	.236	.032	-.317	-.099	-.269
		.098	.416	.912	.269	.736	.352

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 8: Correlations between Social Roles and types of interactions per each month and over three months**

Interactions	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Small talks	M1	.334	.105	.088	.032	.174	.205
		.242	.721	.767	.913	.551	.482
	M2	.296	.301	-.305	.432	.223	.495
		.305	.295	.289	.123	.443	.072
	M3	-.199	.121	-.156	.047	.077	.140
		.495	.681	.595	.873	.794	.633
Simple transactions	M1	.553*	.341	.087	.010	.161	.282
		.040	.233	.766	.972	.582	.329
	M2	.465	.131	-.482	.190	.120	.184
		.094	.654	.081	.516	.683	.530
	M3	.039	.089	-.281	.512	-.167	.131
		.894	.763	.330	.061	.568	.656
Complex transactions	M1	.256	-.265	-.160	.319	-.135	-.128
		.377	.360	.586	.226	.646	.664
	M2	.283	-.480	-.303	-.113	-.057	.171
		.327	.082	.292	.701	.846	.558
	M3	.411	-.449	-.262	.035	-.594*	-.153
		.144	.107	.366	.905	.025	.602
Academic discussion/presentations	M1	.198	.455	.046	.252	.542*	.007
		.498	.102	.876	.384	.045	.981
	M2	.364	.571*	-.059	.407	.529	.242
		.201	.033	.842	.149	.052	.405
	M3	-.083	.225	-.263	-.072	.396	.032
		.779	.438	.364	.808	.161	.914
Socialising	M1	.218	.258	-.244	.224	.162	-.119
		.455	.374	.401	.442	.581	.685
	M2	.423	.078	.266	-.243	.173	-.348
		.150	.800	.381	.424	.573	.244
	M3	.339	-.007	.233	-.564*	-.068	-.207
		.236	.982	.422	.036	.817	.478
Learning English	M1	-.479	.353	-.309	-.378	-.006	.179
		.098	.236	.304	.203	.986	.559
	M2	.120	-.150	-.266	-.356	.115	.024
		.684	.609	.358	.212	.696	.936
	M3	-.187	.014	-.107	-.204	-.499	-.077
		.522	.962	.717	.484	.609	.794

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 9: Correlations between Social Roles, total hours of interactions, range of interlocutors and their rating scores in three months.**

Interactions	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Total hours of interactions	M1	.631*	.060	-.063	-.091	-.122	-.312
		.016	.839	.831	.758	.678	.278
	M2	.684*	-.140	-.276	-.260	.006	-.114
		.007	.632	.340	.369	.986	.699
	M3	.829**	-.301	-.201	-.295	.367	-.235
		.000	.296	.491	.305	.197	.419
Range of interlocutors	M1	.385	.108	.074	.492	-.021	.154
		.174	.713	.802	.074	.943	.600
	M2	-.306	-.262	-.187	.461	-.610*	.498
		.288	.366	.521	.097	.021	.070
	M3	-.189	.082	.426	.197	.319	.068
		.518	.780	.129	.500	.267	.817
Overall rating of communicative competence	M1	.417	.121	-.119	.231	-.004	.312
		.138	.680	.686	.427	.989	.277
	M2	.362	-.005	-.314	.169	.097	.540*
		.203	.987	.274	.564	.742	.046
	M3	.284	-.178	-.243	.024	.059	.233
		.326	.543	.402	.936	.841	.423

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to Tables 7, 8 and 9, there is no clear pattern in the relation between social roles and interactions or communicative competence on a month-by-month basis. The importance of social roles *do* appear to vary monthly: ‘Female’, ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ generally correlated with fewer measures of interaction over the period of the study, whereas ‘Employee’, ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Asian’ increase (albeit very modestly). Secondly, the types of interactions that social roles are correlated with also differ from one month to another. The only exception is the constant correlation between ‘Female’ and ‘Total hours of interactions’, evidencing medium and strong coefficients throughout the three months.

## **Appendix J**

### **Proposed set of variables: Value Matcher/Value Taker and Opportunity Taker/Opportunity Maker**

Similar to Appendix I, the analysis and discussion in this Appendix are as part of the 'flawed experiment'. This is another attempt to explore the data collected. It is presented here for reference as an example of directions that I have tried through out the research process.

#### **1. Values**

Kenneth (1963) defines values as a more or less stable set of criteria that serve as guidance for a person on what may be considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Hofstede (2001) defines values in a cultural context and believes cultural values inform members of a culture what is 'good' and what is 'bad', what is 'right' and 'wrong' etc. Discussions in the focus groups suggested that values did, at times, guide the way in which participants behaved and made sense of and justified events.

##### **1.1 Value Matcher versus Value Taker**

Kenneth (1963) and Hofstede (2001) believe values are implicated in communicative behaviours. Such behaviours can be imagined as forming a continuum with two extremes: Value Taker and Value Matcher. Value Takers (VT) are those who readily accept other values and are more willing to adapt their own values or at least tolerant to experiencing alternatives. Value Matchers (VM) are those who hold on to their values and find it difficult to tolerate dissimilar ones and so tend to avoid.

Values are important in SLA because, according to Collier (2006:59), in order to communicate effectively in intercultural situations, participants have to be flexible and adjust their identities to establish a common ground with interlocutors:

*Intercultural competence occurs when the avowed identity matches the identity described. For example, if you avow the identity for an assertive,*

*out spoken U.S. American and your conversational partner avows himself or herself to be respectful, non-assertive Vietnamese, then each must ascribe the corresponding identity to the conversational partner. You must jointly negotiate what kind of relationship will be mutual satisfying. Some degree of adjustment and accommodation is usually necessary.*

The ‘degree of adjustment and accommodation’ that Collier (2006) refers to can crudely be measured by VM and VT. Accordingly, VMs are more conservative and VTs are more liberal in terms of compromising their values. If Collier’s suggestion is correct, VMs will be less successful than VTs in intercultural competence. In other words, VMs are less capable of communicating effectively in intercultural situations.

In order to test if Collier’s (2006) argument is right, there are a couple of steps to prepare. First, Vietnamese participants will be categorised into VM or VT based on focus group data. Then, the relationship between being a VM or VT and communicative competence will be tested by running correlations.

## 1.2 Categorising participants as Value Matchers and Value Takers

I shall explain the process of categorising participants as value matchers or value takers, based on the definitions of Value Matcher (VM) and Value Taker (VT) in section 1.1.

First of all, I followed Georger’s (2009) approach to basic content analysis. All focus group interviews (approximately 4000 words) were analysed. Participants were categorised as VM or VT on the basis of the ideas and stories they recounted. This was clearly a subjective process. In order to limit subjectivity, a fellow Vietnamese research student was employed to perform exactly the same procedure using the same pre-agreed VM/VT definitions. Any disagreement regarding categorisation would be subject to negotiation; but we both reached identical conclusions (I chose a Vietnamese research student because all focus group transcriptions were in the original Vietnamese language). A tally was kept of VM and VT evidence and an overall judgement was made regarding in which category participants were allocated.

### 1.3 Selected Examples of the Operationalisation of Values

#### Value Matchers

- Tu and Bac withdrew from interactions, especially when native speakers were involved. They did so to ‘rescue’ their ‘maleness’.
- Many female participants attended drinking events once and then decided they would never come again. They did not like the atmosphere: noisy music, loud people, etc. They believe socialising should not be controlled by alcohol. A more preferred way of socialising can be eating out or cooking at home.
- Some female participants were put-off by certain behaviours amongst fellow students, including the gesture of hugging and kissing. They think such public displays of affection should be for their boyfriends only.
- Some participants believed that communicating with non-native speakers is of no practical benefit.
- Some participants withdrew from encounters because they could not identify common cultural reference points
- Participants evidenced interest in expressing Vietnamese culture in front of a Western audience

#### Value Takers

- Sang attended evening events organised by Christian Union even though he was not interested in God. Sang is an atheist. He simply considered such events as opportunities to practice English.
- Hoa and An hardly went out drinking in Vietnam where it is not common for girls to be seen drinking in public places. However, they did not mind going out to pubs with their friends in the UK.
- Some participants organised events designed to appeal to Western students
- Participants were largely tolerant of being put into a homogenising ‘Asian’ category
- Participants expressing a willingness to learn about UK and Western culture e.g. through travel and accessing UK/Western media (e.g. television)

**Table 1: Classification of participants into Value Matcher/Value Taker**

Participants	Value matcher	Value taker	Overall
1 Nga	2	5	VT
2 Hoa	0	8	VT
3 Sang	13	2	VM
4 An	2	4	VT
5 Mai	9	0	VM
6 Tu	6	1	VM
7 Thao	10	1	VM
8 Luyen	9	0	VM
9 Quynh	5	0	VM
10 Chau	12	4	VM
11 Mi	5	0	VM
12 Bac	16	0	VM
13 Ha	1	4	VT
14 Ly	1	3	VT

#### 1.4 Correlations of Value matcher and Value taker

Having been categorised as VM or VT tests of correlations with L2 perceived competence were performed.

**Table 2: Correlations of VM/VT with L2 perceived communicative competence**

		VM or VT	L2 Perceived Communicative Competence
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	1	.585(*)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.014
	N	14	14
L2 Perceived Communicative Competence	Pearson Correlation	.585(*)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.014	
	N	14	14

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between whether participants were a Value Matcher (VM) or a Value Taker (VT) with their perceived L2 competence is positively correlated ( $r = .585$ ) and significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). VM is coded 1 while VT is coded 2, which means that Value Takers (VT) are associated with higher ratings of L2 competence than Value Matchers (VM).

**Table 3: Correlations of VM/VT with L2 total hours of interactions**

		VM or VT	L2 total hours of interactions
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	1	.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.517
	N	14	14
L2 total hours of interactions	Pearson Correlation	.189	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.517	
	N	14	14

The relationship between VM/VT and the total hours of speaking English is weak and *Ns* ( $r = .189$ ): being a VT or a VM does not associate with total hours of speaking English.

In summary, the statistic suggests a positive relationship between VM/VT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and no relationship between VM/VT and L2 total hours of interaction. Participants categorised as Value Takers (more flexible in accepting values dissimilar from their own) tend to rate their experience of speaking English more positively. In contrast, Value Matchers (those who hold on to their values and are less willing/or unable to accept values dissimilar from their own) are associated with lower communicative competence scores.

## 2. Opportunity

Values refer to what participants believe are the right ‘things’ to do. In contrast, opportunity refers to the availability of accessible social interactions in which L2 learners can practice the target language. Opportunity covers both the ‘available interactions’ that one is exposed to and those interactions that individuals generate for themselves. One can therefore either be an Opportunity Maker - proactively making full use of available opportunities and even creating opportunities themselves - or an Opportunity Taker - just taking advantage of whatever is provided. The ‘strongest’



level of Opportunity Taker would be the refusal or inability to access any opportunities at all.

## 2.1 Selected Examples of the Operationalisation of Opportunity

### Opportunity Makers

- Tu created opportunity by speaking in English with his Vietnamese girlfriend
- Mi prefers American accent and she was dating an American man so that she had lots of opportunities to speak English.
- Some participants organised BBQ in order to attract their British classmates to join them.

### Opportunity Takers

- Several participants attended social events organised by their university
- Some participants believed the universities should be responsible for providing more opportunity for them to socialise. They complained about the lack of such a support from the universities.

**Table 4: Classification of participants into Opportunity Taker/Opportunity Maker**

	Participants	Opportunity taker	Opportunity maker	Overall
1	Nga	3	0	OT
2	Hoa	1	6	OM
3	Sang	2	1	OT
4	An	0	2	OM
5	Mai	2	1	OT
6	Tu	0	1	OM
7	Thao	2	0	OT
8	Luyen	2	0	OT
9	Quynh	1	0	OT
10	Chau	5	1	OT
11	Mi	0	4	OM
12	Bac	2	0	OT
13	Ha	1	0	OT
14	Ly	1	0	OT

## 2.2 Correlations between Opportunity Maker/Taker and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence

Tests of correlations were run to explore the relationship between OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and L2 total hours of interactions.

**Table 5: Correlations between OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and L2 total hours of interactions**

		L2 Total hours of Interactions	OM or OT	L2 Perceived Communicative Competence
L2 Total hours of Interactions	Pearson Correlation	1	.421	.320
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.134	.265
	N	14	14	14
OM or OT	Pearson Correlation	.421	1	.703(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.134		.003
	N	14	14	14
L2 Perceived Communicative Competence	Pearson Correlation	.320	.703(**)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.265	.003	
	N	14	14	14

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

OM is coded 2 while OT is coded 1. There is a significant ( $p=.005$ ) positive correlation coefficient ( $r=.703$ ) which suggests OMs tend to have higher ratings of communicative competence than OTs. OM/OT has a medium positive correlation with L2 Total Hours of Interaction – suggesting OMs spend more time speaking English – but the result is *Ns* ( $r=.421$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

### 3. VM/VT and OM/OT and Key Interactions

Appendix I shows that L2 perceived communicative competence correlated with just 4 interaction variables: ‘Academic/University Staff’, ‘Strangers’, ‘Native Speakers’ and ‘Small Talk’. It also shows no direct relationship between social roles and L2 perceived communicative competence among Vietnamese participants. The only

‘indirect’ relationship was the link between ‘Female’ and ‘Academic/University Staff’ which then correlated with L2 perceived communicative competence.

Tables 2 and 5 of this Appendix show that VM/VT and OM/OT are both positively correlated with L2 perceived communicative competence. To further establish whether VM/VT and OM/OT are superior to social roles in terms of understanding L2 perceived communicative competence, I will run correlation tests to between VM/VT and OM/OT with the 4 types social interactions that appear to exert most influence over L2 perceived communicative competence.

**Table 6: Correlations between OM/OT and VM/VT with key interactions**

		OM or OT	VM or VT
OM or OT	Pearson Correlation	1	.645(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.006
	N	14	14
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	.645(**)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.006	
	N	14	14
Academic/University Staff	Pearson Correlation	.272	.780(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.173	.001
	N	14	14
Smalltalk	Pearson Correlation	.439	.572(*)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.058	.016
	N	14	14
Native Speaker	Pearson Correlation	.433	.711(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.061	.002
	N	14	14
Stranger	Pearson Correlation	.670(**)	.419
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.004	.068
	N	14	14

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The results are mixed. OM/OT correlates positively and significantly with ‘Stranger’. The correlation coefficient for ‘Academic/University Staff’ and ‘Native Speaker’ are positive and medium but *Ns*. VM/VT however correlates strongly and positively with three out of four, all of which are significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Values appear to have more influence in terms of shaping individuals' access to these key interactions. But VM/VT and OM/OT also evidence a strong positive correlation (significant at  $p < .01$ ). Values and Opportunism may be interacting.

### 3.1 Partial correlations between VM/VT and OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence

Field (2009) suggests that where one variable is correlated with other variables, it may be useful to run partial correlation to reveal a more accurate relationship between the variables. In this case, VM/VT is positively correlated with both OM/OT and L2 perceived communicative competence. Therefore, in order to understand the true measurement of the relationship between OM/OT and L2 perceived communicative competence, partial correlation is performed, controlling for VM/VT.

**Table 7: Partial correlations between OM/OT controlling for VM/VT**

Control Variables			OM or OT	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	VM or VT
-none-(a)	OM or OT	Correlation	1.000	.703	.645
		Significance (1-tailed)	.	.003	.006
		df	0	12	12
	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	Correlation	.703	1.000	.585
		Significance (1-tailed)	.003	.	.014
		df	12	0	12
	VM or VT	Correlation	.645	.585	1.000
		Significance (1-tailed)	.006	.014	.
		df	12	12	0
VM or VT	OM or OT	Correlation	1.000	.526	
		Significance (1-tailed)	.	.033	
		df	0	11	
	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	Correlation	.526	1.000	
		Significance (1-tailed)	.033	.	
		df	11	0	

Where VM/VT is controlled for, the partial correlation between L2 perceived communicative competence and OM/OT is .526, which is less than the correlation when VM/VT is not controlled for ( $r = .703$ ). So although still significant ( $p < .05$ ) the relationship is diminished.

$R^2$  is .27 – which means OM/OT can now account for just 27% of the variation in L2 perceived communicative competence scores. This is a truer measure of the unique effect of being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker on communicative competence.

Where OM/OT is controlled for, the partial correlation between L2 perceived communicative competence and VM/VT is .241, which is less than the correlation when OM/OT is not controlled for ( $r = .585$ ). It is also *Ns* ( $p > .05$ ).

$R^2$  is .05 – which means that VM/VT can now only account for 5.8% of the variation in L2 perceived communicative competence scores. This is true measure of the unique effect of being a Value Matcher or Value Taker on communicative competence.

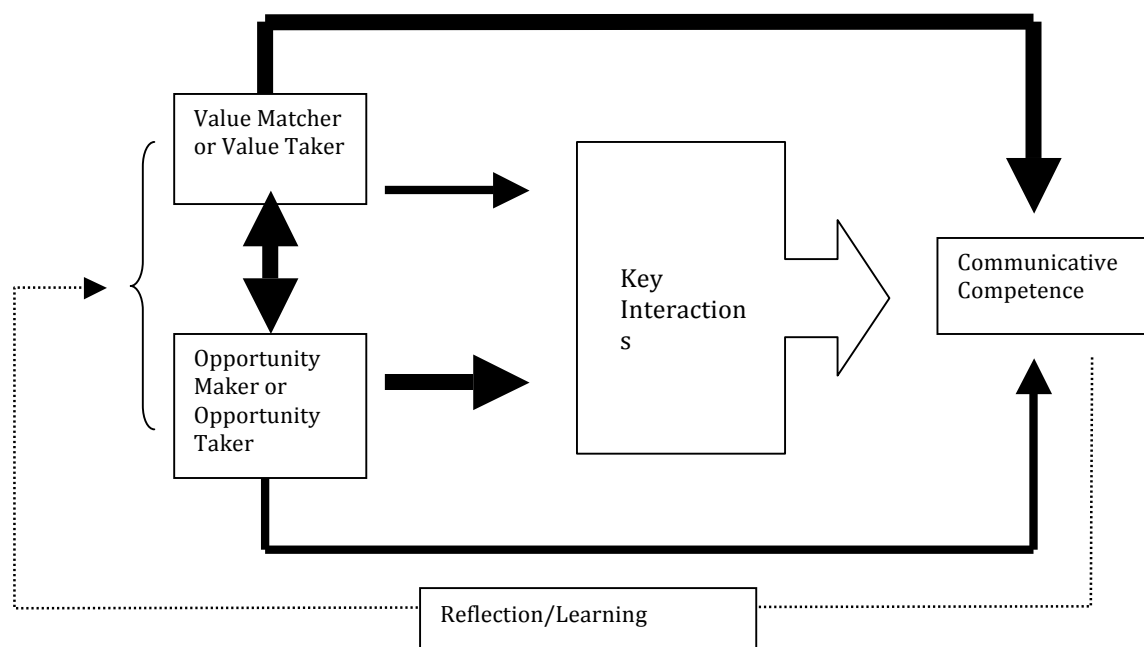
Therefore, although there is an interrelationship between L2 communicative competence/VM/VT/ OM/OT, being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker is clearly much more influential. However, OM/OT still only accounts for 27% of variation in L2 communicative competence scores.

### 3.2 Discussion

There are positive correlations between VM/VT and OM/OT with L2 perceived communicative competence. However, a similar relationship is not observed between OM/OT and VM/VT and L2 total hours of interactions. This suggests that self-perception of L2 communicative competence is influenced by the nature of interactions (quality), rather than the frequency or duration of any conversations. OM/OT and VM/VT both correlate with L2 communicative competence. This contrasts with Social Roles, none of which correlate with communicative competence. Using Opportunity and Values therefore appears to have greater utility in terms of understanding SLA in an SA context.

Opportunity and Values also correlate with those key ‘dimensions’ of interactions that are mostly associated with influencing communicative competence. Here, values initially appear more influential. We know that being an OM/OT and being a VM/VT are associated with one another – they correlate positively and strongly (see Table 7). Partial correlation suggests being an Opportunity Maker or Taker is in fact stronger in

terms of explaining communicative competence. Even so, being an OM/OT still only explains approximately 27% variation in communicative competence. A diagrammatic representation of these findings/relationships is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Summary of relationships between VM/VT, OM/OT and Communicative Competence**

The degree of the strength of a relationship is illustrated by the thickness of the lines. A line suggesting participants' ability to learn from their interactions has been added and this issue is addressed below - focus group data shows that various participants use interactions as learning opportunities and adjusted their future behaviours accordingly. However, this data has not been reported in all participants, so is denoted by a dotted line.

#### **4. Understanding the findings in the context of existing SLA theories.**

##### **4.1 Norton's (2000) theory of social identity and power relations**

The findings can be interpreted as contradicting the contribution of power relations which is central to Norton's (2000) theory. The findings suggest that individuals themselves can be responsible for the types of interactions that they have and how they make sense of them. What occurs within particular interactions *vis-à-vis* any

interplay or asymmetry of power is less important. Norton's (2000) theory of Social Identity sees social roles as an instrument with which to access resources (money, power, language, friendship, etc.). The findings presented in this Appendix instead suggest that key individual characteristics are far more deterministic in patterning individuals' interaction experiences. Further, a theory of SLA predicated on individual characteristics challenges the view that asymmetries of power manifested during and within interactions are crucial to understanding communicative competence: VM/VT and OM/OT both correlated with participants' overall ratings scores – unlike social roles, the dependent variables (OM/OT and VM/VT) did not need to be 'filtered' through specific interaction types in order for their contribution to be understood. What happens inside and during interactions may be important, but the types of interactions being experienced are also important and, crucially, so too is how individuals react to, handle and learn from their experiences.

#### 4.2 Barna's (1998) stumbling blocks

There is room in Barna's framework for individuals to perceive each block differently – some blocks may be overcome more easily by some language learners than others. Individual characteristics may therefore be important. There is nothing in my findings that contradicts this. The findings suggest that two key measures of personality – opportunism and values – may indeed help or hinder access to these key interaction dimensions that themselves relate to communicative competence; but what happens inside those interactions does not automatically determine an individual's own evaluation of his/her communicative competence. Just as L2 learners may or may not perceive something as a stumbling block, even if they do they may not necessarily be dismayed by it. Opportunity Makers report greater communicative competence. Firstly they may be more inclined to seek out, generate and select interaction opportunities. Secondly they may be more resilient to setbacks and/or better able identify positive learning outcomes, turning negative experiences into positive ones.

Turning to values, one would therefore expect Value Matchers to report higher communicative competence – these are people who pick and choose interactions that they feel comfortable with. But young Asian students newly arrived in the UK who insist on value-matching might restrict their interaction opportunities considerably

(and indeed VM/VT correlates less strongly with the key interaction variables compared to OM/OT). In fact Value Takers are more likely to evidence higher communicative competence; the willingness to subordinate one's values and to approach L2 learning context with an 'open' mind appear important.

#### 4.3 Giles & Byrne's Intergroup Model

Giles and Byrne (1982) did not specifically address opportunism but does address values. For Giles & Byrne, an individual's exposure to the TL is patterned by their culturally specific context. Therefore in a multi-cultural context individuals will tend to coalesce into linguistic and cultural 'camps'. Movements in and out of these 'camps' indicate the strength of individuals' sense of group identity. It follows that members of a linguistic/cultural community with only a weak sense of group identity will be more inclined to seek out exogenous interaction opportunities. Being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker can not un-problematically be described as a cultural characteristic (although some national stereotyping seeks to do this). Values, however, may have a cultural component in terms of circumscribing behaviours. Focus group data indicated examples of participants withdrawing from and feeling uncomfortable with certain Western customs and practices. Participants expressed disapproval, frustration and discomfort at, for example, social gatherings involving public displays of affection between relative strangers and the centrality of alcohol in social events. Indeed, being a VM/VT correlates positively with communicative competence. Of these, Value Takers – those most willing to 'suspend' their own and cultural based group affiliations - report greater satisfaction with their communicative competence.

### 5. Summary

This Appendix looks at SLA through two different lenses: opportunism and values. Basic content analysis of focus group data was conducted, identifying examples of individuals operationalizing opportunistic and value – based behaviours. Individual participants were then categorised as either Opportunity Makers or Opportunity Takers and as either a Value Matcher or Value Taker. Tests of correlation were employed to explore the relationship between these categories and communicative



competence, and with those four key interaction variables known to associate closely with communicative competence.

The result poses a challenge to Norton's theory of power relations and the privileging of social roles. First, because unlike social roles, there is a distinct and direct correlation between communicative competence and Value/Opportunity. Secondly because the findings form a plausible basis for a theory of SLA which is not overly focused on the dynamic of interactions but, rather, key characteristics that individuals themselves possess – the aptitude and ideas that individuals *bring* to their interactions and which they draw on, resource-like, to make sense of interactions. With regards to Giles and Barna's theories, the findings in this research are largely compatible. In sum then, in terms of communicative competence, very few social roles seem to feed directly into communicative competence, and hardly any correlated with those key dimensions of interactions that appeared to influence communicative competence most. The overall conclusion is that social roles exercise limited influence in terms of shaping patterns of interaction. Early on, diary data analysis alerted us to prominent *individualised* differences in patterns of interaction, and this suggested it might be fruitful to explore SLA from a less 'social' and more 'personal' perspective.

Two key dimensions of analysis were selected – opportunism and values. Both variables appear to offer considerably more utility than social roles in understanding communicative competence. Even so, considerable variance in communicative competence remains unaccounted for. I tentatively propose that the 'direction of travel' for further analysis and greater understanding is clear – a comprehensive model of second language acquisition must be focused on the individual and must account for both a wider range of individual characteristics/aptitudes/skills (e.g. cognitive ability; motivation; current L2 proficiency; extraversion/introversion) and pay closer attention to variations in individuals' 'lived realities' – the daily routines and fine detail of peoples' lives (e.g. good fortune/misfortune; studying; working; socialising) that shape the quality and quantity of interactions which individuals must make sense of.

## Appendix K

### Problems in SLA context categorisation

This Appendix provides a more detailed discussion regarding the problems in defining SA contexts in SLA research. It is hoped to support the main discussion in the Literature Review – Chapter 2, without distracting the readers if it was included in the main body of discussion.

#### 1. Problematising definitions of contexts

In the above definition, Gass and Selinker (2001) refer to two contexts, which have been the focus of much SLA research: classroom and ‘natural’ situations. However, researchers have classified SLA contexts into four ‘scenarios’ (Figure 1) which have been summarised by Block (2003) as; foreign language, self-instructed foreign language, second language and naturalistic language learning.

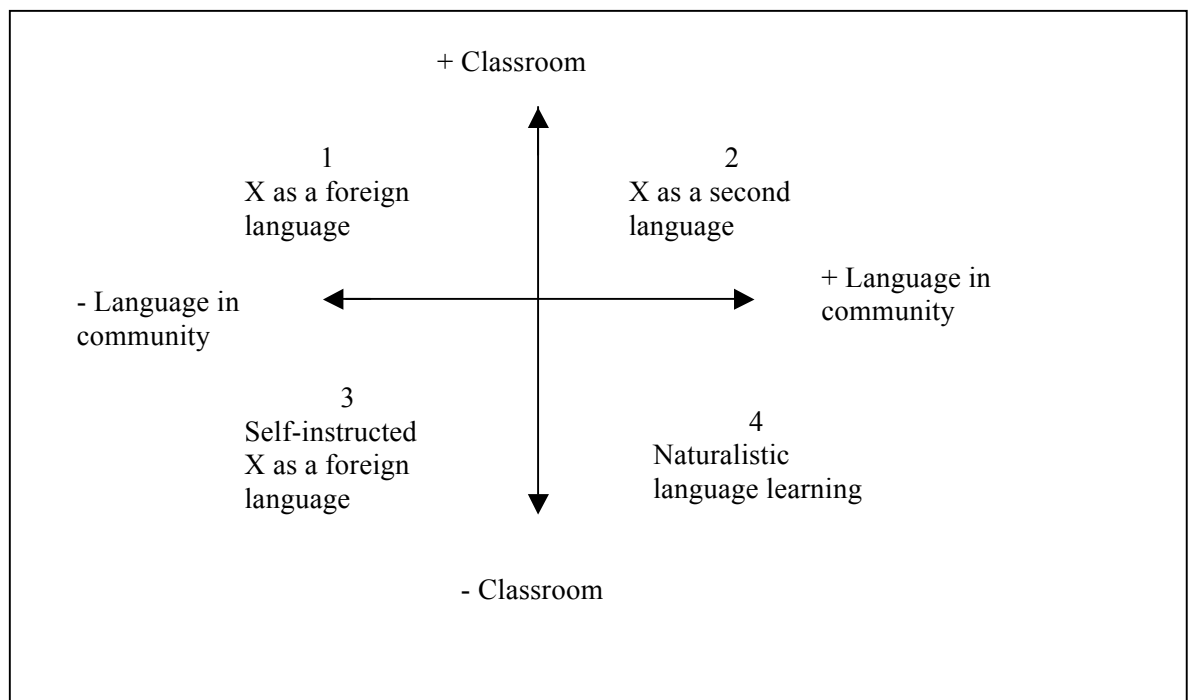


Figure 1: ‘Second’ context scenarios (Block, 2003:34)

The above figure shows that SLA researchers have extended the contexts from two (Gass and Selinker, 2001) to four (Block, 2003); from two distinguished contexts of classroom and natural situation to four contexts combining both natural and classroom contexts. Figure 1 shows that the four contexts in fact are different ‘recipes’ of the same two ingredients (classroom and natural situation) of varying proportions. However, I find current attempts at ‘isolating’ and distinguishing between contexts in SLA research problematic (also see Freed, 1995). In fact, I argue that the current views and definitions of SLA contexts have not yet covered the true context that Vietnamese students in the UK (in my research) experience.

First of all, it might be helpful to review definitions of SLA contexts (Figure 1). Block (2003:51) defines the naturalistic context as one:

*that involves no formal instruction and the learning of a language spoken in the surrounding community. In this case, the learner makes her/his way through a variety of interactions necessary to day-to-day life and must rely on her/his background knowledge, learning strategies and intuitions to get by*

According to Block (2003), the concept of naturalistic context is often neglected in mainstream SLA research. Freed (1995) attributes this to the fact that it is usually referred to as “immersion in the native speech community” in the second language context to help draw a distinction between foreign and second contexts (which both have formal language instructions whereas the naturalistic context does not, see Figure 2).

As illustrated in Figure 2 on the following page, the second language context refers to a combination of “classroom instructions and immersion in the native speech community” (Freed, 1995:5). It contrasts with the foreign context, which is limited to instructions in the classroom, situated where the target language is not shared by the local community. The “immersion”, or “out-of-class contact” (Freed, 1995) or “outside-the-classroom” activity (Block, 2003) is therefore an additional component for learners in the second context. The second language context is considered ‘ideal’ because it is considered to expose learners to numerous inputs and in a natural setting.

It contrasts sharply with the foreign language context, where learners are ‘deprived’ of social contacts with the TL community.

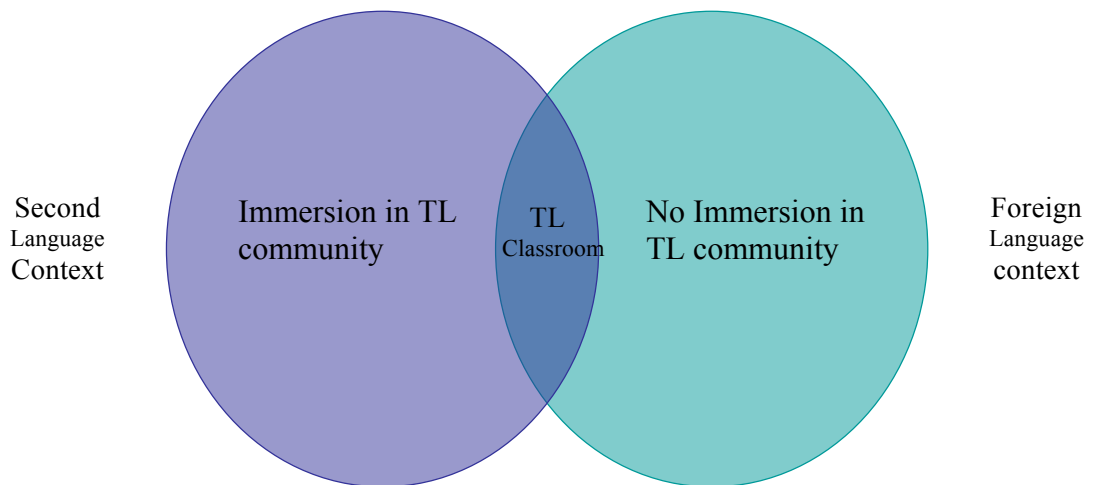


Figure 2: Comparison of Second and Foreign Language Contexts

As discussed above, SLA contexts can be expanded from two to four, yet they still fail to reflect the ‘real’ context of L2 learners. The following example will illustrate the point. A learner who has finished a period of time learning English in Vietnam may then travel to the UK to study another subject rather than the English language (e.g. MA of Business Management). According to the classic definition of the four contexts (Figure 1), she can be considered as moving from foreign language context (English classes in Vietnam) to a naturalistic context (immersed in an English speaking community in the UK albeit with no formal L2 instruction). The problem here is that once an individual learning context is categorised into foreign or second context, the learning opportunities are assumed in a “predictable manner” (Block, 2003:34).

In this regard, the Vietnamese student is assumed to have significantly less interactions with native speakers in the foreign context (English classes in Vietnam) compared to the second context when he/she resides in the UK. As a result, the next assumption is that she can be conditioned to improve her English proficiency once residing in the UK. However, if in fact the person socialises with native English speakers in Vietnam her interactions may be of a higher quality and quantity than those experienced by her UK-based counterparts who may socialise more with fellow Vietnamese (in the L1) and other international students (in L2). In this case, out-of-

class contacts in a foreign context *may* provide more inputs to the student's learning process than the second context – or at least the difference is not as great as may be imagined. The aforementioned is illustrative only, but serves as an example to demonstrate that it is not easy to assert that any one context has clear and “predictable” characteristics. Boundaries have, however, been drawn between classroom and naturalistic contexts and between foreign and second contexts. These are mainly focused on the site where the language learning process takes place. Such lines are drawn, however, without taking into account the mobility of the learner.

In the case of the Vietnamese student above, if she returns to Vietnam and continues to socialise with native English speakers and attends an English course how should we classify her experiences? It is not second language context, because it takes place in Vietnam where Vietnamese is spoken by the community. But neither is it purely foreign context, because it involves extensive extra-classroom contact with native speakers. Therefore definitions of context should be sensitive to the quality and quantity of opportunities that the learner is exposed to *vis-à-vis* the target language, rather than the location of the learning. Privileging location is too crude. A more nuanced understanding of the naturalist context in particular, and other contexts in general, needs to be factored-in when evaluating any claims of proficiency gains in study abroad programmes.

The problem with defining SLA contexts possibly results in the confusion in SLA research findings, especially claims of gains in language improvement in the second language context. The next section will deal with this issue.

## 2. Problematising research in second language context

Study abroad (SA) programmes are invaluable opportunities for students to be immersed in the target language (TL) culture, which is, in turn, assumed to lead to improvements in communicative competence (Block, 2007). There are inconsistencies - and even counter-findings - in some research into the linguistic gains associated with SA programmes. On the positive side, research has found an improvement in the oral production ability of participants in SA programmes (Brecht et al., 1993; Collentine,

2004; Freed, 1990a, 1990b; Freed et al., 2004; Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Kaplan, 1989; Lennon, 1990; Liskin-Gasparro and Urdaneta, 1995; Milleret, 1990; Polanyi, 1995; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). However, Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth (2005) cast doubt over these findings, noting that gains in communicative competence may still be sub-optimal due to individual personality traits and the specificities of particular contexts. In addition, studies that examine learners' attitude, motivation, and behaviour in the host environment - and 'link these factors directly to linguistic development - clearly show that learners do not magically become fluent speakers simply by being surrounded by the target language community (Freed 1995; Isabelli-Garcia 2006). Some inconsistencies and counter-findings may be attributable to different approaches and theoretical frameworks being used by different researchers. They can also be explained, in part, by the fact that claims are made based on different aspects of language acquisition, differing amounts of time spent abroad, and variations in the types of interactions between learners and native speakers (which is frequently not specified).

Another reason is that much research on studying abroad (Brecht et.al.1995), (Lapkin et.al. 1995), in common with many studies in SLA, does not take into account the sociolinguistic dimension, thus preventing the emergence of insights into the nature of language learning (Firth & Wagner 1997). Claims regarding language gains in SA programmes are often made based on statistically significant findings (Block, 2007). Cases involving small numbers of participants have been considered problematical and unjustifiable (Milleret, 1990). Other research (Polanyi 1995; Siegal 1995; Norton 2000; Miller and Ginsberg 1995) is purely based on 'stories from the field'.

However, I argue that one of the main problems which has largely escaped discussion is the research context itself. If a particular research is labelled as investigating learner achievement in a study abroad program, it tends to be automatically framed in a second language context, which combines practising the TL both in and out of the classroom. Freed (1995) already points out the problem of such a 'formula'. First of all, there is a lack of research on the amount of time learners actually speak the target language. Secondly, wider questions of how they actually spend their time abroad remain unanswered. Finally, learners living with host families may not necessarily speak the TL at 'home' (at least not for protracted periods, and any exchanges may be

limited to formalities and simple pleasantries and be at a 'level' determined by the host families' assessment of what is appropriate, rather than what the student needs or wants), nor with the friends they make. Again, we return to the question that the quality and quantity of interactions in the TL matter more than the location where the classroom is situated – matter more than the environment in which the learning occurs. This has led to some confusion in the findings regarding the gains of students in SA (study abroad) programmes, because the context itself is not clear.

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## **Abstract**

Advancing the ‘social turn’ in Second Language Acquisition research requires further research exploring the relationship between identity and L2 acquisition in different contexts and with different groups of L2 learners. Identities considered most relevant to L2 learning and communication are identified. A mixed methods approach – combining focus group interviews and self-completed diaries - is endorsed as an effective strategy for capturing and understanding the relationships.

Data was collected from fourteen postgraduate Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments over a period of twelve weeks. Participants were required to keep daily structured diaries and attend monthly focus group interviews. This study utilises Norton’s definition of social identity, Barna’s definition of communicative competence and Giles and Byrne’s Intergroup Model to understand how ‘identity’ is implicated in shaping participants’ L2 interaction experiences and their L2 communicative competence. The findings confirm the relationship between ‘identity’ and both the patterning of social interactions and communicative competence. Each of the three main theories engaged with offers explanations for participants’ L2 experiences. However, few exceptional cases, and the ‘between-subject’ variation and ‘within subject’ routinisation are not yet fully explained by the key theories.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I confirm that this thesis is original and based on my own work. Parts of the thesis, in shorter versions have been presented in Department of Education's ERG when I started the study. Since then I also presented the study in August 2010 in a seminar at the Department of Education of Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

---

This chapter aims to set the context for this study. The chapter is divided into five parts. It begins with telling the readers what inspired me to initiate a study on the possible influences of the identities of Vietnamese students on their communication experiences in English language in the UK context. It follows by presenting the research aims, then the significance of the study. In the next part, research questions that the study seeks to answer are discussed. Finally, it outlines the structure of the thesis.

#### **1.1 My inspiration to start this study**

My interest in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) developed from my own positive and negative experiences as a language learner. When I studied MA TESOL in Vietnam I was exposed to SLA theory and was able to reflect on my own experiences as a learner. However, I did not pay much attention to the terms ‘identity’, ‘intercultural communication’ during the time. Later as a teacher of English in Vietnam the majority of my peers were also Vietnamese and, of course, my students were all young Vietnamese nationals. However, several fellow teachers were from other countries, including the UK, Australia and America, and were native English speakers. I became close friends with them and watched as they attempted to learn Vietnamese in Vietnam, in mainly naturalistic settings. Some were more interested in learning Vietnamese than others; some were better at doing so than others; some immersed themselves in Vietnamese culture whilst others remained distant and largely restricted their relationships and socialising to other westerners and native English speakers. My western friends used to come to me for advice and possible explanations when they met any puzzles regarding the cultural practices and norms of communication. And each time I received any questions from my friends, I was trying my best to help them to adjust and understand more about Vietnamese culture and the language. On many occasions, I did not succeed. In retrospect, I simply was not able

to give my friends any sensible answers because I could not see their ‘problems’ from their own perspectives. However, this was when I began to vaguely understand the significance of culture and identity to processes of second language acquisition and communication. I already suspected then that the contribution of identity and culture to second language acquisition may be magnified in study abroad contexts.

Enrolling at the University of York was my first visit to an English-speaking country, which was a long dream for me since I started learning English at 12 years old. I was quite confident about my English level, having passed IELTS with high scores, been teaching English and been complemented by my students and colleagues, including native speakers. It was a shock when my own perceived strength - English language - suddenly became a weakness in a native environment. I experienced, directly, the status of ‘other’ – of being culturally dissonant. I felt York was too ‘white’ and I found myself as an Asian woman to stand out when I walked around in the city centre for example. I remember during my first days, I used to check around and feel happier and more secure when I saw another Asian person. Within a short period of time I found myself in the situation that my western friends experienced in Vietnam. Even though my English proficiency was much better than their Vietnamese, I still had difficulties in communication. The issues of identity and cultural orientation once again loomed large, and appeared to be shared among many international students that I acquainted at the University of York.

My original idea (which was also related to my background as an IELTS teacher) was to conduct an international investigation of Vietnamese English language learners’ attainment in the IELTS test, comparing the scores of those who had studied English in a Vietnamese classroom with those who had studied abroad (in Australia; the United States; Canada and the UK). However, within a year and a half of arriving in the UK to do my PhD, I experienced problems accessing international IELTS data and was forced to reconfigure my research.

My own experience as an English language learner, teacher and now an international student in the UK inspired me to draw more attention to the communication in TL language in TL country. Forced to reconfigure my research proposal and drawing on my interest in learning contexts I therefore turned to focus on the contribution of

culture, identity and social roles to language learners' communication experience in a naturalistic and study abroad setting. I understand that I should not interpret accounts of the participants through my personal experiences, which shall only function as a source of motivation for me, and may help to inform the study.

## **1.2 The research aims**

The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore the contribution of second language (L2) learners' identity in their experience of L2 communication: in particular, how language learners' identities and social roles impact their efforts to access opportunities to improve their L2 in a native environment. Improvements in L2 speaking and listening skills are measured according to how successful participants judge their communication in the English language to be - how competent participants believe they are as communicators in an intercultural context. Therefore, investigating the impact of identities on SLA proficiency also means investigating the impact of identities on intercultural communicative competence.

The social turn in SLA theory is of growing importance (see below) and in addition to the personal motivations/experiences described above this research can be understood as a response to Block's (2007) call for further research on the importance of identity to the L2 acquisition process, in different contexts and with different groups of L2 learners (Vietnamese L2 learners are an under-researched group). Much of contemporary SLA literature emphasises the importance of identity as an explanatory tool – there has been a 'social turn' in SLA theorising. However, there is widespread confusion in terms of defining what is meant by 'identity' and identifying those types of identity that are most likely to impact on SLA. Overall, significantly more research on identity is needed to establish its explanatory power, and to evaluate this *vis-à-vis* other (perhaps more traditional) factors assumed to affect the SLA process. This research can therefore be positioned as part of a steadily growing body of literature seeking to 'nudge' the social turn along and is focused on the SLA experiences of a small cohort of postgraduate Vietnamese students in two cities in the North of England, UK. It is hoped that findings from the research will benefit Vietnamese

students in the UK or international students in SA context to be better at their communication experiences in the TL environment.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Research Strategies**

My research questions flowed from my literature survey (Chapter 2) following which I began to develop an informed proposition: that identity/culture/social roles and context are concatenated and will influence the extent and types of target language interactions that L2 learners will have and therefore their L2 communicative competence. For example, L2 learners who are curious to learn about UK culture and/or able to exercise their curiosity by accessing intercultural opportunities will be exposed to larger amounts of L2 learning opportunities compared to L2 learners who are less curious and who restrict their L2 communication to a bare necessity (such as those required for successful completion of their course of study and the range of simple transactions required in everyday living, such as shopping). The contexts in which L2 learners find themselves – in which they seek to operationalise their identity and culture - is also considered important. For example, Vietnamese L2 learners undertaking employment to fund their studies may be using the target language more than those who do not work. Similarly, if a ‘tight knit’ Vietnamese community has coalesced it may restrict its members intercultural interactions resulting in less L2 encounters. Context is therefore important and my research therefore seeks to capture the ‘lived realities’ of my participants in order to understand the context-culture-SLA relationship. ‘Identity’, ‘culture’ and ‘social roles’ are contested and overlapping concepts and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The overall research question is therefore: does identity influence the L2 acquisition process for postgraduate students in a study abroad/naturalistic context? This question can be unpacked to produce three researchable questions:

1. Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
2. How – if at all – is identity implicated in Vietnamese students’ interactions in the English language?



3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual's own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how?

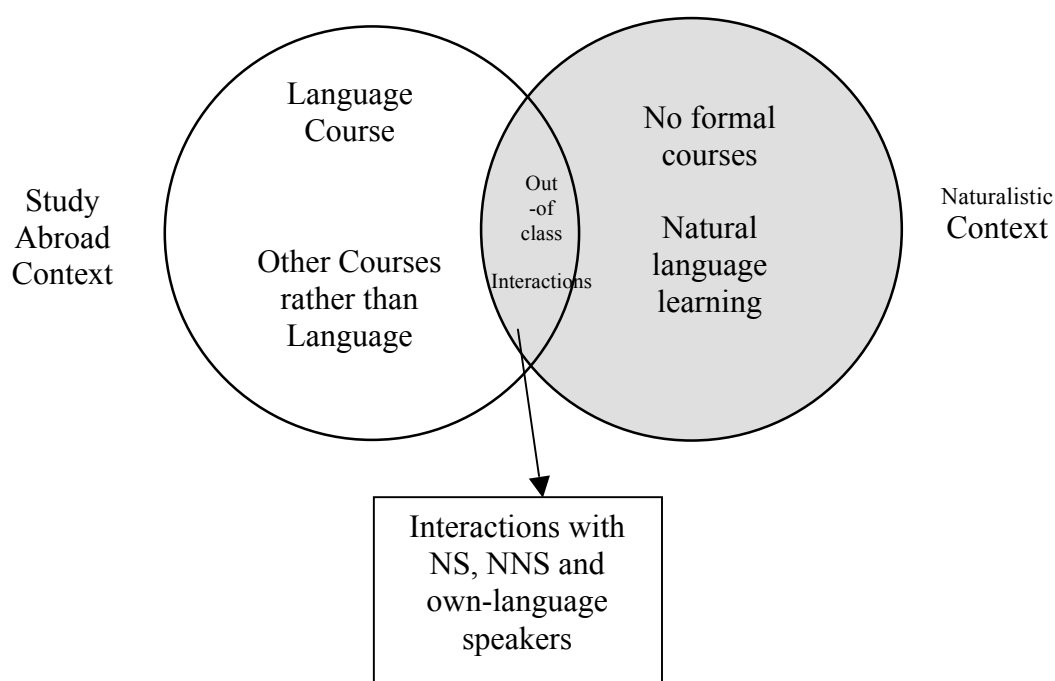
In order to answer the three research questions, a mixed methods strategy was employed which includes both self-completed diaries and a series of focus group interviews. Diaries were completed on a daily basis to answer question 1 - which types of identity are reported by participants during the data collection period? For questions 2, 3 triangulation and synthesis of both diary and focus group data was attempted. The triangulation process helped to validate the reliability of data collected from the diaries and interviews alone. Pilot focus groups were conducted in two different locations in the UK between May and August 2008. The data collected from the pilot focus groups was used to inform the process of designing a semi-structured diary for participants to complete each day for the duration of the study. The diary was then piloted in early 2009. The findings from the pilot studies suggested that diary and focus group interviews are effective tools for collecting data capable of answering the three research questions. The diary template and interview agendas were reviewed and amended in accordance with feedback received from the pilots in preparation for the main study. The main study (diary) lasted from February – April 2009. Focus groups were held regularly between March – May 2009. Participants were recruited via approaches to the Vietnamese Societies of the Universities of York and Leeds. Fourteen MA students - 2 from York and 12 from Leeds - agreed to participate in the research by maintaining a daily diary and attending monthly focus group interviews.

#### **1.4 The significance of the research**

The context of the research is unique in that the participants were enrolled on a range of MA courses rather than formally studying English in a 'study-abroad' context. They were not in receipt of any formal instruction in the English language (but all participants were desirous of improvements to their L2). The context of the research therefore falls in-between the two, arguably most common, targets of SLA research: the naturalist context and SLA study-abroad (SA). The research is an attempt to draw attention to this relatively underexplored middle ground (also see Chapter 2). Findings relating to a context pertaining to one particular L2 learner group can not be easily

‘read-across’ to other L2 groups (see Appendix L for discussion of problems in categorising SLA contexts). However, the desire for simple models in SLA research has resulted in most research focusing on one particular context - either the naturalistic context or second language context – and a failure to acknowledge the diversity that really exists. This leaves a gap for research into those contexts which fall in-between.

The research context does not fall into any particular SLA contexts which have been categorised in the literature. It includes both the naturalistic context (Block, 2003) and out-of-class interactions (Freed, 1995). As presented in Figure 1.1, the research context also differs from SA (study abroad) context: there is no formal English instruction. Learning opportunities are likely to come from natural situation, out-of-class interaction and in-class activities (to learn other subjects). The interactions in both out-of-class and naturalistic settings cover those between non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS); among NNS of one particular language (in this case English); and learners who speak the same mother tongue (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1: Context of the research**

There has been little research on the actual English-speaking experiences of Vietnamese students, and hardly any on Vietnamese Masters students. This may sound trivial, but the ‘testing’ of identity and social roles as determinants of SLA demands that we operationalize the social turn to both different contexts and to different groups of L2 learners so that knowledge may accrue. It is hoped that not only will this contribute to a general understanding of the SLA process, but will also provide insights into the problems that Vietnamese students encounter in their daily experiences of speaking English. The research may therefore be of some use to Vietnamese students who are studying or thinking about studying in an English-speaking university.

In terms of methodology, the majority of research on identity is primarily qualitative. Data is typically collected from participants’ ‘stories’ (also see Chapter 3). This research is of mixed methods design and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the contribution of identity to the L2 acquisition process. This will hopefully help future SLA researchers who are interested in using a mixed methods approach.

### **1.5 Synopsis of the thesis**

The thesis comprises of 7 Chapters.

Chapter 2 critically reviews the SLA literature to set out the context for the research. Then it discusses contemporary research on identity to generate a working definition of identity that can be adopted in the research. The latter part of the chapter focuses on three main influential theories which inform the ‘social turn’ and implicate identity in the SLA process: social identity and investment (Norton, 2000) in the field of SLA; six stumbling blocks in communication in the field of Intercultural Communication (Barna, 1998); and the Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). These theories are drawn on throughout the thesis – both to make sense of the data and in order to be ‘tested’ by the data.

Chapter 3 discusses methodology and the research design. The chapter justifies and explains the use of self-completed diaries and focus group interviews at both the pilot and main study stages. The chapter describes each of the main stages of the research, providing details of the data collection and analysis processes, the design and thinking that influenced the diary, the rationale behind and conduct of the focus group interviews and a description of the basic content analysis conducted on the qualitative data. Some ethical matters regarding participants as well as issues regarding reliability and validity of the data collected are also addressed.

Chapter 4 discusses the process of data analysis presents findings of diary data with reference to data of diary collected in pilot study.

Chapter 5 is structured similar to chapter 4, but addresses the focus groups in the main study, with reference to data from the pilot study. It describes the process of data collection from the focus group, then analyses the data to generate findings.

Chapter 6 combines the findings from Chapters 4 and 5. The combination of findings is part of the process of triangulating data from focus groups and diary for the purposes of validating and establishing the reliability of the data (as set out in Chapter 3 – Methodology). The findings are then evaluated with reference to three main theories: Social Identity (Norton, 2000); Stumbling block in Intercultural Communication (Barna, 1989) and Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). This chapter seeks to answer the research question regarding the implication of identity for participants' interactions in English.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter which summarises the key findings of the research. The conclusions are discussed with reference to relevant theories. Then, the chapter considers the implications and recommendations for Vietnamese students and future SLA theorising. Finally, the chapter discusses some limitations of the research and makes several suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

---

In this chapter, I will present and discuss aspects of the theories of identity underpinning this study. The chapter includes three sections. First, I will discuss the theories of identity in second language acquisition (SLA) relevant to this research. Second, I will briefly review the theories of identity in L2 communication, as part of the SLA process, that have informed my study. Third, I will discuss the theoretical framework of the study, which is based on three theories: social identity and investment (Norton, 2000); six stumbling blocks (Barna, 1998); and the Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982). Also in this chapter, I will present the cultural values/backgrounds in Vietnam that are considered to impact the identity and L2 communication of Vietnamese students.

#### 2.1 Overview of identity

Omoniyi (2006) acknowledges that identity has now emerged as a key concept in social and behavioural science. In the field of SLA, identity has recently come to the fore (Bayley and Schechter 2003; Isabelli-Garcia 2006; Kanno 2003; Kinginger 2004; Maiworm et al. 1991, 1993; Miller 2003; Norton 2000; Pellegrino 2005; Siegal, 1995, Norton Pierce 1995; Toohey 2000). The focus on identity is driven in part by the failure of SLA theories “to develop a theory of social identity that adequately integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (Norton Pierce 1995:12).

In fact, the importance of context to language learning had already been acknowledged, more than 30 years ago, in Schumann’s famous Acculturation Model (1978) and in Gardner’s and Lambert’s (1972) research investigating integrative motivation. However, SLA researchers such as Norton (2000) are increasingly privileging identity as a key concept with which to understand the complexity of the social context within which L2 learning occurs (Norton, *ibid*). I will start this section

by describing how identity re-theorises the two key theories in SLA (Acculturation Model and Integrative Motivation). I will then present the definition of identity operationalised in this research. Next, I will provide an account of how identity is used in SLA research; in particular, showing the relationship between identity and L2 interactions and communication.

## **2.2 Some key SLA theories utilising the concept of identity**

Acculturation (Schumann, 1978) is expressed in terms of the social and psychological integration of the learner to the TL group. So we can think – and measure - social integration in terms of the extent to which an individual interacts with TL speakers and culture (including accessing English language media). Psychological integration can be understood as the extent to which an individual is prepared and able to experience, understand and even assimilate a target culture. Schumann’s research proposes that learners can be positioned on a continuum of “social and psychological distance and social and psychological proximity to speakers of the TL” and argues that the “learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates” (1978: 29). Among Schumann’s six participants (two children, two adolescents and two adults), Alberto, a 33 year-old Costa Rican immigrant to the USA, developed only very limited English. Schumann attributes this failure to Alberto’s unwillingness to acculturate to the Americans. He was considered to be socially distant from the TL speakers, as he belonged - and appeared to prefer to belong - to a working class Latin American community. This community was self-contained and isolated from the host community, and Alberto socialised mainly with other immigrants in his neighbourhood, where Spanish was widely spoken. Schumann’s findings are controversial because Alberto was found to hold positive motivation and attitudes towards English speakers (obtained and measured by a questionnaire at the end of the study). Schumann explains this contradiction by casting doubt over the honesty of Alberto’s answers to the questionnaire, suggesting that he might have wanted to please the English-speaking researcher. There were certainly contradictions between Alberto’s answers and his behaviours: he did not make efforts to communicate with English speakers; he refused to own a TV (he claimed it was impossible to understand) and instead listened to Spanish music; he chose to work at nights (when contact with NS was limited) and did not attend the English classes that

were available locally. An assessment of Alberto's lifestyle led Schumann to conclude that Alberto lived in high anxiety and experienced high levels of protracted cultural shock.

Schumann's research is significant in that it acknowledges social and psychological factors as contributing to the process (and 'end-state') of SLA. Alberto is an example of a learner who had no cognitive deficits or biological difficulties capable of hindering his learning process. Alberto's lack of acculturation to the target language is the main cause of his poor attainment in the L2. Schumann's emphasis is on 'environment' (as a causative factor) and the extent to which it exposes learners to sufficient contacts with the TL culture to be of benefit, but also on the learner's own psychological openness to take advantage of such contacts with TL speakers.

However, Schumann's model was later refuted by a number of researchers: DeKeyser (1991); Freed (1990); Higgs & Clifford (1982); Segalowitz & Freed (2004) and Spada (1985, 1986). Among those who disagree with Schumann's findings, Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes, a Japanese photographer based in Hawaii is worth considering in detail. Like Alberto, Wes's English remained very limited. However, unlike Alberto, Wes displayed high levels of social interactions with NS and very low levels of anxiety. However, Wes displayed high levels of social interaction with NS and very low levels of anxiety, unlike Alberto. More recently, Norton (2000:115) criticizes Schumann (1976b) of "only hear(ing) what he (Schumann) wants to prove". She believes that Alberto did, indeed, tell the truth in his questionnaire (which showed that he had a positive attitude towards Americans). Schumann simply dismisses it and concludes that Alberto is unmotivated to acculturate and as a result his language pidginizes (a concept developed by Schumann to indicate reduced and simplified forms of English). Norton argues that Alberto should have been understood as a learner who had been marginalised by the target community despite his efforts to seek opportunities to speak the TL. Alberto is willing to interact with TL speakers and in fact did seek opportunities to do so. This is shown by his participation in the 10-month study and his practising of negative construction in English with Schuman.

Forty years ago Gardner and Lambert (1972:132) included social identification and ethnolinguistic identity to arrive at their famous concept of integrative motivation

(Ushioda, 2009). The key idea of the integrative motivation concept is that an L2 learner “must be willing to identify with a member of another ethnolinguistic group” (Gardner and Lambert, 1972:135). The link between integrative motivation and L2 achievement - in which motivation is seen as causal – has inspired considerable debate in SLA research. However, the significance of integrative motivation – for English at least - has been challenged given the global spread of the English language. English is now an international language; therefore it is impossible to identify any particular target English community to ‘integrate’ with. Ushioda and Dornyei (2009) suggest re-theorising motivation in SLA in the light of identity, in which an emphasis should be placed on learners’ internal identities - their ‘international posture’ (Yashima, 2002) - rather than an integrative concept which emphasises L2 learners’ identification toward an external target community. Although a significant amount of SLA identity-based literature is focused on establishing the importance of integrative willingness and cultural distance (between learners and the TL community) an alternative approach focuses instead on the emergence of a ‘global community of English language users’ (Ushioda and Dornyei, 2010: 3) which certain groups of English learners (professional and semi-professional and the internationally mobile) may feel that they belong to. Yashima (2002: 57) describes such learners as possessing an ‘international posture’. Deciding whether or not a global English language community exists or is fictitious is beyond the remit of this thesis. But the concept undoubtedly shifts the terms of the debate – if identity is important, it is not so much whether or not individual learners’ concept of ‘self’ can be made to correspond with that of an external reference group – the TL community - but the extent to which the L2 learner self-identifies him or herself as a member of a global English language community. However, it seems to me that this can be possibly exaggerated - English may be global but English learners can only be in one place at a time and wherever they are they will encounter a TL culture, because the concept of identity is influenced by ‘place’ (also see 2.3.4).

Clearly, however, identity counts. Block (2007) confirms that identity has now established its own role in SLA. So an issue here is whether international students in a particularistic study abroad (SA) context experience freedom or agency, or whether, *inter alia*, the SA context minimises individualisation and magnifies the deterministic potential – and therefore significance - of identity e.g. by creating economic or



linguistic powerlessness or spaces and opportunities in which students become the target of unwanted stereotyping.

Indeed, it appears easier to identify identity-based obstacles (to L2 proficiency in SA contexts) than benefits. There may be no such thing as a universal student experience, but studying abroad generally presents international students with certain psychological, social, economic and cultural challenges and opportunities which they must encounter and navigate. When students with limited knowledge of English cross borders thousands of miles away to stay and study in the UK, for example, their identity seems ‘bound’ to the mother tongue language (Miller, 2003). An alien setting poses significant challenges to international students. Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) emphasise the challenges associated with one’s sense of identity and identification upon moving from one country and culture to another. Less able to exercise autonomy the deterministic elements of social identity theory may, therefore, remain apposite for international students in a SA context (see Appendix K for further discussion of SLA contexts).

### **2.3 Definition of Identity in the Thesis**

This section describes a conceptualisation of identity of L2 learners that is relevant to the current study. It starts out with a review of the widespread confusion in definitions of identity in the field of SLA. Then, it presents the definition which accords with the context and research aims of this research.

#### **2.3.1 Definitions of identity in SLA research**

Gass and Selinker (2001:5) define SLA as a generally agreed term to refer to “the learning of a non-native language after the learning of native language”. The term refers to both the acquisition of a second language in a classroom situation and in more ‘natural’ exposure situations.

Recent literature has shown that identity is manifold, contextually realised and constantly shifting (Hall 1996; McRobbie 1996; Omonyi 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2001). SLA researchers have constructed different theories of identities to shed light on their contextual studies. However, different terms with or without clear

definitions of the concept of identity can be observed in SLA research. This reflects in itself the complexity and fluidity of the concept. The terminological confusion creates a situation in which some researchers are clearly working on identity but do not explicitly use the term. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) note, there are numerous terms in use: ‘identity’, ‘positioning’ (Davies & Harre, 1999) and ‘subject positions’ (Miller, 2006) are used almost interchangeably in the current literature. Hall (1995) uses ‘identification’ instead of ‘identity’ to capture the non-fixed state of the concept. He argues that the term ‘identity’ gives an impression that it is immovable. Weedon (1997) prefers the term ‘subjectivity’ which interestingly accords to the ‘social identity’ concept developed nearly twenty years earlier by Tajfel in 1978 (McNamara, 1997). Table 2.1 below illustrates the terminological complexity.

**Table 2.1: Terminological complexity – Identity**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Literature</b>
Social Identity	Miller (2003); Norton (1993, 1995, 2000); Morgan (1997); McNamara (1987);
Ethnic Identity	Goldstein (1996); Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997)
Cultural Identity	Bosher (1995); Scheter and Bayley (1997)
Linguistic/Ethnolinguistic Identity	By most sociologists
Second Language Identities	Block (2007)
Sociocultural Identity	Duff and Uchida (1997)
Subjectivity	Norton (1997)
The Self	Pellegrino (2005)
Voice	Thesen (1997)
National Identity	Kinginger (2004)
Ethnorelativism	Isabelli-García (2006)
Identification	Hall (1995)
Relational Development Identity	Boxer (2002)

This is not an exhaustive list of the research or terms used to explore the link between identity and SLA. However, it offers a brief picture of a wide range of identity ‘classifications’ and terminology which have been constructed and utilised in SLA research over the past fifteen years. Block (2007) maintains that most researchers working with identity do not develop a clear definition of the term. Block (2007) equates social identity with migrant identity. According to Block, all NNS living

abroad – either in employment or education – evidence a migrant identity (Block uses the term ‘second language identity’) delineated by: race, ethnicity, nationality, migration, gender, social class and language.

The thesis maintains that the identities of L2 learners in SA contexts influence the types of L2 interactions that they have. L2 learners bring with them certain identities, but new ones – wanted and unwanted, adopted and ascribed – may also be formed during the SA experience. These identities shape both the quantity and quality of learners’ L2 experiences. This, in turn, may influence L2 learners’ behaviours; how they make sense of and adapt to L2 encounters and, ultimately, their L2 communicative competence. This is a three-stage model of SLA, crudely comprising inputs (identities), L2 encounters (quality and quantity) and outcomes (L2 communicative competence). However, the relationships between the stages are iterative. Identities may influence encounters, but certain encounters may also contribute to a re-shaping of identity. Similarly, certain aspects of L2 interaction may be associated with positive or negative communicative competence outcomes; but the precise outcome is likely to be influenced by individual factors including those linked to motivation, expectations and personality.

### **2.3.2 Norton’s definition of social identity**

As such, I find Norton’s (2000:19) definition of social identity as “the relationship between the individual and larger social world as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services and law courts” helpful. I am also persuaded by Norton’s insistence that identity must be considered a dynamic concept; one that can change over time and which varies from one social context to another and/or when subjected to shifts in personal disposition. My interpretation of identity is that it is the way a person views themselves, and which is: socially and culturally constructed, vulnerable to change over time, and shaped by particularities of community and experience.

### **2.3.3 Criticism of Norton’s definition of identity and my response**

Norton’s definition of social identity has been criticised. First, Norton does not distinguish clearly social identity from cultural identity. Norton (2000) admits that she separated the two concepts at the beginning of her study but eventually decided that

cultural identity and social identity have more similarities than differences. Second, McNamara (1997) claims that the concept of social identity used by Norton Pierce (1997) is merely a repackaging of the concept as developed in earlier research (including that of Tajfel [1978]) and also accords with the concept of ‘subjectivity’ developed by Weedon (1997) in that both share three characteristics: fluidity, vulnerability to change and sensitivity to context.

Those criticisms can be overcome by a deeper understanding of the relationship between the type of identities and the social context. In fact, such criticism only further emphasises the context-sensitivity of the identity concept. Identity can be constructed through individual interaction with others, an imposition or an elective, wanted or unwanted. Each social context is unique which generates unique data and types of identity. As Block (2007:202) states:

*My main aim has been to show how second language identity work varies considerably across these contexts. First, it varies as regard the extent to which it actually takes place... Second, when second language identity work does take place, there is a good deal of variability as regards the aspects of identity that emerge as salient. Thus, in some situations, gender emerges as the single most significant aspect of identity, while in other situations it is race or social class that is most significant.*

Therefore, Norton’s (2000) definition of ‘social identity’ may differ from other researchers, but may still be an ‘actual’ social identity that genuinely emerged from her research context. Also, such overlapping between cultural and social identities is an illustration of the view that L2 learners possess multiple identities. Norton seeks flexibility by not attempting to draw a clear-cut distinction between the two and acknowledges that a person can have multiple identities which are constantly shifting across contexts and time. Therefore identity should be seen as a set of psychological, social and historical “variables”. The experience of L2 learners is unique, changing over time, even in the same context. Firth & Wagner (2007) consider this view of multiple identities as a leap forward from earlier beliefs that learners have only one identity. The variety of terms and identity-types and criticisms of Norton’s (2000) social identity can be interpreted as a struggle in which SLA researchers are

attempting to construct a framework which helps explain and explore the experience of L2 learners in the real world. On the other hand, they can also be viewed as reflecting a flexible approach in order to capture a slippery concept.

In short, Norton's definition of social identity serves as guidance for my research but also emphasises the need to be flexible when identifying and evaluating specific identities (such as gender, race and ethnicity) and social roles (such as international student and boyfriend/girlfriend) emerging from the research. In the following section, I will clarify some of the linked concepts that fall under the general term identity or social identity.

### **2.3.4 Social identity, Social roles, and Cultural identity**

In her definition of social identity (see 2.3.2), Norton's (2000) understanding of the way that the 'social' influences identity seems to focus on how it constrains the roles people can play in society. For example, she explicitly discusses how the deteriorating socio-economic status of immigrants affects their identities – how they see themselves and how others see them.

Wetherell (1998), however, views social identity as one of four main perspectives of understanding personal identity: it accounts for *social* influences on personal identity. The other three include the phenomenological perspective, the psychoanalytic perspective and the biological perspective. However, the biological perspective can also be combined with a social perspective. Lewis' (1998) suggests that our identity is formed based on the sense of who we are, which is first felt by our body: eye shape and the colour of our skin and hair, etc. We develop a sense of 'self' and how we might be related to (and distanced from) those who we assume are (physically) similar (or dissimilar). This sense of 'self' is not purely biological because it is felt in relation to other people, and is therefore socially sensitive. But as a consequence Lewis (*ibid*) argues that race and ethnicity be classified as social rather than just biological. Lewis also addresses the link between 'race' and 'place' which can help understand the experiences of Vietnamese (Asians) in the UK (Europe), and points out that our bodies also provide others with visual clues with which to categorise us. Lewis's argument can be extended to assert that gender also be considered socially constructed rather than biological. Given the nature of this research the belief that identity is

socially constructed is considered to be an appropriate lens through which to understand behaviours. Other perspectives - biological, psychoanalytic and phenomenological- offer less utility in the context of this research, but the biological and phenomenological have not been entirely neglected.

Wetherell (1998:55) defines cultures as the “customs, conventions, signs and symbols of a society which are passed on from individual to individual through learning”. Culture is therefore also socially constructed. That view slightly resembles Norton’s (2000) in that cultural and social identity are two overlapping concepts albeit evidencing more similarities than differences.

### **2.3.5 Personal characteristics**

Dewaele and Furnham (1999) consider personality traits as relatively stable dispositions and indicators of personal needs. Eysenck (1974), cited in Dewaele and Furnham (1999), sees extraversion/introversion as a key dimension of personality. Whether or not individuals are socially or biologically programmed to extraversion/introversion is beyond the remit of this thesis, but certainly extraversion/introversion has implications for the behaviours and experiences of international students whilst studying abroad because it may shape the extent and nature of their L2 interactions. Research by Dewaele and Furnham (1999:537) concludes that extraversion/introversion primarily affects speech production in the L2 (and argues that motivation is the main personality variable affecting SLA). However, Lasen-Freeman (2001) argues that L2 learning depends on ‘openness to experience’ and therefore considers learners’ social networking abilities as promoting L2 progress. Learners who want to interact and who are good at it will experience greater social contacts (and improve their L2) more than those who are less inclined to seek out and manage such contacts (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Evaluating L2 learners’ ability to create and manage L2 interaction opportunities may therefore be important.

### **2.4 Communicative competence**

MacIntyre & Charos (1996) believe that the primary goal for L2 learners is communication, which is manifested in L2 communication frequency. Macintyre & Charos (1996:19) conclude that “communicating in a second language appears to be

related to ... most important, the perception of competence”. In this section, I will discuss in detail the concepts of communication and intercultural communication before offering a definition of ‘communicative competence’ in the context of SLA.

Communication is defined as the management of messages in order to create meaning (Griffin, 2005). In other words, communication is considered to achieve a certain purpose through interacting with others. Every interaction occurs within a physical and contextual environment. The former refers to the location (seminar, bus stop, etc.) where the communication takes place. The contextual, or social environment refers to the context that frames the interaction and influences both the substance and the style of communication employed (McDaniel, Samovar, et.al, 2012) – if asked ‘how are you today?’ by a relative stranger on the street one’s response will be different to that provided to a doctor at a medical appointment or to a group of close friends during a social event or to that given on Facebook.

Research on identity in communication mainly focuses on the intercultural communication context (Chen, 2010). Intercultural communication refers to how people from different cultures interact face-to-face.

Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Spitzberg (2000:375) as ‘appropriate and effective behaviour in a given context’. Spitzberg’s definition, however, is found unhelpful because the perpetrators of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour are not necessarily in a position to know how their behaviour has impacted on interlocutors – whether it is appropriate or inappropriate and therefore whether or not they are practising effective intercultural communication. Barna (1998) defines intercultural communicative competence as the inner capacity to overcome the stumbling blocks in communication (see 2.7.3). Barna’s definition appears more practical and specific: competence is measured by the extent to which one has overcome six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. However, the list is almost certainly not exhaustive. For example, Kim (1991) too identifies a range of ‘stumbling blocks’ some of which are not addressed in Barna’s framework. According to Kim (1991:259), intercultural communicative competence refers to “the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely cultural differences, and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture,

and the accompanying experience of stress”. Stumbling blocks clearly exist, but there is disagreement regarding how many there are and most of them are themselves complex and contested concepts that require unpacking. Further, Barna’s and Kim’s definitions of intercultural communicative competence are presented as suggestions of how to improve one’s intercultural communicative competence, rather than measures of how well one has achieved specific L2 objectives.

MacIntyre and Charos (1996) advocate a basic measure – simply that of how able do learners themselves feel when communicating in the L2? Although communicative competence can be formally assessed, according to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), Clément and Baker *et al* (2003) and Brantmeier (2005) L2 learners’ assessments of their own communicative competence are generally accurate, with positive assessments generally associated with enjoyment (of an experience) and the absence of anxiety; and it is this measure of competence that is used in the thesis.

Norton’s concept of investment (see 2.7.1.2) has viewed language learners as investors who make efforts in their learning and expect outcomes from their investment. She argues that the learner’s world is a site of struggle in which learners have to negotiate opportunities to practice the TL. The process of learning a language is not merely one of learning the words, grammar and pronunciation, but also involves the construction of ‘self’. Learners’ L2 communicative competence should therefore be seen as a process of identification in an alien context. In the process of identity construction, the primary mode of self-representation - speaking - must undergo a transformation. For minority students (eg. Vietnamese) who enter a dominant culture (eg, English culture) proficiency in the dominant language is essential, as it is the primary means of making sense, being seen and being heard (Trueba 1989). Interaction with target speakers occurs in specific social contexts or sites which may facilitate or constrain students’ abilities to make sense of themselves and others. Guiora *et al* (1972:112) suggests that of all language skills, speaking is psychologically the most demanding, necessitating fundamental changes to “the basic modes of identification by the self and others”. An investment in language learning, therefore, is also an investment in the identities of L2 learners.



This section has defined several key concepts: communication, communicative interaction, intercultural communication and communicative competence (in the context of an intercultural communication context). It has also established that communicative competence can be assessed by L2 interlocutors themselves. The issue of how communicative competence can be measured has been discussed through the stumbling blocks (Barna, 1998); through the frequency of interactions (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996); through the absence of anxiety and presence of enjoyment (Clément and Baker *et al.*, 2003 and Brantmeier, 2005); through the ability to ‘impose the right to be heard’ in communication (Norton, 2000) (which will be discussed later in 2.7.1). I have also argued that Norton’s concept of investment helps us to understand how L2 communicators make sense of their L2 experiences and their communicative competence.

## **2.5 Identity and L2 communicative competence**

Researchers have attempted to chart the types of identities that emerge over a period of time and their impact on L2 communicative competence. Wilkinson (2002) looks at how identity is manifest in teacher-student relations. His research describes how participants feel when they are seen as learners (or rather inexpert speakers of the target language) not only in the classroom but also with host families and strangers in public areas. Being corrected by interlocutors, no matter how respectfully, still resulted in participants losing faith and subsequently performing to a lower standard. Indeed, Wilkinson (2002) concludes that identifying identity-based obstacles to L2 proficiency in SA contexts seems to be easier than identifying the benefits. Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) also emphasise challenges associated with one’s sense of identity and identification upon moving from one country and culture to another. Studying abroad generally presents international students with certain psychological, social, economic and cultural challenges and opportunities which they must encounter and navigate.

Roberts and Simonot (1987:138) describe a context in which “adult workers have to learn to communicate by communicating in order to learn”. It is worth noting that the process even happens in indifferent or hostile environments, and even when the L2 learner has a strong desire to learn. The researchers conclude that:

*They (L2 learners) are, from the outset, disenfranchised by their lack of the language which in turn leads to a loss of rights at work and in their private lives. We see here language performing the function of perpetuating the power structure and in turn being a product of these structures.*

Acton and Walker de Felix (1986); Laubscher (1994); Bacon (1995), Wilkinson (1998b) and Isabelli-Garcia (2006) have examined possible ‘stages’ that SA participants go through. In her study, Isabelli-Garcia (2006) was interested in whether or not four Americans on an SA programme in Argentina were able to join the established speech communities and build up social networks (Milroy, 1987) in their host environment. In general, her participants continued to project a superior American national identity (towards the TL speakers). Counter-intuitively, the SA experience enhanced affiliation to an inherited national identity, as opposed to the development of greater intercultural sensitivity.

Much discussed in SLA research is the sexual harassment of female students and how such harassment affects opportunities to develop their target languages. Polanyi (1995); Twombly (1995); and Talburt and Stewart (1999) discuss this in depth. Female students in their studies report how they were frustrated at not being able to talk with men in the host countries (Russia, Costa Rica and Spain) because of the men’s sexual advances. The women finally chose to avoid going out and therefore experienced limited opportunities to practise speaking the TL. Clearly the imposed identity of female-sexuality by the TL culture (men in host countries) has shaped the type and frequency of interaction that L2 learners have in the TL country.

Mismatches in expectation and perception between TL speakers and L2 learners may also influence the quality and quantity of L2 interactions in SA contexts. Boxer (2002:179) studied cross-cultural gate-keeping encounters in an American university context. She based her study on the theories of *Gemeinschaft* (membership of a society through birth) and *Gesellschaft* (instrumental relationships not merely based on common history or background) developed by Scollon and Scollon (1995). The research focused on the face-to-face communication between international students and two staff members who worked in the International Program Office in the

university. Boxer (2002:204) concludes that the work of staff members in the university is not enough to lead to “relational talk and gate opening”. The data collected confirms that students failed to recognise and take advantage of the opportunities even when the staff attempted small talk or used terms of endearment, which she terms as “Relational Development Identity”. There was a lack of knowledge on the part of students regarding how to engage correctly with their interlocutors. The staff, on the other hand, were considered to judge students too harshly. International students, having passed TOELF (Test of English as a Foreign Language) tests to enter an American university, were expected to understand the norms and rules of interactions in America. If they failed to do so, it was considered the students’ own fault because, as one staff member commented, “they are not mixed enough with Americans”. Boxer states that ESL teachers agree that passing TOEFL tests at 550 or 600 (out of 750) does not mean a student can understand bureaucratic workings and immigration laws. She also indicates that while there should be a two-way understanding, international students are left with the burden to wrestle with ‘the rules of the game’. In short, there was a mismatch between the staff’s intentions/perceptions and students’ perceptions/reactions. Boxer used a metaphor: the staff put the key to the door for the students but did not open it for them - they expected the student to know and open it by themselves. Unsurprisingly, it remained closed.

The experiences of the international students in Boxer’s research are evidence of how students have to ‘struggle’ even in a university setting where there are deemed to be favourable conditions facilitating effective communication with TL speakers (staff members). The data (ibid: 204) suggests:

*Lack of shared contextualization cues can cause missed opportunities for Relational Identity Development. Stereotypes are likely to be reinforced in such instances. Gates close that might otherwise be opened.*

In addition to students’ extra-classroom experiences, the university - as a physical and bureaucratic entity – also emerged as problematic. The unique experience of L2 learners in a naturalistic context requires SLA researchers to address the relationship between learners and the ‘real world’ that they occupy. Broad-brush assumptions

regarding the ease of accessing L2 interaction opportunities in naturalistic settings are easily problematised, so too the entire SLA process. There is no such things as a universal international student experience and the remainder of this chapter draws on the ‘social turn’ in SLA research to understand how identity might be responsible for shaping international students’ L2 interactions and their L2 communicative competence.

Ricento (2005:899) criticises SLA research for not taking into account the “social aspect of language learning and use”. Using the concept of identity to investigate the experience of L2 learners, Ricento concludes that learners pay a price of losing their identity or accepting dual identities in exchange for being accepted into the TL culture:

*... an individual’s identity in L2 contexts is mediated by the reactions of others to that individual’s social and cultural position, which in turn, can influence that individual’s motivation to learn in ways that are not predictable using standard psychological or sociological categories*

Socio-biological factors and cultural stereotyping can have a powerful effect on learners’ L2 experiences. When Mishela, a female black African student in Spain (Talburt and Stewart, 1999) walked on the street, she often received sexual comments from local Spanish men who saw black African women as sexually symbolic. The link between the discrimination experienced by Mishela outside the classroom and her limited linguistic development is not established, but the study raises important issues and connections between culture, race, identity and language learning. According to Mishela, her difficulties were not “something cultural but an ignorant mind” (Block, 2003:168169). Her identity and experiences as a black female student can therefore be understood through the lens of a cultural stereotype (the black woman as a symbol of exotic and aggressive sexuality).

In summary, the above discussions suggest that identity appears to shape L2 interactions because the SA context is a challenging learning environment; and because the process of accessing the TL community is a social endeavour – it is a

process of negotiation and a site of struggle shaped by the distribution and exercise of power which is inextricably linked to the identities and social roles of its main actors.

## **2.6 Vietnamese Social and Cultural Backgrounds**

Cultural understanding and constructs are therefore implicated in the communication experiences of international students. An understanding of Vietnamese culture and society is therefore considered important. The ancient Vietnamese culture was formed around the Red River (Song Hong), and featured typical South East Asia culture (Huu Ngoc, 1995). Current Vietnamese culture is a result of three major developments: Chinese rule (179 BC – 1858), French colonialism (1858 – 1945) and socialist ideology (since 1945). As a result of contact with other cultures, Vietnamese culture is a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism Taoism, and Socialism. Much of the contact with new cultures and ideology is marked by conflict but the core characteristics of Vietnamese culture – *ban sac van hoa* - were often maintained and directed towards protecting and promoting nationalist sentiment. As a consequence, patriotism remains very powerful in Vietnam.

### **2.6.1 Strong sense of community**

Vietnam's largely agrarian economy was labour intensive and rice production in particular required significant levels of co-operation and coordination among people in the community. Therefore, Vietnamese people developed a culture of bonding to each other, to support each other's' growing and harvesting activities. Phan Ngoc (1998:89) describes this as a 'village culture' (*Van hoa lang xa*). Villagers support each other not only in farming but also in social life and Ly and Howard (2005:4) observe a 'strong human relationship' as a core characteristic in Vietnamese culture. Individual villagers have clear understandings of where they belong and of their responsibilities. In return, the village protects their rights, offering them a base, a community where he/she belongs and lives: the saying 'the King's rules are surpassed by village rules' - *phep vua thua le lang* - emphasises the importance of 'the local' and 'community' over centralised sites of power and even the king.

Phan Ngoc (1998:444) suggests that a traditional Vietnamese person defines his/her identity in relation to the surrounding people in his/her local community. This is

illustrated by looking at the form of address used in the Vietnamese language. The forms change constantly with the same person. When a Vietnamese talks to his father, he calls his father ‘*cha*’ and refers to himself as ‘*con*’. But when he talks to a brother he would refer to himself as ‘*anh*’ and to his younger brother as ‘*em*’. When he talks to an older sister he becomes ‘*em*’ and refers to her as ‘*chi*’. Vietnamese interlocutors need to be aware of age, gender, social status etc. during social exchanges. There is therefore an element of fluidity in identity that changes from interaction-to-interaction and aspects of one’s personal identity are shaped by individuals’ relations with surrounding people.

Vietnamese forms of address are also evidence of the importance of community in Vietnamese culture. Ly and Horward (2005) indicate that Vietnamese people address people in the community-at-large – including strangers - using the same form of address as they use with their family members. For example an older male person is referred to as *anh* (as is a brother); an older female person is referred to as *chi* (as is a sister). This rule applies to many other addresses: *ba* (elderly woman/grandmother); *ong* (elderly man/grandfather); *chu* (middle-aged man/uncle); *co* (middle-aged woman/aunt) etc. This possibly originated from a popular legend that the very first 100 Vietnamese people were born to the same mother (Au Co) and father (Lac Long Quan): that all Vietnamese people today are members of one big family and have a duty to render assistance to one another.

### **2.6.2 Respect and responsibility**

Vietnamese people are expected to show respect to others regardless of their social status, age or gender. Phan Ngoc (1998) considers this an example of how *ban sac van hoa* were maintained despite the influence of Confucian hierarchies emphasising masculine and authority – poor and low social status individuals can still gain respect as long as they fulfil their responsibilities to their family, village and country. Individuals are expected to care more about other people and to subordinate personal desires. This philosophy is clearly influenced by Buddhism but Phan Ngoc (1998) also suggests the relationship works in reverse: Buddhism accords with *ban sac van hoa* and was purposely adopted because of this. Such a philosophy contrasts with Western culture which generally encourages individualism (Phan Ngoc, *ibid*).

### 2.6.3 Gender in Vietnamese Culture

According to Le and Horward *et al* (2005), prior to Confucianism women/femininity were worshipped in Vietnam and men and women had roughly equal social status. Infact the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam was relatively limited (compared to certain other South East Asian countries) and the Confucian maxim ‘men and women should be physically distant’ (*‘nam nu thu thu bat than’*) was largely ignored. According to Phan Ngoc (1998: 85) Vietnamese social gatherings (*le hoi*) were opportunities for men and women to socialise together. Over time, however, men began to dominate the political and social world and women’s authority was largely restricted to the domestic sphere (although highly valued). Education – the key to social status – was only accessed by men, depriving women of opportunities to improve their social status and consolidating their domestic roles (Nguyen Phuong An, 2004:167).

This situation was increasingly challenged during the French colonial years (1858-1945), when feminism, individual freedoms and free marriage were introduced and hitherto restrictive dress codes were abandoned (the *‘ao dai’*, a tight-fitting dress influenced by western fashion, was introduced). However, as Nguyen Phuong An (2007) argues, this new openness was only available to middle class women - the majority of Vietnamese women were peasants and they remained under Confucian influences.

Gender inequality remains a problem in Vietnam characterised by double standards *vis-à-vis* acceptable behavior and sexual conduct. Asian women are expected to dress modestly, expound conservative values and lead morally respectable lifestyles. Men, on the other hand, are subject to fewer sexual and cultural mores. Sex before marriage continues to be frowned upon in Vietnam, but when it happens almost all the opprobrium is reserved for the woman (Nguyen Phuong An, 2007). However, increasing numbers of Vietnamese women are challenging these traditional gendered roles and accessing education in order to pursue successful careers, either in addition to or in place of any domestic/familial expectations. Even though Asian men are subject to far fewer restrictions in terms of their social conduct, middle class Asian men are under pressure to provide for their families and the concept of the strong,

responsible and ‘socially adept’ Asian male – commanding respect - remains powerful (Davis and Proctor, 1989). As already noted, numerous researchers investing SLA in SA contexts have identified gender as an important variable. Asian women, like black women, have not escaped sexual-cultural stereotyping. Like black women, the West has constructed Asian women as ‘exotic’. However, in contrast to the masculinisation of black women, Asian women are constructed as hyperfeminine - available, submissive and dutiful, subordinating their own sexual needs to those of (white) men (Pyke and Johnson, 2003: 36).

#### **2.6.4 Vietnamese’ Attitudes towards the West**

The French introduced notions of democracy, individualism and personal freedom to Vietnam (Jamieson, 1993; Smith, 1968), although these applied most to the urban middle class (Nguyen Phuong An, 2007:295). Individualism began to replace collectivism and is associated with Vietnam’s economic reforms in the 1980s which, according to Thomas & Drummond, (2003:2) and Marr (2003) increased Vietnam’s porosity to western goods and culture. Gillespie (2005:62) argues that this has been accompanied by a shift away from traditional Vietnamese culture to a society based on “individualism and consumerism” where western values and lifestyles are valorised and constructed as ‘cool’: a process particularly pronounced amongst Vietnam’s young people (Nguyen Phuong An, 2004:175).

Patriotism and communitarianism remain influential in Vietnam, but co-existing and competing with the individualisation processes associated with westernisation. Crudely, the latter helps to explain why so many young Vietnamese pursue a Western education (see 2.6.5), whilst the latter may help to explain certain behaviours of Vietnamese students during their sojourns – particularly the widespread formation and pastoral role of Vietnamese Societies.

#### **2.6.5 Education as motivation**

Thus far, it would not be too erroneous to describe SLA in SA context as a learning process in potentially rewarding but nevertheless tricky circumstances. It is appropriate, therefore, to also understand learners’ motivations, which may have implications for their ability to learn from and overcome setbacks. Parenthetically, an



investigation of individual learning styles would provide an even greater level of resolution, but is considered beyond the remit of this thesis.

The majority of participants are middle class, educated professionals/semi-professional. According to Trinh Duy Luan (1993) and Bresnan (1997:77), Vietnam's urban middle class comprise three overlapping advantaged groups: (1) employees in administrative roles; (2) those who have economic capital; and (3) those who are educated and possess employable skills. The participants of this research belong to the third group. All participants were born during the 1980s when the American War had ended and the country was opening the door to the outside world via a series of economic reforms known as '*doi moi*'. However, the market economy also brought about higher unemployment and a widening gap between Vietnam's rich and poor and it was at this time that the middle class emerged as a powerful strata. All of the participants are young and come from the two largest cities in Vietnam - Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – where they were employed in relatively well-paid semi-professional and professional jobs. King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh (2008:804-806) describe young professionals in Vietnam as consumerist, committed to their personal career development (via acquiring new knowledge and skills), and to accessing news and information. They have aspirations to improve and maintain their social status.

Credentialism is important in Vietnam and education has long been considered the best way of securing personal (career) success. It can be traced back to feudal times when education was one way of climbing the class ladder (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974:26). The tradition continued during French colonial times (1883 – 1954). Education was not only a route to success and social status, but also a means of achieving public respectability (Tran Trong Kim, 1929 cited in Jamieson, 1993:95). After the French left and when Vietnam moved towards communism, between 1954 and 1986 young people who performed particularly well in their university entrance exams were sent to other communist bloc countries to receive a better education and upon their return to Vietnam were offered key positions working for the government. Therefore, in Vietnam there is a widespread belief that educational qualifications, especially those gained from outside Vietnam, are a passport to success; but the high tuition fees and living costs associated with international study render this option

available only to a minority (King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2008:800). The middle class therefore view international study as a financial investment to improve their career prospects and consolidate their social status.

## **2.7 Key Theories used in the research**

This section is focused on developing a deeper understanding of how identity impacts the L2 communication with reference to three theories: Norton's (2000) power relations, Barna's (1989) 'stumbling blocks' and Giles' (1982) intergroup model. The thesis as a whole engages extensively with these. I will explain the major approaches; how they are used in this research and position each theory in the literature.

Research on identity in communication mainly focuses on how identity is shaped by considerations of power and how it influences interactions (Chen, 2010). The discipline of studying identity construction and its influence on interactions is based on four approaches: intergroup approach, cultural approach, critical cultural approach and post-colonial approach (Shin & Jackson, 2003). Intergroup approach adopts the theory of social identity to shed light on the inter-ethnic communication from the perspective of uncertainty reduction and ethnolinguistics and is reflected the work of Giles and Byrne (1982). The cultural approach views communicative competence as culturally and ethnically specific variable and can be discerned in the work of Barna, (1998). The critical cultural approach and post-colonial approach share a similar assumption that identity is re-constructed constantly under the unequal distribution of power in the society and is reflected in the work of Norton (2000).

### **2.7.1 Social identity and investment**

In this section, the concept of social identity is explored in depth. This also helps define the term social interaction, which will be used widely throughout the thesis. In the second and third parts of this section, the Norton's (2000) understanding of investment is also presented, in light of motivation theories. Finally, the fourth part will discuss another layer of power relations, between NS and NNS.

### 2.7.1.1 Social identity and social interactions

Norton's (2000:19) definition of social identity is focused on understanding tensions between people at the micro level of daily interactions which are characterised by asymmetries of power including unequal access to symbolic and material resources.

Social interactions can be understood in light of Norton's (2000) definition of social identity (also see 2.3.2). A social interaction is a negotiation between a person who performs in a context to present his/her identity. Social interactions therefore include a context where one interlocutor interacts with another and what is going on between the two communicators. Social interaction therefore exists at daily micro levels such as a simple transaction in a shop or a small talk with a stranger at a bus stop, etc. Social interactions also exist in a macro level which is manifested through the unequal distribution of power relations, which will be discussed below.

In her longitudinal study of five immigrant women in Canada, Norton (2000) argues that language learners have complex social identities, which can be understood in relation to the power relations that structures social order. Drawing on the concept of subjectivity by Weedon (1997) Norton Pierce describes a learner's social identity as 'multiple and contradictory'. The success or failure of the learning process depends on how the learner navigates his or her way to construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard and the terms of the discourse. Understanding the concept of identity therefore requires an understanding of the concept of power relations and how they operate in a social setting. As identity is shaped through social interactions, it is also shaped by a social order that reflects relations of power. Norton's (2000:7) defines power as:

*...socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated.*

Norton's definition stresses how symbolic and material resources are produced, distributed and validated in a social structure. These symbolic resources are: language, education and friendship; and material resources (capital goods, real estate and money). Norton agrees with Foucault (1980) that power relations reflect themselves both at macro (institutions, government) and micro level (daily social exchanges), and

that power is unequally distributed in a society. Power is not manifested in physical possessions, but in social exchange. Norton's definition of power accords with Weber's (cited in Coates, 1995:41) "power is the probability that an actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" – a view fully compatible with the process of L2 learning in SA contexts.

The centrality of power relations lies in the unequal distribution of *both* symbolic and material resources. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) work, Norton (2000:8) agrees that there had been an assumption among SLA researchers that those who speak regard those who listen as 'worthy to listen', and those who listen regard those who speak as 'worthy to speak'. Norton (*ibid*) therefore suggests that an expanded definition of communicative competence should include the "right to speech" or "the power to impose reception". This requires a sort of "investment" by learners in order to learn a second language. They do so to negotiate access to symbolic and material resources.

Norton emphasises on both material and symbolic resources as the keys in understanding the unequal power relations. In the context of the research, participants are Vietnamese students, this can be applied with a focus on the symbolic resources (English language). If we consider only economic/financial resources as the key, for example (the one who pays to learn will experience fewer difficulties than the one who gets paid to learn), we cannot understand many international students' sub-optimal experiences. Students in Welsh's (2001) research demonstrate very little difference in the scale and types of difficulties affecting both groups. Students are assumed to have more positive experiences in their interactions with TL speakers than immigrants, precisely because students pay to be accommodated and pay to learn. However, in terms of symbolic resources (e.g. English language skills) they, like immigrants, are still 'dependant' on TL people: they have to negotiate and struggle (Schuman, 1978; Goldstein, 1996; Norton, 2000; Welsh, 2001; Boxer 2004).

### **2.7.1.2 Investment**

Norton (2000) developed the concept of "investment" to describe learners' desire to learn a target language. Learners have a certain expectation and hope to receive a good return from their 'investment', one which will achieve access to symbolic

(education, healthcare, etc.) and material (financial) power/resources in the TL community. This, in turn, will increase their ‘cultural capital’ - a concept developed by Bordieu and Passeron (1977) to refer to the knowledge and modes of thoughts which belong to classes and groups in a particular social context. Ellis (1997:42) supports this view of L2 acquisition as a site of ‘struggle’ and ‘investment’.

*Successful learners are those who reflect critically on how they engage with native speakers and who are prepared to challenge the accepted social order by constructing and asserting social identities of their own choice.*

The investment that a learner makes in a target language therefore can be understood as an investment in their social identity. They expect a wider range of identities in the target community. Investment and identity are concepts which accompany each other, or as Norton describes it: “investment is best understood in the context of a post-structural notion of identity” (Churchill, 2002:4). This perspective can help us understand the role of power relations in the interactions between learners and TL speakers.

### **2.7.1.3 Differentiating between investment and motivation**

The concept of investment helps explore deeper the interrelationship between learners and the social world. It contrasts with the instrumental motivation of Gardner and Lambert (1972) which views the desire of learners as fixed and unitary. The following examines the concept of motivation in more detail and compares and contrasts this with the concept of investment.

#### **Motivation**

Several different types of motivation orientations that have been used within SLA research, including: resultative (Hermann, 1980; Savignon, 1972; Strong, 1984); intrinsic and extrinsic (Dörnyei, 2001); travel, friendship, prestige and knowledge (Kruidenier and Clement, 1986); self-understanding and instrumental (Belmechri and Hummel, 1998) and integrative assimilation (Graham, 1984 cited in Ricento 2005). The most influential work on motivation is arguably that by Gardner (1985). He is

interested in establishing the relationship between motivation and achievement in SLA. According to Gardner (1985:50), motivation incorporates four distinct aspects: “a goal, effortful behaviour, a desire to attain the goal and favourable attitudes towards the activity in question”. The goal is the reason why an individual wants to learn a second language; effortful behaviour is the activities that the person employs to learn the language; the desire reflects how much she/he wants to achieve the goal; and finally attitude refers to how she/he feels about the learning process. Gardner emphasises that all four aspects are involved but that they are not uni-dimensional. For example, the goal acts as a stimulus for motivation but is itself not a measurable component. Motivation itself varies because the last three categories (efforts, desire and attitude toward the activity) are variable. This distinction has brought about the two notions of “orientation” (long-range goals) and “motivations” (efforts learners are ready to make). The former involves types of motivations and the latter refers to their “intensity”. In collaboration with Lambert, Gardner identifies two types of motivation orientations: instrumental (Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991) - which refers to functional reasons such as securing jobs and educational opportunities - and integrative - which reflects an interest in the target culture and people (Gardner, 1985; Gardner and Lambert, 1959). These ignite debates regarding which motivation is capable of generating most achievement in SLA. Gardner’s and Lambert’s Canadian research suggests the integrative type is most significant, but later acknowledge the importance of instrumentalism based on evidence from the Philippines and India (Ellis, 2004). Gardner and Lambert eventually agree that both types of motivations are equally important and co-exist in a single learner group.

After a review of 27 studies in motivation using integrative – instrumental constructs, Au (cited in Ricento, 2005:897), casts doubt over the measurement of motivation and the theory behind the measurement. According to Au, the reliability of the measurement tools is questionable. One cannot easily be defined as having just or mainly integrative or just or mainly instrumental motivation. Graham (Ricento, 2005:88-97) also problematises the concept of integrative motivation and introduces his own concept: integrative assimilation. Here, assimilative motivation refers to a desire to become a member of the TL community not just to learn the TL (as opposed to the case of integrative motivation): the former requires constant contact with the TL community whereas it is not a prerequisite for the latter.

Gardner and Lambert's view of the link between motivation and L2 achievement - in which motivation is seen as causal - is also challenged. Research in resultative motivation actually indicates the reverse - it is the success or failure in L2 that affects learners' motivation and at a quite sophisticated level: in a French study, success in the target language was found to enhance positive feelings towards local people and culture, not merely greater progress in the TL. At the same time, a Californian study of Mexican English learners demonstrated that success in English heightened female learners' exposure to discrimination, eventually undermining their respect for and interest in American culture (Ellis, 1997: 75) - *less* integratively oriented Mexican women in California were more successful in learning English than those who were *more* integratively oriented.

In addition, Gardner and Lambert's concept of motivation is overly-deterministic in that the types of motivations they describe are presented as a menu for learners to choose to apply to their tasks, eventually resulting in success or failure. Crookes and Schmidt (1994) point out that some research suggests some learners do not necessarily subscribe to any particular motivation. This very nearly accords with what Noel *et al* (2000) term as amotivation - the absence of a motivation to learn. This is controversial as it runs counter to the Olsonian belief that nobody does anything unless they want to or are coerced. Individuals are also found to have changed their motivation types throughout a course of study. Gardner and Lambert's research has encouraged closer scrutiny of the types of motivations in practice and prompted further studies into which motivation type contributes most to SLA achievement. Overall, however, the degree of effort that learners are prepared to commit to their learning experience (and why they chose to do so) remains under-researched (Ellis, 2004).

In response to these criticisms, Dörnyei (2001) developed a process model of learning and motivation which aims to chart how motivation changes over time. He divides the process model into three stages: a "preactional stage" which resembles the idea of orientation ("choice motivation"); an "actional stage" dealing with efforts that learners are ready to make, reflecting the quality of the learning experience; and a "postactional stage" involving the attributions outside the learning experience which decides learner's willingness to continue. While Dörnyei's model can be considered

superior to the more static concept described earlier (Ellis, 2004), it still struggles to capture the complex, dynamic and multidimensional elements of motivation. Dörnyei himself (2001:9) considers his ten “contemporary motivation theories” as “far from complete” and calls for “an eclectic construct to represent multiple perspectives” (ibid:13). Later, whilst discussing individual differences including the concept of motivation (and “self-motivation), Dörnyei (2005:219) still admitted to “irritation in understanding individual difference variables toward SLA”. He believes that “all the variables described in this book are either in the process of, or in desperate need of theoretical restructuring” (ibid: 218). To avoid the ‘irritation’, Dörnyei advances “intriguing parallels” which suggest SLA researchers take into account the context where the learning task and learners are situated; adopt more complex theoretical paradigms; and attempt to integrate linguistic and psychological approaches.

Much of the above evidences the difficulties experienced by SLA researchers to construct an agreed measurement of motivation in SLA and an account of how it works. Motivation research can, at worst, be considered confusing and contradictory; and, at best, unfinished.

### **Why investment?**

Learners in Norton Pierce’s view have, instead, multiple desires and constantly reconstruct their sense of who they are and how they belong to the social world when they speak. It is in this sense that investment in the language also means investment in one’s identity.

Learners, according to Schumann (1978), Welsh (2001), Ellis (1985) Krashen (1981) and Stern (1983), do not live in an ideal world where opportunities are available and conditions to interact with TL speakers are readily at hand. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992:213), however, comment on the ‘voluntary’ characteristic of the informal context where the “individual can either participate or not in informal acquisition contexts”. Such a view does not take into account the inequitable relations between social strata. It results in crude classifications of some learners as motivated and others unmotivated. With regard to international students, they are in shock, in a strange place, speaking a language they have not yet mastered. They can be missing friends and home. This is not the sort of environment where everyone can flourish,



and it is certainly not an environment where people can choose to do whatever they want. People might want to be motivated, but be prevented from doing so. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) write about the voluntary factor – but it appears that for many international students it is the involuntary factors that are more likely to shape their experiences (McKay and Wong, 1996; Agelil-Carter, 1997). Therefore, the concept of motivation alone cannot explain enough about the L2 learning experience. It requires a combination of the concepts of both identity and power relations.

Norton (2000: 10) also recognises shortcomings in the literature on motivation and SLA, arguing that “debates do not capture the relationship between power, identity and language learning”. Norton (2000:4) examines the ‘struggle’ confronting SLA researchers:

*SLA theorists have struggled to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not developed a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learners and the language learning context. Further more, they have not questioned how relations of power in the social world impact on social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers.*

Norton Pierce (1995) therefore privileges the role of social identity in the L2 learning process, promoting the concept of “investment” as an alternative way of understanding L2 learners’ motivation. Learners are not like computers, limited to processing inputs, but are investors who have expectations and who may dare to impose their right to be heard (Ellis, 1997). According to Norton, motivation must be viewed as a flexible concept, which is subjected to individuals and their experience; which is again reflected by their temporal social context.

#### **2.7.1.4 Native and non-native speakers (another layer of power relations)**

Much L2 learning occurs at the native speaker/non-native speaker nexus. Even the terms native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) are found “offensive and hierarchical as they take the native as the norm, and define the other negatively in relation to this norm” (Phillipson in Ricento 2005:903). The immigrant women in

Norton (2000) are not considered “worthy to listen” by TL speakers, which Norton attributes to the fact that they are seeking material resources (finance) or symbolic resources (English language) from TL speakers. The hierarchical relations between NNS and NS originate from sources associated with language ‘ownership’. Wilkinson (2002) maintains that if an L2 learner’s proficiency is poor, she takes the role of student not only in the classroom but also at home (with host families) and in daily interactions (with TL speakers). Such learners are judged - harshly or constructively, it doesn’t necessarily matter - which makes them feel inferior when speaking English in front of English speakers. If they are confident enough, and have not been dissuaded by negative attitudes, they may eventually acquire a good command of the TL. But, sometimes, such ‘achievements’ are considered as “linguistic theft” (Davies, 2003). The native speakers somehow consider their mother tongue as exclusively theirs. It is a world that L2 learners can never fully enter without intentional or unintentional obstacles from the TL speakers.

Lave & Wenger (1991) developed a theory of legitimate peripheral participation as an analytical way of examining the learning process. In their view, learning should be seen as participation in a community of practice, in which learners are considered as newcomers who seek full participation in a new social context for knowledge. Lave and Wenger (1991:85) insist that “the important point concerning learning is one of access to practice as a resource for learning, rather than to instruction”. Thus, it is essential for learners to be able to access activities and other community members, and to be able to access information, resources and favourable conditions to become full members of the community. This is in fact problematic and returns us, full circle, to power relations. Again, where there is “struggle”, there are issues of “investment” and “identity”. Lave and Wenger (ibid:53) stress that “identity, knowing and social membership entail one another”.

### **2.7.2 Intergroup Model**

The NS-NNS nexus – and its implications for intercultural communicative competence – is also implicated in the SLA process and Giles’ and Byrnes’ (1982) Intergroup theory is considered particularly relevant. Giles & Byrne (1982) investigate the relationship between a learners’ language group and the TL group. Intergroup

Theory sees the interaction between groups of learners and those of the TL as dynamic. This dynamism is strongest between groups possessing different ethnolinguistic identities. Giles and Byrne see ethnolinguistic convergence progressively related to social integration and L2 proficiency.

As previously noted, international students experience a sense of dislocation during their sojourn and may or may not seek 'refuge' in the company of those with whom they share certain key socio-cultural-linguistic commonalities. The boundaries between L2 and L1 communities are dynamic arenas and Giles and Byrne investigate how and why certain individuals are able to move more or less freely in and out of one linguistic 'camp' to another, affecting intercultural communicative competence. Intergroup theory necessitates an appreciation of the organisation and pastoral role of own-language/own-culture practices and institutions in SA contexts and their relationship vis-à-vis the TL language community – how they might facilitate, shape or constrain L2 interactions.

In Schumann's research, Alberto spent considerable periods of time mixing with people of his own culture. The 'pull' of staying within groups of one's own culture appears strong. Alberto's desire to participate in a Latin American group – and such groups' availability - appears to have been at the expense of Alberto's interactions with TL speakers. Where own-culture groups do not exist, extensive and protracted interaction with TL speakers is less avoidable (though not inevitable). The presence of such groups may therefore form a key determinant of the extent of learner's interactions with TL speakers, and ultimately their progress in the TL. It also places considerable emphasis on ethnicity as the basis for group-formation and group-allegiance. However, Giles and Johnson (1981) argue that although groups do form around race and ethnicity, what individual members may actually be seeking is the company and familiarity of people who share identical or similar values: these may just happen to be those with the same ethnicity. Groups therefore don't simply have the power to determine the extent of social interaction with TL speakers, but are also heterogenous and capable of coalescing around a range of ethnic, social, political and economic categories and concerns. Interestingly however, there is also evidence which suggests that group formation and cohesion is strongest when the group forms around and seeks to represent exclusive, rather than inclusive, interests (Van Gyes, de

Witte et al 2001). So people who find themselves isolated and/or 'different' might have an increased propensity to join and form groups together. The 'pull' of the Latin American group in Alberto's case, however, was not explored in any depth. Schumann notes the existence of a (Latin American) in-group and an (host community) out-group, but views the relationship between them as static, with a fixed border (Barkhuizen, 2004). The inter-group model, examined later, develops a more socially sensitive look at the channels of opportunities and influences that shape individual learning experiences, over which individuals may or may not exercise precise control.

### **2.7.3 Stumbling blocks in communication**

Barna (1998) identified six practical stumbling blocks in intercultural communication which help to explain the 'struggle' that someone from a different culture may encounter and reinforces the view that the SLA process (in SA contexts) has a social dimension and is about more than vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

The first is an 'assumption of similarities'. Barna argues that we easily fall into making assumptions that others are the same as us, that we have similar social, psychological and biological conditions and needs and that we see and understand epiphenomena in the same way. In fact, we are heavily conditioned by the culture we have been brought up in. Unless it is recognised that people are different, communication with people from different cultures is problematic.

The second and third stumbling blocks are linguistic ones, or in Barna's terms: language differences and nonverbal misinterpretations. Miscommunication attributable to differences between the L1 and L2 is, of course, unsurprising, and proficiency in and knowledge of the *lingua franca* is important in many cultural encounters. However, Barna does not privilege either of these. This implies that he does not believe learning the TL or understanding nonverbal cues is determinant of the success of intercultural communication.

The fourth stumbling block concerns the preconceptions and stereotypes that we might hold. In the context of this research, stereotyping refers to the beliefs that

people from different cultures have of one another. They may be very wide of the mark. Stereotypes are considered a stumbling block for communicators because they interfere with objective thinking. Stereotypes exist because we all possess and construct shorthand preconceptions of people from different cultures and evaluate their behaviour accordingly.

The fifth stumbling block is the ‘tendency to evaluate’. People tend to agree or disagree with other peoples’ statements and actions rather than trying to comprehend and ‘make sense’ of what they do from the actors’ own perspectives. This tendency to judge acts as a barrier, preventing an open mind towards others’ behaviours and attitudes.

The last obstacle is termed high anxiety (tension or stress). This is a common feeling when people from different cultures attempt to communicate. It is common and should be kept under control, so not to ‘get in the way’ of communication.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to illustrate how ‘identity’ and the ‘social’ has been incorporated into theories and models in SLA research to provide a better understanding of the L2 learning experience and key theories and assumptions about SLA in SA contexts relevant to my research have been identified.

An overarching assumption regarding SLA in SA contexts is that social identity counts and has implications for the quality and quantity of L2 interactions. But identity is a contested and complex concept, which varies from person-to-person and different identities and aspects of identity may have different implications for L2 interaction. There is therefore a need to capture the types of identities likely to be found amongst international students, whilst remaining aware of the fact that there is probably no such thing as a universal international student experience. The difficulties associated with capturing identities are complicated by the fact that identities may be electives or ascribed, wanted or unwanted, with different ones being foregrounded under different conditions. The cultural, socio-biological and psychological dimensions of identity must also be accounted for.

The chapter has investigated the relationship between identity and SLA. An underlying assumption is that SLA in SA contexts feature manifold L2 interaction opportunities. However, much research suggests that this is exaggerated – or, at least, not inevitable - and that it is social and identity-based phenomena which can explain the variation. The complex, lived realities of students in SA contexts – their motivation for studying abroad; porosity to western culture; financial circumstances; social networking skills; own-language group affiliation; gendered experiences etc. - is therefore vital to understanding how identity functions as a mechanism shaping L2 interactions, both in terms of their quantity and quality.

As mentioned earlier, identity appears to shape L2 interactions because the SA context is a challenging learning environment and because the process of accessing the TL community is a social endeavour – it is simultaneously a process of negotiation and a site of struggle influenced by the patterning and exercise of power which is inextricably linked to the identities and social roles of its principal actors. The research draws heavily on three main theories. Power relations (Norton, 2000) emerged from the SLA field and emphasises the role and impact of identity on L2 learners and its capacity to help them navigate and negotiate learning opportunities in the TL community. *Stumbling Blocks* (Barna, 1989) flows from an intercultural communication perspective, and constructs the successful learner as one who has developed communicative competence by overcoming six key communication obstacles extant in the TL community and culture. The Intergroup Model (Giles & Byrne, 1982) investigates the interactions between learners' own (L1) and the TL communities (as well as with other English NNS) with particular emphasis on the functioning of socio-cultural and linguistic group affiliations.

A second underlying assumption is that L2 interactions in SA contexts are beneficial to the SLA process – that L2 interactions in naturalistic contexts can impact L2 communicative competence. It is argued that identity works here not simply because it may have functioned to open up (or close down) L2 interaction opportunities, but because it may also have opened up (or closed down) specific types of interaction opportunities – those most (or least) beneficial to SLA – and because the identities of interlocutors are likely to shape the content and conduct of L2 encounters.

This thesis therefore seeks to identify the ‘types’ of social identities reported amongst Vietnamese students in SA contexts and assess their role in accessing L2 interaction opportunities; the content and conduct of those interactions; and the relationships between L2 interactions and communicative competence – crudely, which identities facilitate the most optimal L2 interaction experience *vis-à-vis* L2 communicative competence.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

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This chapter presents the research strategy and methods of collecting data for the target group. It comprises of three parts. Part one describes the research aims, research design and methods. Part two looks into the ethical considerations and criteria to ensure trustworthiness Part three discusses the research procedures: pilot and main studies.

#### 3.1 Research aims

The concerns and daily experience of Vietnamese students in the UK in their endeavor to improve their communicative competence are of primary importance. A qualitative strategy will help focus on the participants' own views of identity and intercultural competence. I would like to develop a relationship with my participants to “genuinely understand the world through their eyes” and in order to obtain “rich, deep data” (Bryman, 2008:394).

According to the literature (Chapter 2), a qualitative approach provides ‘room’ for exploration and theory to emerge from data. In contrast, quantitative research often starts off with hypotheses or clear theories which are then subjected to ‘trial by numbers’. This does not mean that qualitative research is not as effective at testing theories as quantitative research. In fact, more qualitative researchers are interested in this. Therefore, the research questions in qualitative research may sometimes be more general than those in quantitative, affording researchers the right to come back to address and refine them in light of emerging data or as a result of experience from the field (Bryman, 2008:370). This flexibility is particularly useful where the research concepts (identity and intercultural communication competence) are fluid and contested.



Qualitative research also involves developing a ‘feel’ for natural settings, for the ‘real world’. It links the actions of participants with their social settings in order to understand deeper the often hidden meanings behind behaviour. The context of the research - Vietnamese students in the UK - is unique; generalisation of findings (of the sort quantitative researchers might practice) is therefore not an explicit aim. Rather, the research seeks an understanding of particular phenomena within a particular context. I am interested in capturing a particular reality more so than the big scale social settings - specifically how Vietnamese students in the UK interact using the English language.

### **3.2 Research questions**

The main focus of the research is on the relationship between the learner’s identity in their daily interaction and communication in English. Such a relationship can be divided into three areas of interests: identity and interactions, identity and intercultural communication, and the type of identities. I have worked out three research questions as follows:

1. Which type of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
2. How – if at all - is identity implicated in Vietnamese students’ interactions in the English language?
3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual’s own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how?

### **3.3 Research design**

#### **3.3.1 Choosing appropriate research strategy**

Social research is often categorized into two types: Descriptive research and analytical (explanatory) research (Buckingham and Saunders, 2007). Descriptive research, as the name implies, describes a phenomenon, whereas analytical (explanatory) research seeks to explain how a phenomenon happens. However, Buckingham and Saunders (2007) refer to a third type: exploratory research. Exploratory research is particularly appropriate where our ontological and/or epistemological understanding of the

phenomenon is so vague that we do not quite know what it is like or how we can measure it. In such a case, Buckingham and Saunders (2007:44) advise:

*The purpose of the research is therefore to gather as much relevant information as possible so that we can begin to identify and specify what it is we are studying. Only then can we design studies to measure or analyse it*

As presented in Chapter 2, the phenomenon of research remains controversial. First, there is no agreement on contested theories regarding identities and intercultural communicative competence. Secondly, student experiences of studying abroad are unique (Freed, 1995), so that any research on this is dealing with fairly unique sets of circumstances (different people, with different L2 skills; in different settings etc.). Thirdly, the research is the accumulation of knowledge, step-by-step, adding – albeit incrementally – to existing knowledge in this area by applying theories and frameworks to another unique set of circumstances. Therefore, the exploratory research design of Buckingham and Saunders (2007) is selected.

### **3.3.2 Stages of the research**

Stage 1: Pilot focus groups - May 2008 to August 2008

Focus group 1: May 2008 (in Leeds)

Focus group 2: August 2008 (in York)

Stage 2: September 2008 to December 2008

Analysing data from focus groups

Reporting on focus groups

Contacting and recruiting participants for the main study

Stage 3: January 2009

Diary design and piloting

Stage 4: February 2009 to April 2009

Main study: 12 students in Leeds and 2 in York.

- Daily diary keeping in three months (February, March and April)
- Focus groups (each group is met 5 times in three months, 5 times x 3 = 15 focus groups)

Stage 5: May 2009 to May 2010

Data analysis

Stage 6: June 2010 to May 2011

Writing up

### 3.4 Research method

The main study comprises studying 12 participants in Leeds and 2 participants in York over a period of three months (started from beginning February to the end of April 2009). Sub-methods include focus group interviews and self-completed daily diaries.

Table 3.1: Main study plan (Adapted from Menard, 2008:5)

	1 <sup>st</sup> month	2 <sup>nd</sup> month	3 <sup>rd</sup> month	
Group A (participants 1-6 in Leeds)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group A (participants 1- 6)
Group B (participants 7- 12 in Leeds)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group B (participants 7- 12)
Group C (2 participants in York)	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Focus group/diary collection and review	Group C (2 participants in York)

The above design means the same set of cases are investigated each month (each period). Participants are divided into three groups, using stratified random sampling, with gender - identified in previous related research as a significant variable (Norton, 2000) - selected as the key criteria. Two groups of 6 and one group of 2 therefore

comprise the same proportion of males to females as the overall sample. Other factors were candidates for stratification but were ruled out: age was not a factor, and ‘friendships’ – wishing to construct groups that did or did not put friends together – was complicated because friendships themselves are dynamic and change and expand and contract over time. There is no ‘main’ or superior group. All groups are treated equally and their participants go through the same data collection process and experience identical interventions.

All the field work is carried out by myself. I met the participants 5 times in total. At the first meeting the participants are briefed about the purpose of the research and what they are expected to do during the three month period. Training on diary keeping is given, with detailed examples. Questions from participants are welcomed and answered. At each of the second, third and fourth meetings, I met the participants in a focus group format to discuss each participant’s diaries, experiences and attitudes etc. (the diaries have been collected shortly in advance of the meeting to facilitate moderator input and activity and are obviously kept by me for further, later analysis). The fifth, final, meeting is organized for any follow-up activities and is also an opportunity to thank the participants and brief them again on what would happen with the data they have provided.

### **Points of interventions**

As presented in table 3.1 above, ‘treatment’ is conducted at the end of the first, second and third month: a focus group of information raised in the diary within the month (which is collected in advance). The idea of more ‘relaxed’ treatment, i.e. every term or two months was rejected after careful consideration. First of all, the attrition rate can be controlled better when participants are supposed to fill in a diary on a daily basis for three months, not 6 months or even longer. Secondly, in a discussion with a researcher friend, who did a similar longitudinal study, I was advised against it. In that research, participants met every term during one academic year (10 months) = 3 times altogether. Because of the length (over 10 months) participants could not fill in a diary on a daily basis. They were advised to complete it on a weekly basis and only when they felt something important or relevant to the research had happened. In fact, only 50% (3 participants) adhered to the plan. Some emailed or phoned the researcher at

times in between their 3 interviews, but the majority were difficult to contact. In my opinion, this is not an effective way of collecting data related to the concept of identity and intercultural communication and which ‘emerges’ from everyday living. I am interested in daily routines and interactions of participants to tease out relevant information. The chances of missing information, as a result of the participants’ bias of what is and is not important and relevant to the research topic, is therefore reduced with my approach. For these reasons, treatment will be introduced monthly during the three months of the main study.

The research combines two ‘sub-methods’ of diary keeping and focus group interviews. Justification for the triangulation of the two sources of data and how it is going to be carried out are presented in the next section.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

#### **3.5.1 Triangulation of focus group and diary**

Triangulation as an approach bases itself on “different methodological standpoints” (Gillham, 2000:13). Data yielded by a method can be viewed as a puzzle. Puzzles, collected together, help build up the general scenario of the research interest. Patton (2002:555) argues the “logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations”. As different data requires different methods to collect and each method has its own advantages and disadvantages, there is a need to triangulate data. However, understanding the term triangulation in this meaning remains limited. The traditional literature review is a typical example of another type of triangulation in which reviewers use different theories and evidence to shed light on the topic of research (Gorard, 2004). Chapter 2 – literature review – can be considered to have adopted “theory/perspective triangulation” to use Patton’s term (2002:556). It discusses studies and theories relevant to the concept of identity and intercultural communication. In the fieldwork, I adopt another type - “triangulation of sources” as mentioned in type 2 in Patton’s (2002:556) list:

1. *Methods triangulation: Checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods*

2. *Triangulation of sources: Checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same method*
3. *Analyst triangulation: Using multiple analysts to review findings*
4. *Theory/perspective triangulation: Using multiple perspectives or theories to interpret the data*

Patton's list is more comprehensive in that it covers both Gillham's (2000) and Gorard's (2004) definitions and bring forward two more types: analyst triangulation and triangulation of sources which is chosen as a means to verify and validate qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

It is important to note here that though different in terms and types of triangulation, the literature unanimously warns against the misconception that the triangulation of different data yields the same results. According to Gillham (2000), not every puzzle fits into a picture as expected. When this happens, it does not mean a particular method is wrong but it can be maintained that the understanding and the facts do not match. The expected joints of the pictures are not what is imagined. This is where the theory needs further updating. Any particular data which is not explained by the theory means the theory is being challenged. Patton (2002) emphasizes that triangulation does not just help look at a phenomenon in different ways but also contributes to 'credibility' by strengthening confidence in any conclusions drawn. It checks the consistency of cross-data. Areas where there is convergence should generate greater confidence in the findings. On the other hand, dissonant data, if found, can also illuminate a problem and generate a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon being researched.

Gillham (2000) also admits that the process of fitting puzzles together is not smooth. It is messy or even contradictory. By adopting triangulation, I demonstrate an awareness of the "mess" and the non-linear characteristics of much research that I will have to confront. The benefit of triangulating data, as discussed above, easily outweighs the troubles and amount of workload it can cause, but needs careful planning.

As mentioned above, triangulation of sources (Patton, 2002) is chosen. This approach involves comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information gathered at various times and by different qualitative methods. The research relies on two channels of collecting data: focus group interviews and diary reviewing, which belong to “qualitative” methods (although diary data has been quantified). Similar approach is termed ‘diary-interview’ as per Elliot’s (1997) health research. Sheridan (1993, cited in Elliot, 1997) notes that different people have different views on keeping diaries. Some really enjoy the task, but others find it mundane. Diaries may record simple or complex attitudes and feelings or just be a record of events. The use of focus groups and diaries is intended to provide some triangulation - research based only on the diaries or only on the focus groups may miss important data. Therefore, triangulation is being used to ensure that issues are explored and put ‘under pressure’ from more than one direction, especially in terms of their universality – do the personal testimonies etc. of individual participants resonate with those of others’ and can they withstand any scrutiny e.g. that associated with group interaction? Specifically:

- Checking for consistency of how the same event is recorded in diaries and expressed in focus group interviews
- Comparing what people say about the same thing over time (at the time of completing the diary and later in focus groups; in the first, second and third months)

### **3.5.2 Descriptive and inferential statistics of diary and focus group data**

As part of my triangulation strategy and in order to establish relationships between key variables I was interested in generating statistical data. Diary data lends itself well to both descriptive and inferential statistics. Here I was particularly interested in establishing relationships between social roles and the extent of interactions:

- Estimated hours of speaking English
- Who participants spoke English with
- The nature of the conversations

In addition, I was interested in the relationship between the above variables with participants' rating of their communicative experience. Upon receiving diaries from participants, I coded data and then entered them into SPSS software.

**Descriptive statistics:** I have used descriptive statistics to present key variables such as those referred to above. The descriptive statistics were presented in tables, figures and charts where necessary (see Chapter 4).

**Inferential statistics:** According to Bryman (2004) there are two types of inferential statistics: descriptive and causal. The descriptive inferences mainly refer to generalisability while causal inferences refers to the relationship between variables. The descriptive statistic is less relevant in this research because of the small sample which makes generalisability impossible. On the other hand, the inferential statistics are used to attempt to explore the relationship between three key sets of variables: social roles, social interactions and self-rated communicative competence. Therefore inferential statistics in this research should be understood as causal inferences (Bryman, 2004). Tests of correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) were employed to identify relations between those variables, which of those variables contribute most to communicative competence. Details of those tests of correlations are presented in Appendix I.

Further contribution to triangulation and also an alternative approach to understanding the relationship between social roles and communicative competence was offered by content analysis (Bryman, 2004) of focus group data. The literature survey (Chapter 2) and focus group analysis (Chapter 7) seem to suggest that variables such as passivity, extroversion/introversion and willingness to sample 'foreign' culture could be factors influencing the patterning of individuals' communicative experience and linguistic outcomes. Qualitative analysis of focus group data was used to categorise participants as opportunity makers/takers (OM/OT), value matcher/takers (VM/VT). Participants were allocated into categories and then statistical tests were performed. Further details of the tests performed are provided in Appendix J. The aim of the statistical tests of correlations is to compare and contrast the experiences of different participants according to their membership of the above categories.



The process of categorising participants into either VM or VT, and either OT or OM was relatively straightforward. Transcripts of focus groups were analysed and certain behaviours and expression associated with the afore-mentioned categories were recorded next to each participants' names. I followed Georger's (2009) approach to basic content analysis. All focus group interviews (approximately 4000 words) were analysed. Participants were categorised as VM or VT on the basis of the ideas and stories they recounted. This was clearly a subjective process. In order to limit subjectivity, a fellow Vietnamese research student was employed to perform exactly the same procedure using the same pre-agreed VM/VT definitions. Any disagreement regarding categorisation would be subject to negotiation; but we both reached identical conclusions (I chose a Vietnamese research student because all focus group transcriptions were in the original Vietnamese language). A tally was kept of VM and VT evidence and an overall judgement was made regarding which category participants were allocated to. Selected examples of the operationalising of Values and Opportunity are provided below.

#### Value Matchers

- Tu and Bac withdrew from interactions, especially when native speakers were involved. They did so to 'rescue' their 'maleness'.
- Many female participants attended drinking events once and then decided they would never come again. They did not like the atmosphere: noisy music, loud people, etc. They believe socialising should not be controlled by alcohol. A more preferred way of socialising can be eating out or cooking at home.

#### Value Takers

- Sang attended evening events organised by Christian Union even though he was not interested in God. Sang is an atheist. He simply considered such events as opportunities to practice English.
- Hoa and An hardly went out drinking in Vietnam where it is not common for girls to be seen drinking in public places. However, they did not mind going out to pubs with their friends in the UK.

#### Opportunity Makers

- Tu created opportunity by speaking in English with his Vietnamese girlfriend
- Mi prefers American accent and she was dating an American man so that she had lots of opportunities to speak English.

### Opportunity Takers

- Several participants attended social events organised by their university
- Some participants believed the universities should be responsible for providing more opportunity for them to socialise. They complained about the lack of such a support from the universities.

The process was relatively straightforward, however, several problems were encountered. First, several participants did not express views or provide accounts of their behaviour which could be readily categorised. Secondly, two participants expressed views that were easily categorised but did not express many of them. Therefore, the categorisation process might be based upon minimal evidence. With these caveats in mind, I was able to categorise all participants into categories. Statistical tests of correlations examining the relationships between membership of the OM/OT and VM/VT categories and the variables captured by the diary data were then possible. Cohen's conventions (1991) are used throughout to describe effect sizes. Descriptive statistics and information regarding the distribution of variables are provided in Appendix J.

Statistical analysis of the relationship between membership of a particular category and participants' experiences of interactions and linguistic outcomes generated a range of interesting findings. For example, being a value taker associates positively with communicative experience. This supports Giles and Byrne's (1982) argument that individuals who are prepared to suspend their personal and group-based cultural affiliations are more likely to move in and out of any linguistic camps (thereby maximizing their L2 experiences). But some findings challenged key theories. For example, findings in the statistical test suggests that certain individual characteristics are far more deterministic in patterning individuals' interaction experiences than the social roles privileged by Norton (2000). Similarly, there is room in Barna's (1998) framework for individuals to perceive each block differently and some blocks are overcome more easily by some language learners than others. Individual characteristics – more so than social roles - may therefore be important in patterning individuals' interaction experiences and how they understand linguistic obstacles and learn from them. Additionally, because of the small sample size, no claim of generalisability can be made. Overall, this aspect of my research is therefore highly

problematical. The phenomena that it tried to capture – such as the relationship between extroversion/introversion, interaction experiences and communicative competence – are still presented not least because, as discussed earlier, they emerged during the focus groups. However, the statistical analysis is instead offered as a ‘flawed experiment’ and presented in Appendices I and J.

### **3.6 Considerations to ensure trustworthiness**

Mason (1996); LeCompte and Goetz (1982); Kirk and Miller (1986) maintain that the concepts of reliability and validity widely used in quantitative research also apply to qualitative research. However, I agree with Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) suggestion that qualitative research should be judged on different criteria, which fall under the heading of trustworthiness and this is addressed below.

Central to Guba’s and Lincoln’s (1994) advocacy for alternative criteria to evaluate qualitative research is their rejection of an overly-deterministic view of social reality. In fact, they argue, there is no unproblematical objective reality and there might be, at the same time, several explanations of particular social phenomena. I will adopt this point of view approach towards the topic of the research. Trustworthiness consists of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I will discuss how each criteria is applied in this research and also discuss the issue of generalisability.

#### **3.6.1 Credibility**

Credibility concerns whether or not research results and interpretations adequately reflect how the participants actually responded to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve credibility, Bryman (2008:377) suggests that any findings arrived at need to be fed back to the participants for ‘respondent validation’. In the research, the following will be carried out to ensure a good match between my presentation and participant’s experiences and points of view:

- Give participants the transcripts of their interview texts

- Ask for feedback from participants and see if they are happy with how they have been quoted in the report.

My experience with the pilot studies showed that the relationship between participants and myself (as a researcher) were close, so they may have been reluctant to provide critical feedback. In addition, being critical is not especially common in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese students tend to respect researchers as well-educated and knowledgeable figures. The focus group in Fern (2001) is an example, in which participants turned to the researcher for advice rather than giving their opinions. Therefore, it is essential for participants to understand that all their ideas are welcomed - see also section 3.7 (ethical considerations).

Hobbs (1993) and Skeggs (1994) also suggest that participants may not be able to provide critical feedback because they may not understand social science terms and terminology. Given that none of the participants are language or education students, it might not be possible for them to make sense of analyses related to theories in SLA and intercultural communication and this might therefore cause frustration and confusion when they are requested to give comments. For this reason, I decided to seek feedback on my analysis from fellow researchers and academics - only accounts of largely factual information provided by the participants were fed back to them for comment.

### **3.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability is concerned with whether the findings of a study can be transferred to another study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that transferability can be achieved when the context of the original study is found to be similar to that of a proposed study. This links to generalisability or external validity (Bryman, 2008). Findings from one context can be beneficial to other contexts or in similar or identical contexts but at different times. Therefore, the transferability of qualitative research is possible. However, in order for transferability to work, 'rich description' is needed (Gomm, 2000) so that informed judgments on the possibility and degree of transferability to other contexts can be made. In this study, in order to achieve transferability I have provided a detailed description of the participants, how they were recruited, and of the research methods and instrumentation (see 3.4). The participants in this study are

social science and business majors within the UK university context and it is possible that the findings might be applicable to other Vietnamese students elsewhere in the UK with similar majors. The findings might also be applicable to other Asian students (with similar majors) who share similar social and cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, as Freed (1995) acknowledges, it is difficult to replicate studies in a broad context (see Chapter 2) because we cannot ‘pause’ whole social settings; and even with the same set of participants in the same context, research conducted at a different time will not be the ‘same’. This clearly has implications for generalisability. The research is vulnerable here because the focus groups are based on only 14 participants in total; and because non-probability snowball sampling was used, which is not representative of the population.

However, Gomm *et al* (2000) consider this criticism problematic. Generalisation, in qualitative research, does not mean the same as in quantitative research – most obviously it does not depend on carefully selected participants generating quantifiable and normally distributed data capable of representing a population. In fact, small scale research has what Stake (2000) calls ‘naturalistic generalization’. He argues that the idea of developing a ‘law’ of generalization is misleading because if it is false, it causes misunderstanding, but if it is true it contributes to a too simplistic understanding of the social world. Achieving generalisability should not be considered as the target of the research. Rather, I adopted a small-scale study in order to capture the unique characteristics of a particular context. It is an in-depth investigation into a particular ethnic group that does not aspire to generalisability, but which may nonetheless produce findings capable of being transferred to other similar contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Donmoyer (2000) even suggests that findings from small-scale and *suis general* research can even ‘jump’ contexts; providing important insights into completely different situations. Certain findings suggest that the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants may have impacted on their L2 experiences, as discussed in Chapter 2; suggesting that the overall research findings might ‘transcend’ the particularistic context of the research and apply to young professional/semi-professional Vietnamese/Asian students learning in the UK generally. My research design was not

set up to specifically test the importance of (Vietnamese/Asian) socio-cultural background to L2 communicative competence in a UK environment - a multiple case study approach comprising at least one non-Vietnamese comparator group selected on a ‘most similar’ basis (other than socio-cultural background) would have achieved this. Given this, the ability to generalize with confidence largely depends on the extent to which such socio-cultural influences (on L2 experiences) can be isolated from other social and even psychological variables and their precise influence measured. To illustrate, a female participant reporting very few social activities with the TL community may be doing so because *inter alia*:

- She is shy
- She is not invited (e.g. because she is unpopular or not considered interesting)
- She is embarrassed by her L2 competence
- There are limited social activities
- There are limited social activities involving speakers of the TL
- Social activities with speakers of the TL comprise unappealing and culturally unfamiliar elements (e.g. alcohol-centred; inappropriate venues)
- She is too busy (e.g. studying or working)
- Own-language social activities are more accessible/frequent/fun

In reality, the precise patterning of participants’ L2 experiences and contact with the TL culture and native speakers is likely to be influenced by several of the above at the same time and may vary from person-to-person. Where the data indicates that socio-cultural factors are indeed influencing participants’ L2 experiences, and can be distinguished from the array of influences linked to the precise social contexts that participants occupy, this is clearly indicated. However, such analyses are suggestive and must be interpreted within the overall set of caveats associated with highly context-specific and case study research as outlined above.

### **3.6.3 Dependability**

In order to ensure the dependability I kept a clear record of all interview audio files (as recorded by a digital recorder), transcripts (both in Vietnamese and English), written

documents (diaries and field notes). The transcriptions and translation (as described in detail later) were proofread by native Vietnamese and English speakers.

#### **3.6.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with whether the findings and interpretations of findings are a true reconstruction of the participants' responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be achieved by careful examination of the data, findings and interpretations. In this research, I acted as objectively as possible, especially during data transcription, translation and analysis. Any conclusions from the data was drawn as objectively as possible and I tried to present ideas from the participants in fairly and accurately (Bryman, 2008:379).

#### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

All participants were recruited on a volunteer basis. According to DeVaus (2002) no-one should be put under pressure or coerced to participate in research. Also, Buckingham (2007) argues that it is unethical to ask participants to take part in research which has no academic or social utility (see Chapter 1 – Introduction for the rationale of the research). I also ensured that participants were fully briefed with regards to the goal of the research and their roles in the project prior to their agreement to participate (Bryman, 2004; Harrison, 2001; Buckingham, 2007; Harrison, 2001; DeVaus, 2002). Participants were notified of their entitlement to withdraw at any time (see Appendix F - Consent form). With regard to the invasion of privacy, this research does make enquiries into individual's private lives – right down to personal daily routines. But Bryman (2004) argues that individuals who volunteer to take part are also, to an extent, 'surrendering' their right to privacy and expressing a willingness to expose certain attitudes and behaviours to recording and analysis etc. Therefore, I believe that the research does not invade participants' privacy.

I have considered the existence of any potential harm to participants. I expected the main potential harm to be limited to individuals raising certain information in the focus groups and receiving unfair or harsh criticism etc. which they may find uncomfortable and upsetting. In order to prevent it, I made it quite clear at the beginning of each session that the value of the research depended on all participants

feeling that they can be open without fearing undue criticism; and that their participation in the research was interpreted as their agreement to this (see 3.5 for description of administration procedures). My own evaluation of the two focus groups showed that no participant was harmed in this way.

However, it was also possible that participants could be subjected to ridicule and criticism *outside* the focus group as a result of what they said during it. Clearly I do not have any control over this.

### **3.8 Focus Group**

#### **3.8.1 Research aims**

Focus groups are employed as a tool to explore a research topic before any further decision regarding research design is made, i.e.: measuring or analysing the phenomenon in question (Buckingham and Saunders, 2007). In exploratory research, focus group interviews appear the better choice than the survey questionnaire. This is because the focus group allows emerging themes and/or concerns to be explored, obviating the need to commence with a structured set of questions which might reflect and be influenced by the researcher's bias or limited understanding.

#### **3.8.2 Research method**

Mannheim and Rich (1995) describe the focus group method as an in-depth discussion on topic(s) among a small group of people who are carefully selected in order to establish their opinion on a given topic.

Much research on the concept of identity has used focus group interviews to capture the range of identities constructed (Norton, 2000 among others). Focus groups or "qualitative interviews" (Fern, 2001:154) are employed to "generate hypotheses which can be used to develop theoretical explanations for phenomena of interest". Harrison (2001), however, sees focus groups having several uses: from formulating research questions to outlining important indicators for data collection, and to actually collecting data to answer research questions themselves. Kitzinger (2005:57)



considers focus group as “ideal for exploring people’s talk, experiences, opinions, beliefs, wishes and concerns”.

Focus groups, therefore, are one of several methods available which can be chosen in the initial stage(s) of the research to explore the daily experience(s) of Vietnamese students in the UK; in which the significance of the concepts of identity, power relations, cross-cultural communication and ‘inter-group’ relations on intercultural communicative competence can be rendered testable. In comparison with surveys, Harrison (2001:76) argues that focus groups have several advantages:

- 1 they ensure that the research question is covered; they can overcome the problem of wording that may be encountered with surveys and the possibility of interviewer effects;*
- 2 an explanation of answers can be requested;*
- 3 it is possible to recognize how opinions are given in relation to the answers and reactions of others.*

In fact, none of the first three advantages are amongst the reasons why I chose to use focus groups. Firstly, if a focus group is poorly run (see later), it may not fully address the research question. Secondly, questions still need to be carefully put to the participants of focus groups, and the attitude and behaviour of the moderator can affect the results as much as the attitude and behaviour of an interviewer. Thirdly, it is quite possible to conduct surveys administered by trained interviewers who are able to guide, prompt and probe respondents. It is Harrison’s fourth point which comes closest to explaining the decision to eschew surveys.

Delli, Carpini & Williams (1994) also support focus groups’ superiority over (closed question) surveys, arguing that respondents can generate unanticipated and open-ended responses, which can limit or compensate any bias or shortsightedness on the part of the interviewer. The large volume of data generated in focus groups – often highly detailed – therefore creates fewer ‘spaces’ for interviewers to be tempted to fill-in with his or her own interpretations. Of course, the (in)famous ‘double hermeneutic’ cannot be eliminated completely: the participants in this research are

interpreting their 'world', so as the researcher I am myself interpreting others' interpretations (Marsh, 2002).

Fern (2001:142) provides quantitative evidence showing that focus groups generate similar findings to surveys but provide far more information. This benefit of focus groups fits in well with the requirement for this research to generate substantial and substantive information. Therefore it does not make sense in the context of this research design to replace focus groups with a survey.

All the above benefits in focus groups can also be found in one-to-one interviews. However, the focus group remains a better choice for several reasons. Harrison (2001) focuses on the ability of focus groups to expose interactions, which may consequently reveal or hint at how strongly a person holds an opinion and is prepared to defend it under public pressure. As the concepts of identity and communicative competence are closely connected with social interactions, their exploration within a dynamic environment may be advantageous. I am also interested in how the main concepts used in the research are shaped and re-shaped in discussions. Also, it is the interaction that takes place that is largely responsible for generating the larger volumes of (qualitatively different) data. Bryman (2004:358) also argues that the interaction associated with focus groups makes them "less artificial than many other methods" because interaction is a "normal part of social life".

The focus group was not selected for being economical in the sense that it permits multiple interviews in 'one-shot' which Bryman calls a group interview (2004). Even though the focus group will help save time and money it is its effectiveness as a research tool in the research context that persuaded me to adopt it. Additionally, focus groups tend to explore particular topics in depth, whereas group interviews tend to be expansive (Bryman, 2004)

However, I also acknowledge a problem regarding the raising of sensitive issues in a focus group setting. In focus groups - especially in mixed sex groups - sensitive issues may not be easily raised. Therefore, provision for individuals to raise sensitive/personal issues and confidentiality must be built-in. This will be done in two distinct ways:

1. diary entries that participants do not want aired at the focus group will be held back if requested to do so by the diary owner
2. in these circumstances there should be provision for the participants and myself to discuss the matters privately, if the participant is content to do so.

These ‘protocols’ will be built-in to the research, and participants clearly notified of them.

All focus group interviews (both pilots and the main study) are audio recorded. I decided not to use video recording even though it has some acknowledged benefits (e.g. it can capture, in precise detail, the body language and interactions of participants). Krueger (1998:83) gives the following reasons for not using video recording:

*Video recording is obtrusive and usually not worth the effort. We have found that the video camera may change the environment and affect participant spontaneity. Videotaping usually requires several cameras plus camera operators who attempt to swing camera quickly to follow the following conversation. The fuss and fury of videotaping makes the focus group appear more like a circus than a discussion.*

I chose not to use video recording because of its possible effects on the participants. Interactions and body language can still be noted during the discussion, and assessed for significance during the transcription process. The idea of combining observation with interviews (Darlington and Scott, 2002) was also rejected after careful consideration. This combination is mainly advised for when verbal contacts are limited (eg. in research involving children or some disabled people). I chose to ‘observe’ the body language and other cues instead and take notes during the discussion. Video recording the interactions of participants and interlocutors (Boxer, 2005) or audio recording are possible options. However, after considering the issues involved in such methods, they were rejected: the benefits do not offset the trouble and potential trouble they can cause. They involve major ethical issues and commitment from participants. Given the number of participants in the main study is 14, audio and video recordings

would generate significant amounts of data above-and-beyond that likely to be collected by the daily diaries and focus interviews. As I am interested in how the participants understand and describe their interactions ‘in their own terms’, the interaction through the eyes of participants are of primary concern. Therefore, I decided to run focus groups, audio recorded with the permission from participants.

### **3.8.3 Pilot Focus Group 1**

#### **3.8.3.1 Research aims**

The literature emphasises the importance of piloting and pre-piloting (Gillham, 2000). As a research tool in the main study, the focus group interview needs piloting to see if it is a suitable vehicle with which to collect data (potentially) capable of answering the research questions. It is also ‘practice’: ensuring that I am comfortable in running the focus groups in the main study. In short, piloting makes an important contribution to the working out of reliable research tools.

#### **3.8.3.2 Size of the focus group**

The ideal size for focus groups is contested. Fern (2001:161) recommends between 2 - 8 for “exploring tasks”. Bryman (2004) recommends 6 - 8 participants and Harrison (2002) suggests 8 to 10 interviewees. The ‘ideal’ group size appears, more often than not, to be the average number of participants that other, similar research involving focus groups have used. However, I find Morgan’s (1998:72) guidance on the calculation of the number of participants convincing, because of its ‘scientificness’. First, I worked out how many questions I would like to ask (see Appendix B – interview schedule). Then I considered the sensitivity of the topic for the participants (I concluded the sensitivity of the research to be quite low which Vietnamese students would not find too difficult talking about). Finally, I estimated how much time each participant would have for each question. It would be ideal if all participants each had time to elaborate on all points of view, but overlong interviews are exhausting for all concerned (Gillham, 2000) – this risks deterioration in the quality of the discussion. After careful consideration, and following Morgan’s guidance, I decided to target 6 - 8

participants. Morgan (1998) considers groups comprising 6 or less as small, and those of between 6 and 10 as big.

### **3.8.3.3. Recruitment**

In 2007, I had an unsuccessful experience of recruiting Vietnamese participants for another project. With the support of the International Office in the University of York, I sent a “cold” letter to potential Vietnamese participants enrolled at the university, requesting volunteers for my research. My response rate was zero. From later discussions with eventual volunteers it was confirmed to me that the Vietnamese I approached were not comfortable with a formal request for their assistance from a total stranger; and that they were reluctant to ask for clarification: they simply ignored the letter.

I therefore adopted a different approach for my current research: snowball sampling via an existing Vietnamese institution. I contacted the President of the Vietnamese Society in Leeds - VietsoC - briefed her of the aims of the research and asked for VietsoC’s cooperation. She showed great interest in the research by joining the focus group and passed a copy of my recruitment letter (Appendix A) to seven other society members in the 2007-2008 academic year on my behalf. This approach proved successful and I received a 100% response rate, equating to eight Vietnamese students.

To minimise ‘no-shows’ a reminder was sent one day before the event. This was considered preferable to over-recruiting, which is rarely recommended (Morgan 1998). Therefore, I decided to stop approaching additional potential participants once eight agreed and confirmed their participation. A high no-show rate can be a serious problem. To guard against it, the actual method of recruiting participants was taken seriously. Incentives for participating in the research are modest (due to a limited financial budget), so it was essential to make a good ‘impression’ on potential participants through the recruitment letter. It was polite, not overly formal and friendly, emphasising the importance of their participation. The responses of potential participants were carefully acknowledged, and gratitude was expressed. Reminders were sent in advance of the meeting. Any questions from the participants regarding

their participation in the focus group were addressed promptly. I also made it as easy as possible for participants to attend by seeking their approval regarding the date, time and venue of the meetings (see the logistics section, later). These steps were aimed at putting participants at ease – they are much more likely to feel comfortable (and turn up!) if they are familiar with a location and have a rough idea of what a focus group does. They know that it will be an informal, relaxed ‘talk’, unthreatening and relatively unconstrained. Significantly, all the participants were acquainted with one another (Fern, 2001): they had a general idea of who else would be participating in the discussion. As a result, the response rate was 100%.

#### **3.8.3.4 Participants**

As it is a pilot study, I was trying to elicit as many ideas from participants as possible, and so therefore welcomed participants of various ages, studying different degrees, and different durations of study in the UK. There was an equal mixture of males and females (4 each). Participants were recruited from a ‘natural group’ (defined by Bryman [1998] as an established group); in this case from the community of Vietnamese students enrolled in educational establishments in Leeds and members of Vietsoc (Vietnamese Society). The participants knew each other quite well, and displayed discernable levels of familiarity and cohesion. The advantages and disadvantages of focus groups comprising of participants who know each other are identified in more detail below. However, it is worth adding at this point that the centrality of ‘the group’ and group dynamics as, *inter alia*, a retreat or a repository of shared identities and understandings is a key focus of the research.

In the research project, I refer to the participants using pseudonyms. This reflects concerns about invasions of privacy linked to concerns regarding: what happens with the information that is obtained; who has access to it; and can it be traced back to the individual (which overlaps with concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity and the need to avoid harming participants).

**Table 3.2: Pilot focus group 1 – Participant Profile**

Interviewee	P	V	LA	S	HI	HY	MA	HA
Gender	M	M	F	M	F	F	F	M
Age	30	24	36	22	25	25	30	31
Degree	PhD	MA	PhD	Found- ation	MA	MA	MA	PhD
Major	Science	Business	Social Science	-	Science	Business	Business	Social Science
Currently sharing with English- speaking housemates	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Part-time job (s)	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Member of other society rather than Vietsoc	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Length of stay in the UK	4 years	3 years	4 years (MA in 2002)	3 years	1 year	1 year	1 year	3 years

**Time, place and administration/procedure**

Time: 31 May 2008, from 2 – 3.10 pm

Duration: The focus group lasted 1.20 hours

Venue: In the Vietsoc's President's accommodation

Nine chairs and one small table were arranged in a circle; I was sitting at the same table as the participants. The room was unimposing and of medium size, comfortably accommodating all participants and myself, thereby avoiding any environmental effects on the participants (Krueger, 1998). A digital voice recorder was placed in a central position. The accommodation itself was chosen by the participants as a place

where they had socialised before. Refreshments were available throughout the focus group.

At the beginning, I thanked participants for attending the session and stressed the importance of their participation. I also briefed them again regarding the purpose of the discussion and made it clear that all ideas were welcome and that 'we meet as equals'. I adhered to the ethical considerations recommended by Bryman (2000) (see 3.7) to ensure no harm to the participants (e.g. bullying, ostracising etc.).

At the conclusion, I repeated my thanks to the participants for their assistance. I briefly explained what would then happen with the data they supplied. If any participants were interested in reading the transcription I promised to send them a copy.

Participants were also informed that a short questionnaire requesting personal socio-demographic information would be sent to them after the session. This was done afterwards and not in advance in order to help participants feel more comfortable about attending the focus group. It was not asked for on the day of the discussion because of time constraints and its potential for disruption. However, after conducting the first pilot focus group, I found it more helpful to let participants introduce themselves at the beginning of the discussion (see lessons from focus group 1 – 3.8.3.6)

For the interview schedule: As the purpose of the first pilot group was exploratory, the questions were less structured (Morgan, 1998:45). I attempted to strike a balance between the topics that I believe are relevant to my research questions, and the need to create opportunities for participants to express their own concerns and interests. Therefore, I included in the protocol open-ended questions (see Appendix B).

Regarding the level of moderator/facilitator involvement, I acted as the moderator of the focus group, assisted by a friend who helped with refreshments and child-minding (two participants were married and brought their child). As explained in section 2, the overall approach was to avoid being too intrusive or insistent on too much 'structure'. The set of questions developed were intended to function as general guidance only:



*steering* the discussion but not *straightjacketing* it. This had the advantage of affording participants the freedom to talk about issues that were important or interesting to them in terms of their efforts to improve their English. However, too much freedom and a fully undirected approach might allow too much irrelevant information to surface. It was my responsibility to decide the extent to which participants could stray ‘off-topic’ and continue along lines not of obvious direct relevance to the research. I was aware of the sensitivities involved when steering them ‘back’ into more relevant territory. I was also aware that some contributions, which on the surface might be viewed as tangential, may at a different level of analysis contain useful information etc. worth investigation. Further comments about the degree of intervention by the moderator is presented later.

### **3.8.3.5 The interaction among participants**

One of the differences between focus groups and individual interviews is that the former permits significant interaction between the participants (Bryman, 2004). Focus groups were chosen partly because I was interested in the way participants construct and present their views during – and as a consequence of - interaction with others as “members of a group” (Bryman, 2004: 346). However, in reviewing over 200 research projects over a 50 year period, Wilkinson (1998:112) concludes that in most research employing focus groups the interactions are “rarely reported, let alone analysed”. It is a pity to run a focus group and only pay attention to what is said and ignore how it is said; the context as well as the prompts. Therefore, the report focuses on the interactions among the participants. In general, the participants were relaxed and interested in the discussion. There was little I had to do to maintain the liveliness of the discussion and the participants were enthusiastic right from the start. Towards the end, they lingered to chat, even after I announced that the session had ended and they were welcome to leave. Morgan (1998) considers this as evidence that the participants found the event and the topics interesting and enjoyable. In contrast there is Fern’s (2001) focus group comprising of Vietnamese women’s understanding of and feelings about sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Fern argues that Vietnamese women are reluctant to communicate openly with strangers, and so the participants Fern selected were all friends. However, their level of participation was not adequate (2001: 158):

*They tend to agree more with the moderator and express personal belief, values and practices... In fact, two thirds of the content of the Asian transcripts was devoted to giving information and answering questions. It is reported that Southeast Asians reflected courtesy bias and were less likely to express their views that they thought were not acceptable to others in the group.*

Fern's focus group, as it was reported, turned out to be unsuccessful. According to the author, the participation was adversely affected by a lack of confidence in speaking in English and by a "horizontal collectivist culture". The problem identified by Fern (2001) appears daunting because it invokes limitations pivoting around innate and/or deeply held cultural mores. However, another factor might be at work, and it might not be the language that mitigated against success. As the author notes, the focus group was a disappointment despite the women being confident in communicating in English in the one-to-one pre-sessions with the recruiter. The problem that Fern and the research team had can be avoided in advance. I can use the following to illustrate the point that culture might not have played the only part in the failure.

In order to develop a "feel" for a "proper focus group", I volunteered to be a participant in one conducted in the University of York. I would call it a group interview rather than a focus group because the discussion was one-way, between the moderator and one participant at a time. There was limited interactions or even eye contact between participants. In my opinion, this was not due to a "horizontal collectivist" culture as the participants were from different cultures. The problem was that I was only one of four participants who agreed to meet, of which only two (myself included) turned up (50%). The number of moderators/administrators present (3) outnumbered the participants. In fact the presence of the manager – no doubt keen to listen to ideas from respondents first-hand - spoiled the atmosphere. None of the participants – myself included – felt comfortable providing opinions, and were keen for the event to end. Accordingly, I would argue that the most rewarding incentive for participants (excluding pecuniary rewards!) is to receive an opportunity to express ideas which they think are important. In order to be able to say what they really think, participants must feel able to trust all the people in the group, including the moderator. Once they feel comfortable, they will be more committed to the discussion.

I therefore took cautious steps to avoid and limit this possible problem. First, in terms of recruitment, all participants have socialized with each other before. Secondly, I made sure the participants felt comfortable with the accommodation. Third, the focus group was presented as/contained a socialising element, with refreshments and snacks available. The Vietnamese participants were therefore quite relaxed and interested in the discussion and keen to contribute ideas and opinions. In particular, they were not afraid to acknowledge their sub-optimum English proficiency.

I also ensured that the participants understood the purpose of the focus group. I confirmed my commitment to adhere to principles of confidentiality and anonymity regarding the information recorded and topics discussed. In addition, it was emphasized that all ideas were welcome; that no judgments would be made, and that we meet 'as equals'. The Vietnamese participants felt sufficiently comfortable to challenge and disagree with each other. This gave me a chance to see how participants justify their opinions and form ideas based on what others in the group say and how they react to particular statements etc. In some cases, individual participants had to explain why he or she maintained certain positions. As one of the interests of the research is to see how ideas and concepts are formed under the influence of interactions among members in an established group, it was useful to see this dynamic in action. Fern's (2001) study suggests that conducting a focus group in L2 adversely affects levels of participation of Vietnamese. This problem was eradicated by conducting the focus group in Vietnamese (my own L1).

The second problem is the difficulty in analysing data. This is due not only to the huge amount of data generated but also the complexity associated with many people involved in a discussion (overlapping conversations; (in)audibility; interruptions; abrupt changes of topic etc.). Recording therefore sometimes does not capture everything (sometimes this is due to poor recording equipment or poor positioning of the equipment or background noise and poor acoustics). I followed advice given by Gillham (2000). I commenced transcribing straight away, when my memory was still fresh about the interview day. Notes about body language and laughter and sarcasm etc. were also noted during the discussion. Careful attention was paid to the position of the microphone so as to record all participants' contributions clearly. If in doubt, I

was prepared to contact participants to check if what I heard was what they said (but in fact I did not have to do so).

The next problem involves the amount of effort and time spent on transcribing. Blooer *et al* (2001) points out that transcribing a focus group takes more time than transcribing an interview of the same length. The interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese, using Microsoft Word. It may take up to six hours to transcribe a one-hour interview (Gillham, 2000) but for a one-hour focus group it took an extra two hours.

Group effects can seriously affect discussions and therefore their validity. This problem was observed in Krueger's(1998) and Morgan's (1998) focus groups. That there will be dynamics in a group event is inevitable. There are always dominant participants and "shy" ones. In my experience, group effects did occur in both of my pilot groups. I have followed Krueger's (1998) guidance on how to 'turn the spotlight' off the dominant one(s). I was careful to not upset him/her (Morgan, 1998). I tried to keep a balance between encouraging rapport (between participants and myself) and limiting the over-dominant participants. I also paid attention to those participants who appeared to be holding back, perhaps feeling intimidated, and encouraged them to speak by asking them questions directly, referring to them by their names, and maintaining frequent eye contact with them. It did work.

Group-think is where an idea assumes dominance and valid alternative views – usually held by a minority - remain unarticulated (in some cases the unarticulated view may be held by a majority, but individuals may feel that publicly they must express certain other – e.g. more socially acceptable - opinions). In some focus groups, a group view may take hold, which participants become too attached to and uncritical of. There are, obviously, certain difficulties associated with identifying when group-think is occurring – how to distinguish it from legitimately held views which are the product of robust personal evaluations of competing views.

The last problem is associated with sensitive issues surfacing in focus group. The problem may take three main forms. First, participants may withhold sensitive/personal information, thereby limiting the usefulness of the focus group

(which would of course remain hidden from me). Secondly, if someone does raise sensitive information and viewpoints it may make other participants feel uneasy and embarrassed, suppressing their willingness to participate in that and future sessions, and/or conditioning their reactions. Finally, some sensitive issues may also be controversial ones, capable of generating heated debate and disagreement, which may be an unpleasant experience and, once more, may deter people from participating. Some of the negatives associated with the last two issues can be mitigated by a skilled moderator (eg. moving the subject on if he/she detects discomfort). However, I felt that the subject of the research was unlikely to generate such strong emotions. I anticipated the first problem being most likely: that participants will simply keep quiet about issues they feel embarrassed about or consider too personal. Fern's research (2001) describes a group of Vietnamese women's unwillingness to be really open with anyone who isn't family or a very close friend. Although sensitivities associated with SLA research are likely to be relatively rare – and certainly not as profound as those related to SIDS - previous research suggests that some sensitive issues are important here. Freed (1995), for example, showed how the opportunities to speak English for Russian women in America were shaped by American men's construction of Eastern European women's sexuality. Consequently, provision has been made encouraging all participants to be able to talk to myself on a one-to-one basis to discuss those issues he/she does not want to raise 'publicly', with appropriate guarantees regarding confidentiality.

The interviews will be transcribed soon after the interview day, whilst the memory remains fresh, as suggested in Gillham (2000). I found this way very helpful as it has helped me understand the significance of transcription better.

For example, in Pilot Focus Group 1, in Leeds, a male PhD student commented on his limited access to the English language caused by not owning a TV or radio at home. He used the word "we" to refer to many cases of Vietnamese students, not just himself. As soon as he finished the comment, he looked around at other participants to seek support. Once his idea was confirmed by the others in the discussion he felt more confident and elaborated further. Such 'observation' may indicate that this viewpoint was not strongly held by the student (although there are several alternative explanations). Observing body language, although open to misinterpretation, is clearly

capable of complementing spoken words and revealing meaning. Gillham's (2000) recommendation of immediate transcription proves helpful.

### **3.8.3.6 Lessons from the focus group 1**

This section reviews points for consideration and improvement from the first focus group. It is based on my observations, and with reference to appropriate literature on methodology. In general, there was a need for considerations of a more structured focus group. The first pilot group was an exploratory discussion, and the questions were less structured. It had the advantage of providing participants with space to raise interests and concerns about their experiences of speaking English in the UK. However, the experience of running the first pilot group showed me that I needed a more structured approach in the second focus group. Morgan (1998:46) describes the advantages and disadvantages of a structured approach as follows:

*The obvious strength of the more structured approach is its ability to deliver a maximum amount of well-targeted information. The downside, however, is an inability to learn about issues that are not included within the narrowly focused set of predetermined issues.*

According to this, I run the risk of missing important information. However, the decision to conduct a more structured focus group was made after careful consideration. First, because the concepts of identity, power relations, and intergroup and intercultural communication are sensitive, complex and subtle. In order to collect more data about them, the questions must be more focused. A more focused approach will help nail down answers to the research questions. Second, as generating large numbers of additional topics of concern was not a primary goal, I felt confident in risking limiting information in exchange for "a maximum amount of well-targeted information" (Morgan, 1998:46). It must be noted that focus group 2 was still far from *highly* structured merely *more* structured compared to the first pilot. A more structured focus group mean reflects in the size of the group, the interview schedule and the level of moderation, which will be discussed below in detail.

### **Size of the focus group**

The size proved suitable with the semi-structured interview schedule. However, the concept of identity requires a more structured interview which will help tease out information. A smaller size, for example 6, would possibly be more suitable for a more structured level of moderation. This was taken into account in the pilot focus group 2 (see 3.6.4.2).

### **Interview schedule**

The schedule for the pilot focus group 2 should be more structured and contain fewer questions. This was taken into account in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.5). I realized that I actually had only limited control over the interview schedule. Firstly, this was due to my relative inexperience as a moderator and of finding the right balance between getting the answers to the questions I want to ask, and receiving unanticipated information. I was not particularly adept at this in the first focus group (this issue is discussed later, in more detail). Secondly, I did, in fact, ‘abandon’ my schedule at times in order to generate more ideas and to follow the thoughts and stories of participants. In the schedule, questions are designed based on literature reviews and assumptions. As soon as I started talking to the participants, I realized that I had to listen to them more, rather than interrupting them and mechanically moving on to the next question to ‘complete’ the interview schedule.

On the bright side, Bryman, (2000) refers to these as both problems and as opportunities. A degree of freestyle moderation allows the researcher to generate more ideas and views from the participants. Darlington and Scott (2002) also reports a case when a researcher called Angelina started out with a very detailed question guideline for her focus groups. However, at the first focus group she managed to ask only a few of them and in the final meetings the situation had deteriorated so much that she asked none from the schedule at all. She said she did not want to ruin the relationship between her and the interviewees by imposing her agenda and disturbing the conversation flow. I felt the same in the first focus group. As Pilot 1 was exploratory, the schedule was less structured and moderated in a flexible and experimental manner. Details about the level of moderation is addressed in the following section.

### **Level of moderation**

In Vietnamese culture, it is considered rude to interrupt speakers. Therefore, I found it difficult to interrupt participants even when straying off topic. This was fairly common. For example, when asked to rate their speaking performance now compared to when they first arrived in the UK, one participant started to talk about her writing skills instead. Almost immediately others joined her and expressed multiple views about writing skills. This is quite common in focus groups as Krueger (1998) acknowledges.

At first, I tried to be patient, as I did not want to upset the participants as this might adversely affect the quality of the focus group. Later, I realized that if I simply waited for them to finish their point I would never be able to complete my agenda. So I did interrupt, but not when the participants were in the middle of telling a story or were particularly animated (Krueger, 1998:59). In fact, I became more confident in handling this when I saw the participants themselves interrupt each other without incurring annoyance.

More detachment from the focus group: When I was transcribing, I realized that I could have been less judgmental. At times, I did contribute some comments (almost by accident or habit) such as “really?” which might have a certain effects on the participant (in this case, suggesting disbelief). I was even telling my own story at one point. I should have spent that time listening to the participant’s stories. At times I became too involved, possibly because as a fellow international student I felt I had similar experiences to my participants. This also happened when the participants themselves sought agreement and ideas from me. In this case, I should have anticipated the situation and treated it as a topic for group discussion.

Another issue is the researcher/participant relationship. I met the participants in Leeds for the first time at the focus group (except S, who I had several contacts with before). Also, the age difference between myself and the participants should be taken into account. Vietnamese people address each other according to gender and age differences. This means that from the moment we greet each other, we need to know who is the oldest (and who the youngest) in order to produce an appropriate address. It is possible that these ‘rules’ had an effect on the participants (also see Chapter 2). S, in



Leeds, for example was much quieter in the discussion than he usually is outside. One possible explanation is that as the youngest (see Table 3.2), he might have felt intimidated in expressing ideas in front of his elders - those who (in Vietnamese culture) are supposed to have more experience to share. Another possible explanation is that S was sitting next to me. I was therefore not able to give him as much eye contact as the other participants. This might have discouraged him from getting more involved in the discussion. I raised these concerns with S, privately and informally, afterwards. He maintained that he felt relaxed and did not feel any extra pressure as a result of being the youngest, and disagreed with my belief that he was more quiet than usual. However, this issue was suggested to be paid attention to in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.6).

Overall, I should have paid more attention to the 'balance' between the level of structured questions and the degree of moderator involvement. The questions are less structured, so the level of moderator involvement is minimal as well. When participants went off topic, I should have brought them back more effectively. When discussing topics absolutely relevant to the research, I should have afforded them more freedom, and intervened less.

Instead of sending out questionnaires about bio data afterwards, it would be helpful to ask participants to introduce themselves briefly at the very beginning, instead of a small questionnaire being distributed afterwards. This was because I wanted to help participants to feel at ease right at the start of the focus group. In the first focus group, I assumed the participants had known each other well so I did not use such an introduction. This was taken into account in the second pilot focus group (see 3.6.4.2).

### **3.8.3.7 Summary**

This section has described the first pilot focus group, which was conducted in Leeds in May 2008. It debriefs the preparations, information of participants and recruitment method. Literature supporting my reasons for utilising focus groups is also discussed. Pilot study 1 generated some interesting data, which will be presented in Chapter 4. The lesson from focus group 1 suggested that there remained 'areas for improvement' in my utilisation of the focus group tool. Considerations and suggestions on how to

improve the research tool have already been put forward. Several conclusions were executed in the second pilot focus group. Recruitment, appropriate accommodation in Pilot Focus Group 1 all proved effective. They are therefore repeated in the second pilot focus group. One of the most important lessons learned concerned the level of structure of the questions, and the level of moderation which clearly influenced the extent and nature of my interventions.

### **3.8.4. Pilot focus group 2**

#### **3.8.4.1 Research aims**

Gorard (2001) emphasises the importance of piloting and re-piloting until the research instrument becomes sufficiently effective to ensure the reliability of the research. Discussion in the previous section shows that there was a need to conduct the second pilot focus group with special attention paid to working towards a more structured approach to the interview schedule and level of moderation. For pilot focus group 2, I decided to replicate the recruitment method, setting and facilities etc., as they had all proved effective in pilot focus group 1.

#### **3.8.4.2 Recruitment**

The recruitment method for the first pilot focus group proved effective so I replicated it in the second pilot: snowball sampling via an existing Vietnamese institution. I again contacted the President of the Vietnamese Society, but this time in York (“Vietsoc”), and asked for their cooperation. This time, I was supported by the President (again), who passed my recruitment letter to five students; and she herself also participated in the interview. I chose to target six students instead of eight as a result of lessons learned during the first pilot in Leeds (see 3.8.3.6). The focus group size was smaller because I planned to operationalise a ‘more structured’ focus group.

Although the timing was not ideal (the focus group was planned for August in the summer holiday when most students would be exploring the UK or even visiting home) I was happy with the 6 volunteers and it met the minimum target number suggested by Bryman (1998). Given the second focus group was intended to be more

structured, a smaller number of participants would provide each with more time to answer my questions, thus eliciting in-depth views. I used the same letter of recruitment from the first pilot study, as it too had proved effective. Similarly, reminders were mailed out to minimise “no-shows”. I was keen for all 6 participants to come to the focus group as I did not want to end up with a sub-optimal number of attendees and wanted to avoid the type of *debacle* that I had participated in previously (see 3.8.3.5).

This recruitment method once again proved effective as I received 100% response rate for the second time. This suggests that I can keep the same recruitment strategy for the main study. All participants were, of course, recruited on a volunteer basis.

Time, place and administration procedures:

Time: 16 August 2008, from 7pm – 8.35 pm

Duration: The focus group lasted 1.35 hours

The focus group was conducted in domestic accommodation, with seven chairs around a modest-sized table. I was sitting at the same table with the participants. It was in the evening, the lighting was good enough but not too bright. Davies (1994:61) points out potential detrimental effects caused by inappropriate venues:

*The ambience of the room may influence group members and their productivity. Conditions such as too much noise and heat and too many visual effects may create stress that in turn makes demands on the attention and information-processing capacities of group members. The increase stress can result in distorted perceptions of smaller interpersonal space. As heat and noise level increase, some individuals may feel more physically constrained and that their privacy is threatened. These threats are stressful conditions, group participations begin thinking about ways to compensate for their perceived lack of personal space. Thus, they become less sensitive to social cues, less motivated to be helpful, unable to recall facts and issues that have been raised, and may become more aggressive and less tolerant of others; views.*

With this in mind, precautions were taken to limit any environmental effects on participants. With the consent of the participants, a digital voice recorder was placed

in a central position on the table. Refreshments were provided throughout the focus group.

I followed the same procedures in the first focus group and adopted similar ethical considerations (see 3.7). As suggested in the lessons learnt from focus group 1 (see 3.8.3.6), I asked participants to introduce themselves briefly at the very beginning, instead of a small questionnaire being distributed afterwards. This was because I wanted a ‘device’ that could act as an ice-breaker, and sufficiently composed to answer questions and contribute.

### **3.8.4.3 Participants**

Six undergraduate students (two females, four males) participated in pilot focus group 2. Similar to those in Leeds, the York participants knew each other quite well (some had even have known each other for more than 2 or 3 years). However, they were younger; all pursuing undergraduate degrees and majoring in Business (it was known to me beforehand that all Vietnamese students in York in the academic year 2007-2008 were undergraduates and pursuing Business studies). As mentioned earlier, I was interested in carrying out a more structured focus group, i.e. just as – or even more – interested in testing the tool rather than the findings. Therefore I was relaxed with the relative homogeneity of participants - I did not have any preference with regards to their ages or subjects of study. Nevertheless, I was happy that the York group was different from the Leeds group. I was interested to see if this would generate different data and give me a chance to compare and contrast the groups (see Chapter 4 for Analysis and Findings).

**Table 3.3: Pilot focus group 2 – Participant Profile**

Interviewee	HN	TH	HNG	M	T	HG
Gender	F	M	F	M	M	M
Age	22	20	20	20	23	21
Degree	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate	Under-graduate
Major	Business	Business	Business	Business	Business	Business
Currently sharing with English-speaking housemates	no	no	no	yes	No	no
Currently working part-time	yes	yes	no	yes	No	no
Member(s) of societies rather than Vietsoc	yes	yes	no	yes	No	yes
Length of stay in the UK	5 years	3 years	4 years	3 years	3 years	3 years

#### 3.8.4.4 Interview schedule

As suggested in lessons from focus group 1 (3.6.3.6) the set of questions of the second focus group were more structured (see Appendix D). I designed a different set of questions for the second pilot focus group. I picked up the most important issues from the first group and used them as a template for the second group. More structured questions were designed on this basis to be used in pilot focus group 2 (see Appendix D). The exploratory task in focus group 1 generated ‘headline’ concerns for a group of Vietnamese students in Leeds. As mentioned in the recruitment section, I was also interested in investigating how relevant those concerns were for participants in York. The set of questions for the second focus group therefore were based on the themes that *emerged* from the first focus group, rather than either a brand new list of topics or the list that I had started out with in Leeds (for schedule focus group 1 - see Appendix B):

- Participants’ evaluation of their current speaking skill
- Participants’ identity
- Opportunities of practicing the target language in the UK
- Participants’ views of ideal ways to improve speaking skill

The interview schedule allowed me to compare the answers of the two groups. This is part of the task of comparison that I want to engage with in the main study (Menard, 2002). In addition, as suggested in the lessons from pilot focus group 1, the schedule also reduced the number of questions from 8 to 5, which gave each participant more time to answer (see 3.6.3.6).

#### **3.8.4.5 Level of moderator/facilitator involvement**

The level of moderation is largely influenced by the structure of the focus group. In the context of a highly structured focus group Morgan (1998:46) emphasizes:

*A highly structured set of questions would limit your ability to uncover this missing information. And even if the group might try to raise it, a more structured moderating style would redirect the discussion back to the preset topics.*

I acted as the sole moderator of the focus group, again without the support of anyone else. I adopted a more structured moderating style which steered participants back to the interview topics whenever they strayed. However, there were moments when I let participants feel free to carry on to finish a point they were trying to make, even though I did not think they were fully answering my questions. I did not adhere slavishly to my question schedule as originally intended. Partly because I did not want a highly-structured focus group, but partly because I inevitably found some points that participants raised to be novel and very interesting. Whenever this occurred I allowed them to continue without interruption. I was also, of course, trying to get a balance between developing a rapport and getting what I wanted.

With my experience from the first focus group, during the second I was more attuned to the responses from participants. For example, in the discussion I noticed that while most participants valued contacts with native speakers of English – seeing it as a good way for them to improve their own L2 skills - most were living with other non-native speakers, typically fellow Vietnamese. I encouraged the participants to expand on this fact and received interesting comments directly related to the concept of identity and intercultural communication (see Chapter 4).

With regards to the researcher/participant relationship, as suggested in lesson from focus group 1 (3.8.3.6), I also paid attention to the fact if the age difference was at work. I am the oldest Vietnamese student in York, therefore, the age difference between myself my participants in York was bigger than that the Leeds participants. However, during the focus group I did not notice any possible problems that might have caused by the hierarchy caused by age differences as described in section 3.8.3.6. One possible explanation was that I met and knew the participants in York prior to the focus group. We had attended a number of social events together, and had known some of them for three years at the time of the pilot study.

#### **3.8.4.6 Summary**

In general, pilot focus group 2 was better run, being based on lessons from the first focus group. A more structured interview schedule and moderation approach seemed to work well when combined with the small group size of six participants. I was confident after focus group 2 that I had become a much better moderator. I also learnt how to achieve a balance between detachment and involvement, where necessary. Both focus groups 1 and 2 showed that the focus group interview is a suitable research instrument for generating and comparing Vietnamese students' feelings about their learning experiences in the UK. It is therefore recommended to be utilised in the main study.

### **3.8.5 Some final points for both pilot focus groups**

#### **3.8.5.1 The use of Vietnamese language**

The two pilot focus group interviews yielded approximately 175 minutes of audio material. With the participants' consent, the interviews were digitally recorded. I also had a back-up recorder for each interview - but I was lucky and did not experience any technical problems.

Consideration was given whether to use English or Vietnamese language through out the interviews and in correspondence with participants. The use of English language

can have several advantages. In particular, it can eliminate time spent on translation and therefore also problems associated with loss of accuracy. As it happens, Vietnamese language was used throughout all the interviews for the following reasons. First, it was the participants' choice to speak in their L1. In my first letter to potential participants in my first focus group, I left the choice of Vietnamese or English up to them. I did not think it would be an issue in their willingness to join the discussion, but to my surprise, most participants seemed anxious about having to use English in the interviews, and expressed 'relief' when I emphasised that Vietnamese could be used if it made them feel more comfortable. Some participants even mentioned that they would only turn up if Vietnamese was not used. Apparently, the idea of using the English language had the potential to 'scare' participants off.

The difference in languages between participants and the moderator can possibly result in dissatisfaction (Fern, 2001). A similar problem was reported by Goldstein (1996) when the author interviewed Polish women working in Canada. She acknowledges her inability to understand the language of the informants as one of the weaknesses of her research.

As the topics of discussion focus on Vietnamese students' daily experience of communication in English - and the complex multi-layered concept of identity, which can be difficult to conceptualise and articulate even in the mother tongue - I considered it desirable to use my participants (and my) first language, so that we could all express our ideas accurately.

### **3.8.5.2 Translation**

Temple and Young (2004) criticise several research projects for failing to identify problems surrounding issues related to translation: with the whole process of translating and interpreting information provided by participants remaining largely hidden. This can have the undesirable effect of making the reader question the methodological validity of the research. In the context of this research, I share Vietnamese as the L1 with the participants. This permits me to also function as a translator. Temple and Young (2004:168) argue that there are advantages associated with situations where the research can be conducted in the participants' L1:



*The situation where the researcher is fluent in the language of communities she is working with is rare. It offers opportunities in terms of research methods that are not open to other researchers in cross language research. I can use the experience of translating to discuss points in the text where she has had to stop and think about meaning.*

I am a proficient and experienced translator of Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese, having worked as a translator in both Vietnam and the UK. In addition to understanding the syntax, vocabulary and meanings of Vietnamese words, I am a Vietnamese national and have spent 30 years living in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city. This therefore affords the further advantage of the research being undertaken by someone with first-hand experience and understanding of certain cultural concepts raised by participants.

One example of a serious consequence associated with a lack of shared cultural knowledge is described by Eisenbruch (1994:179). The case involves a female Vietnamese patient of a UK General Practitioner. The patient and the GP were 'at odds' in agreeing on a course of treatment for the patient's condition. Neither the patient's non-fluency in English nor the doctor's inability to speak Vietnamese were the main source of confusion and disagreement. Rather, it was the GP's failure to understand the cultural origins that lay behind his/her patient's understanding of her condition that therefore influenced what treatments she trusted - and therefore was or was not prepared to accept.

I consider myself as an "objective instrument of research" (Temple and Young, 2004:169) in which all information is merely transmitted through me, so keeping the originator's message as unchanged as possible. To achieve this I was aware of the likelihood of encountering Vietnamese phrases which might not have exact equivalents in English. Whilst maintaining the anonymity of my participants, I therefore sought occasional assistance from other bilingual Vietnamese and English speakers to proofread my translation (all of whom were external to the research itself). This was to eliminate any "bias", one of the primary concerns of all research that involves translation processes. The bias does not solely rest in the translator's ability

to translate accurately, but is also potentially reflected in my “socio-cultural positioning” (Temple and Young, 2004:169) and in the use of “language to construct self and other” (Alcoff, 1991; Back and Solomos, 1993; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996, cited in Temple and Young 2004:167). Additionally, when translating, I tried to ensure that I had understood not just the etymological meaning of the words themselves but also the meanings and emphases intended by the interlocutor (the speaker’s timbre and/or facial expressions and/or the context within which something is said may provide additional clues to meaning).

Further details regarding the procedures used to interpret and transcribe the interviews is provided in Chapter 4 – Data analysis and findings. All interviews and completed diaries are translated into English.

### **3.8.5.3 Conclusion**

Focus groups were chosen to be a key research instrument in the research project. It was tested twice, the first in May 2008 in Leeds, the second in August 2008 in York. The first focus group was more exploratory, adopting a semi-structured interview schedule. However, in order to collect relevant data in a more efficient way, I decided to apply a more structured interview schedule and moderation level at the second pilot. Therefore, it is suggested that in the main study the focus group method be conducted in the same manner as the second pilot study. The following section will discuss another research tool: the self-completed diary.

## **3.9 Diary**

### **3.9.1 Research aims**

According to Bolger *et al* (2003:579) diaries are useful in generating frequent reports on individuals’ daily lives and allow us to “study change processes during major events and transitions”. As described in Chapter 2, international students experience and attempt to cope with significant levels of change when they travel to study away from home and, additionally, there is a distinct temporal element featured in my research. Daily diaries completed contemporaneously also minimize the extent to which participants must recall information. Diaries are particularly good therefore at

capturing: person level information; within-person changes over time; and the possible causes of within-person changes (Bolger *et al*, 2003, Pomerantz, *et al*, 2004, Sharky *et al.*, 2005)

Barbour (2009:294) defines a diary as a record of activities and experiences kept by respondents for research purposes. The template of such a record can be “structured or unstructured, as the researcher wishes” (Barbour, 2009:19). Therefore, diaries can be constructed requiring participants to record information at regular intervals or, alternatively, in response to specific events and signals. For the purposes of this research, a highly structured diary format will be used – in effect, a daily questionnaire - and participants are required to record and comment on those events and experiences they have experienced on a particular day (questionnaires are typically associated with cross-sectional research and capture a ‘snapshot’ of phenomena at a particular point in time. It is the temporal element associated with my research which confirms my use of this particular instrumentation as a form of diary). The use of a structured diary can help address the limitations of diary studies discussed in the following section.

### **3.9.2 Limitations of diaries**

Bailey (1991) observes that most published diary studies are completed by teachers or linguists, not actual learners. Unstructured, ‘freestyle’ diarizing may also generate highly subjective data which varies in quality and quantity and cannot easily be quantified and/or systematically compared and contrasted (Bailey, 1991, Bolger *et al*, 2003, Pomerantz, *et al*, 2004, Sharky *et al.*, 2005). Participants in my research are novice diarists but ‘real learners’. Therefore, to ensure the ‘quality’ of diary entries, a structured diary (in the form of a daily questionnaire) is used to provide more guidance and ‘focus’ for the diarists and to facilitate analysis.

Apart from addressing quality issues, the structured diary approach can also address the problem of commitment. Both Bailey (1991) and Bolger *et al* (2003) identify commitment (to maintaining a daily diary) as one of the major risks to successful diary studies. A structured template is therefore used so that the process of recording

data is less time-consuming, thereby minimizing the ‘drop-out’ rate. This appeared to work and all my participants maintained their diary for the full three months.

Although the diary takes the form of a questionnaire and is highly structured it was also designed to capture significant amounts of relevant data. The degree of structure of the diary was therefore calibrated to save my participants’ time, while at the same time generating *sufficient amounts of relevant* data capable of meeting the research aims.

Finally, Bolger *et al* (2003:592) refers to the risk of “reactance” and habituation. Reactance occurs when individuals completing the diary allow it to affect their behaviours. I have addressed this point elsewhere (referring to a housemate’s participation in a national radio listening survey). Habituation occurs when the diarist believes that he or she has ‘learned’ what is being asked of him/her and completes the diary unthinkingly: this is also addressed previously in this Chapter in further detail. Bolger *et al.*, (2003) argues that further studies looking at the effect of reactance and habituation on the validity of diary-based research is urgently needed.

With regards to the way the diary is administered, completed and returned (this can be done electronically, by e-mail, or by post) I have left this decision up to the participants. I offer both ready-printed diaries for pen-and-paper completion (so that participants can put it on notice boards or other convenient locations) or e-versions sent as an email attachment.

### **3.9.3 Recruitment**

The diary pilot was during week 1 of term 2, in January 2009. I contacted five Vietnamese students in the University of York who had never participated in any parts of the research project before and asked for their cooperation. All five students agreed to participate in the diary pilot study. I chose wholly new participants for the diary pilot in order to receive new views from Vietnamese students hitherto unaware of the main concerns of my research. The main study was targeted at between 14 and 16 participants, and therefore five participants was considered to be a reasonable number for piloting.

### 3.9.4 Participants

The purpose of the diary pilot was to test the research tool (the diary): therefore students were recruited regardless of their education background, major, gender or age. Those selected comprised a mixture of genders, but were of similar ages and studying similar degrees. They are referred to by their initials which again, are not necessarily their actual initials.

**Table 3.4: Participant profile – diary pilot study**

	THNH	CH	LPH	LTR	DA
Age	20	20	22	22	23
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male
Major	Economics	Economics	Business	Business	Economics and Politics
Degree	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate

### 3.9.5 Diary design

As discussed in section 3.9.2, a structured diary format is chosen for the purpose of this research. This section will explain the steps and thoughts involving in the process of constructing a structured template for participants to keep on a daily basis. Buckingham and Saunders (2007) recommend breaking down research questions into hypotheses, and identifying the key concepts associated with them that should then be turned into ‘testables’. A diary is then constructed which allows relationships between the testable to be identified and analysed.

Hypothesis: Identity and second language acquisition are interconnected

**Table 3.5: Hypothesis, concepts and testables**

Hypotheses	Concepts	Testables
Identity is constructed and re-constructed – not fixed	Identity	Presence of social roles and changes to them in time and space Self-perceptions regarding identity
Identity influences interaction (inputs and outputs)	Interactions	Qualitative and quantitative nature of interactions Self-assessments of linguistic competence
Opportunities to interact with L2 speakers are contingent	Inter-Group	Group facilitating interaction and acculturation, minimising shock (support mechanism) or limiting interaction?
	Power (power over and power to) – worthy to speak and worthy to listen	Evidenced In Key relationships (eg employer/employee; student/supervisor; tenant/landlord etc.) and by individual positions and ‘group’. Success or failure in specific interactions
	Motivation	
Greater interaction with target language speakers leads to greater proficiency in the L2	L2 Proficiency	Success or failure in specific interactions Nature of interactions: is quality more important than quantity of interaction? Self-assessment of progress in the L2

A structured diary template was constructed based on Table 3.5. It comprises of 4 closed questions and one open-ended question for each day. The set of questions is repeated throughout the week. There is an additional question regarding the ranking of social roles for every week, and a space for participants to provide extra information. It is also necessary to note that the diary is not used as a ‘stand-alone’ method in this research. The diary is used in combination with focus group interviews, as a diary-interview method (Elliott, 1997). Barbour (2009:18) also suggests that the use of a diary can stimulate discussion at subsequent interviews when used within the context of a longitudinal study. This is based on Elliott’s (1997) observation that the use of diaries can provide useful insights regarding what is going on in respondents’ lives in-between interviews.

### **3.9.6 Diary completion training**

It was essential that participants understood the questions in the diary and knew how to answer them properly: some training in using the diary was therefore provided. The pilot study was carried out for a period of one week for each participant in January 2009. I met two participants (THNH and CH) personally and showed them how to keep the diary. The session took place in an informal setting and refreshments were provided. Both hard and soft copies were provided to participants. I explained briefly the research and guided them through each question in the diary template (Appendix G). The diary's guidance notes (Appendix C) were also explained in detail. Feedback from both participants on the diary's format and guidance notes were positive. They had no difficulty understanding the questions. Similar conversations with the other three participants (LPH, LTR and DA) took place online or over the telephone. Both methods of approaching my participants (face-to-face and online/telephone) generated similar conversations. Lessons learned during the face-to-face encounters were used to inform my online and telephone 'conversations'.

### **3.9.7 Feedback from participants**

This section will describe changes in the format based on feedback and suggestions from participants in pilot diary study. The pilot diary template is provided in Appendix G. The revised diary template for main study is provided in Appendix H. Guidance on how to complete the diary template (for both pilot and main studies) is provided in Appendix C.

#### **3.9.7.1 Language and Format**

I offered participants both Vietnamese and English versions of the diary and guidance. Four participants preferred English versions, and DA did not indicate any preference. This was surprising as I had expected participants to prefer Vietnamese versions. When asked, participants explained that they were very confident in their English, having resided in the UK and studied in English for several years. The English version did not pose any difficulties. DA and THNH described the English language used in the diary as 'plain English', considering it simple and easy to understand. The

participants suggested the diary itself should be in English whereas the guidance should be made available in either Vietnamese or English. I also raised the issue of which language to be used in filling out the last column - 'Notes' - where participants are asked to record feelings and observations about their daily experiences. DA and LPH stated that they were comfortable completing this in either language. THNH, CH and LTR suggested that they would prefer completing this section in Vietnamese.

In general, participants preferred the diary to be in English, but expressed no language preference for the guidance. For the main study I therefore decided to produce the diary in English and to produce the guidance in English to ensure that participants understood it clearly. I let the participants choose which language (English or Vietnamese) to use when completing the open question in the last column. In short, participants described the language and format used in both the diary and guidance as simple to follow and easy to use.

### 3.9.7.2 Modification of diary template

Column 1: "How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?"

LPH and CH suggested that the scale of 'more than 7 hours' was too large. They did not believe any participants would ever speak English more than 7 hours a day. However, I suggested that there might be cases where participants held part-time jobs which required lots of speaking (customer service roles, for example). LPH and CH agreed that this was possible. However, CH and THNH suggested there should be one box for 'not at all' as '1 hour or less' does not accurately capture cases where no English is spoken at all. These suggestions were accepted and the template was adjusted accordingly.

Column 2: "Which of the following **best** describes who you spoke English with today?" (*circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers*)

It was suggested that I should add DN (Don't Know) for cases where participants are unsure of their interlocutor's linguistic status. This was also accepted and adjustment was made. The list of 'types' of interlocutors provided was considered



comprehensive. THNH did not follow the instructions of circling N for native or NN for non-natives. Later discussion with THNH revealed that he was not sure what N or NN meant. Even though this was explained in the face-to-face diary training. Therefore, further emphasis on the issue during training was recommended for the main study.

Column 3: “When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today? (tick as many as apply)

Participants seemed to need further clarification of what constitutes – and distinguishes - ‘small talk’ from ‘socializing’; and how ‘simple transactions and negotiations’ differs from ‘complex transactions and negotiations’. I therefore reinforced the guidance to make sure the definitions were adequate. I then decided to keep the definitions unchanged but would make sure participants understand the differences and similarities of the categories.

Column 4: How do you rate your experience of speaking English **today** in general?

CH suggested that I should include one more box for ‘neither negative nor positive’. In CH’s opinion, there were occasions when she spoke English but had no particular feelings about the interaction. The box ‘mixture of positive and negative’ failed to capture her particular experience. I had assumed that participants always assessed and were able to reach definite conclusions about their interactions. Therefore, I amended the diary by adding ‘neither negative nor positive’ box.

Column 5: Notes

Most participants did not enter anything in this column. Some participants said they forgot to complete this, whilst others (THNH and DA) told me that they did not know what I meant by “notes”. Training on completing this column will receive greater emphasis in the main study. In addition, the title of the column has been changed to: ‘Please describe here, briefly, the reason why you have chosen the rating scales in the column on the left’. Finally, I enlarged the column to draw more attention to it.

Final box: Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week? Please rank them, putting '1' alongside the role that most applies, '2' alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.

The options seemed to have covered all the Social Roles that students experienced. However, DA suggested adding another social role: 'Friend' as it was how some of his interlocutors viewed him. I have added one more box 'Friend' in the template for main study. The addition was under careful consideration. I already considered the fine line between 'friend' and 'student': one can have student friends but not all friends are necessarily students. I also paid attention to this issue during the diary training session to make sure participants understand the overlap between 'Friend' and 'Student'.

There was another issue flagged up by THNH who was confused regarding wanted and unwanted Social Roles that others impose on him, and roles that he believes himself to 'occupy', and roles that others believe he occupies. THNH suggested splitting the box into two - one for roles that participants felt they occupied and the other for roles that their interlocutors believed the participants occupied. This was a very interesting comment from THNH but after careful consideration I ultimately decided to keep the box unchanged. The reason for not splitting the box into wanted and unwanted roles is that it will cause more difficulties for participants to complete these boxes. It is not realistic to ask participants to guess what social roles they believe other people think they are occupying. In addition, this might cause problem for credibility when data is collected based on guesses and assumptions.

Participants in the pilot also suggested I should include a new box: "If there is anything you think important this week that I should know, please make a note of it here and I will discuss it with you in detail when we meet". This gave participants a chance to record 'freestyle' opinions and/or observations. This recommendation was accepted and I have inserted the box as such.

### **3.10 Main study**

The section will present the plan to carry out the main study which started from February to April 2009 (see Stages of the Research 3.3.2). I followed the same recruitment method as in the two pilot focus groups. 14 MA students of academic year 2008-2009 agreed to take part in the research. As discussed on the research design, the main study involves daily diary completion in three months, 5 focus groups. The section moves on to discuss the limitations of the research design and ends with possible consideration to overcome the limitations.

#### **3.10.1 Recruitment**

Chapter 4 – Data analysis and findings - suggest that participants, in their first or second year of residing in the UK, seem to experience more problems and difficulties. Also, the older they are when they first arrive in the UK, the more challenging it is for them to adapt to the target culture and take advantage of opportunities to practice speaking English. Findings from the two pilot studies do not indicate any differences associated with students' choices of subjects studied, or the level (undergraduate or postgraduate) of course pursued. Therefore, in the main study, I focus on MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year, regardless of their majors. This group satisfies the criteria: they are normally older than the undergraduate and have shorter stays in the UK (typically just one year). As the recruitment method in the pilot studies proved effective, I decided to replicate it for the main study. At the beginning of academic year 2008-2009 (October 2008), I contacted the Vice-President of Vietsoc. I explained the goal of my research and asked for her cooperation. As the numbers and contact details of MA students were not accessible until the start of the academic year, I could not contact them earlier than that. The Vice-president agreed to participate in the research and passed my recruitment letter (Appendix E) to all new MA students (for academic year 2008-2009). Twelve students (including the Vice-President of Vietsoc) volunteered to participate in the main study.

Vietsoc-York was established in 2008-2009. I nominated myself as Vice-President and was elected. This was in an effort to get involved and get access to potential

participants. However, only two Vietnamese MA students enrolled for the academic year. I met them in person separately to explain my research and asked for their participation. They both agreed, which means I received 100% response for the third time. In total, 12 MA students in Leeds and 2 MA students in York will participate in the main study.

### **3.10.2 Problems/limitations**

The design is not without flaws. However, the purpose of the research is to observe temporal changes thus it is necessary to adopt the design. Missing data occurs in any research design but might be more common due to the difficulty of securing the commitment of participants. There are many reasons for this problem (Menard, 2002:31): some participants withdraw from the research or sample attrition (Bryman, 2004 and Menard, 1991); others move elsewhere and cannot be located. Even if all participants remain active in the panel, there is still the risk of missing data - participants may forget past events, or refuse or hold back their co-operation by providing information selectively. It is not easy to contemplate the ability or inability to 'tease out' information from respondents.

It is difficult to fully control for sample attrition (Menard, 2002). There are 14 participants in my main study. The numbers of cases in such research are often deliberately small in order to remain manageable: examples include Norton's study of 5 women (2000) and Schuman's study of 4 adults and two children (1978). Some researchers have focused on a single case (Kinginger, 2004). I decided to work with 14 participants for the very first reason that 14 volunteered to participate in my research. In addition, I do not consider 14 to be unmanageable; and also because it is sufficiently high to act as a 'buffer' in case of drop-out. In a worst-case scenario involving, say, 50% drop-out that would still leave more participants than in a number of comparable studies (above). In addition, the period of time is kept to three months during which the participants will meet just 5 times. Again, this is not considered too demanding. With regards to the diaries, I have made sure the diary template is simple to use (tick-box format, available as an e-diary or as a pen-and-paper version) and does not take more than 3 minutes to complete (also see 3.9.2 and 3.9.5). Further,

incentives (small gifts) are being provided to thank participants for their cooperation, and refreshments will be provided at all meetings to incentivise continued attendance.

Another problem is referred to as ‘panel effects’ (De Vaus, 2002). This is when participants behave differently under the influence of the research schedule. I myself personally observed this effect on a housemate participating in a longitudinal study looking at people’s radio choices and listening habits. He was asked to keep a daily diary for a week about what channels he listened to, where, and for how long. I noticed that he appeared to be listening more. I had an informal conversation with him about his experience afterwards. He admitted that the idea of a researcher viewing his diary made him more eager to listen so that he had “more” to put into the diary. He knew that no one would be able to identify him but nonetheless his listening habits changed. Oddly, if he had simply wanted to ‘impress’ the researcher with his extensive radio-listening all he had to do was lie on the form. Instead, he actually changed his behaviour. I then realized the panel effect was extremely powerful and if any participants in my research did the same the “findings” would clearly be skewed. I therefore, encouraged participants to behave normally during the research period, but of course this does risk drawing attention to the possibility of panel effects and possibly even increasing its likelihood. The panel effect cannot be completely eliminated and cannot even be easily identified. But it may be partly avoidable by being careful in terms of not explicitly advising participants on what they should and should not do to maximise the benefits of any social interactions. The panel effect is not unique in longitudinal study, and remains a problem in any research where the participants know that they are being observed.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

The chapter has provided a theoretical framework for the choice of research strategy and design. It justifies the research procedures and explains in detail the steps involved in each stage of the research. It is then followed by reports on pilot groups 1 and 2. The first pilot group was conducted with 8 participants in Leeds (May 2008). The pilot study was based on a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B). A review of the study suggested that a more structured level in the interview schedule and moderation was needed in order to collect relevant data most effectively.

Therefore, the second pilot focus group was held with 6 participants in York (August 2008). The interview schedule was more structured with fewer questions, based on the main themes generated from the first focus group (Appendix D). Results from the second pilot study showed that the focus groups in the main study should be conducted using the same procedures and structure. The chapter moved on to discuss briefly the rationale and limitations of the diary pilot which is carried out from January 2009. After that, discussion for the research design of the main study was provided in detail. Findings and analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### **Diary Analysis and Findings**

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This chapter presents data collected from the diary during the 12-week main study from 2 February to 26 April 2009, with references to data from pilot study. As discussed in Chapter 3 – Methodology - the diary was kept on a daily basis. The structured template diary is provided in Appendix H; guidance made available on how to complete the diary is presented in Appendix C. The chapter consists of six main parts: (1) brief presentation of the administration of data collection and analysis; (2) the quantity of L2 interactions; (3) types of L2 interlocutors; (4) types of L2 interactions; (5) how participants felt/judged their L2 experience and (6) the social roles/identity participants believed they have occupied.

#### **4.1 Data collection and analysis process**

This section will briefly discuss the process of data collection and analysis in the main diary study, which are divided into three parts: recruitment of participants, administration and dealing with missing data. The purpose of this section is to provide some background information to aid the understanding of the findings which follow.

##### **4.1.1 Participants and recruitment method**

The same method of recruitment was used to that of the Pilot study (see Chapter 3 – Methodology) where it had proved effective. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through the Vietnamese Society (VietSoc) in York and Leeds. Fourteen MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year agreed to keep a daily diary over 12 weeks, commencing on 2 February 2009. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Ly and Ha are in York, and the rest live and study in Leeds. Table 4.1 below presents the participant's profiles.

**Table 4.1 Main study participant profile**

	Age	Gender	Major	Part-time job
Ly	25	F	Social Science	N
Ha	24	F	Business and Finance	Y
Sang	29	M	Natural Sciences	N
Luyen	25	F	Business	Y
Quynh	23	F	Business	Y
Tu	27	M	Business	N
Nga	24	F	Business	N
Hoa	24	F	Business	Y
An	26	F	Science	N
Mi	24	F	Social Science	Y
Bac	27	M	Business	N
Thao	25	F	Business	N
Chau	25	F	Business	Y
Mai	27	F	Business	Y

Participants were aged between 24 and 29, with a mean age of 24.14. The majority (10/14) were studying for an MA in the field of Business; of the remaining four, 2 were majoring in Science and 2 were majoring in Social Science. Eight students (57.1%) at the time data collection had a part-time job. Almost 80% (11/14) of the sample were female.

#### **4.1.2 Administration**

The administration of the main study was more complicated than that of the pilot due to the longer time over which participants were asked to keep the diary. But logistical problems arose also due to the fact that the majority of participants lived in Leeds, a large city some 20 miles away from the researcher's base: a significant amount of communication with these participants was via email and telephone. I held the first meeting with participants in Leeds on 31 January 2009 and in York on 1 February 2009. Participants were briefed on the research and what they were expected to do during the twelve weeks. They had been assured that they could withdraw from the research at any time. These early meetings were largely focused on training participants how to use the diary and providing them with clarification. It was agreed that participants would maintain the diary every day, in electronic ('e-



diaries') or paper format. Most of the participants chose paper (Nga, Mai, Sang and Thao however, preferred e-diaries). I suggested 'e-diaries' be returned weekly for better data protection. The diary booklet, however, was to be posted to my address in York every four weeks by registered mail. All the postage costs were covered by myself. For the two participants in York, I personally collected the diary every four weeks.

#### **4.1.3 Dealing with missing data**

During the twelve weeks of the main study, missing data problem occurred, which are divided into three 'types' for treatment. In 'type' one - Thao and Tu - the data was not collected at all Thao's computer 'crashed' shortly after she had completed the first two week's diary which she had not yet managed to return by email, even though I had suggested e-diaries should be returned on weekly basis. I was not notified of the problem until the middle of week 2 when I sent her a reminder for the week one diary. By the time Thao was ready to keep a paper-copy diary it was the middle of week 3. Thao agreed to carry on keeping a diary from weeks 3 to 12. As Thao was not confident in recalling her experiences in the first three weeks we agreed to treat it as a complete missing data set. Similar to Thao, Tu was not able to keep his diary for two weeks between 15 March to 1 April 2009. He claimed he was too busy to do so. Completing the diary retrospectively, from memory, was rejected for the same reason as that given for Thao.

In the second 'type' of missing data, the information given by participants was partially missing and then 'recovered' after follow-up discussions. This data is therefore treated with caution (see the analysis later). Quynh did not provide information about her interlocutor's categories (Native, Non-native or Don't Know). Again, the problem was not raised with me until the end of week 4 after the paper diary was returned by post. I arranged a second meeting with Quynh to give her additional training in diary completion and to help her retrieve the missing data. However, unless indicated, this data is generally excluded from my analysis because it is dependent on Quynh's memory and therefore might contain errors. Tu, Ha and Quynh also failed to rank the social roles as requested and simply ticked which ones they felt they had occupied. I returned the diaries to the two Leeds participants (Quynh and Tu) and they amended their responses, and met Ha in York

and helped her to complete hers. Because identifying participants' social roles was an important focus of the research I could not afford treating them as missing data but, once more, certain data should be treated with caution.

The final 'type' of missing data was with Chau who only handed in the first four weeks of the diary on time. Although I had chased her up by emailing and phoning her from time to time, I did not receive the remaining 8 weeks of her diaries until mid-June 2009. Her information remained legitimate as she had kept the diary on a daily basis was simply too busy to post them. This caused some problems at the diary analysis stage because I had to add her information and rewrite my data analysis.

## 4.2 Quantity of L2 interactions

### 4.2.1 Total hours spent on speaking English

Question 1: How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?

Participants were asked to estimate the number of hours they spent each day speaking English: "not at all"; "1 hour or less"; "3 hours or less"; "5 hours or less"; "7 hours or less" and "more than 7 hours" (see Appendix H). For presentation purposes, the 84-days main study was equated to 3 months.

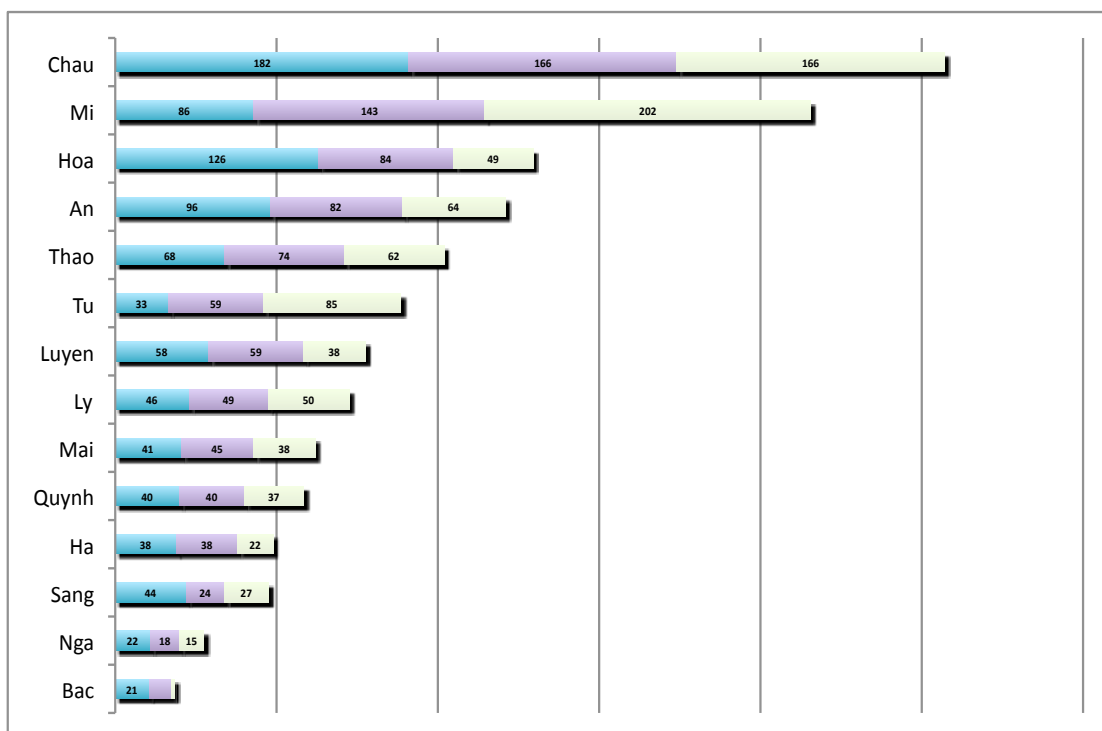


Figure 4.1 Total number of hours per month spent on speaking English

The Figure summarises the maximum number of hours Vietnamese participants spent each month speaking English during the main study. Data was missing with Tu in week 1 of the second month; and Thao in three weeks of the first month. On the whole, most participants spent fewer than 100 hours per month speaking English (or below 3.3 hours/day), except Chau and Mi who spent on average 171 and 110 hours/month respectively. Nine participants (65%) spent no more than 50 hours/month (or below 1.68 hours/day). The number of hours speaking English was on a downward trend, though varied from one individual to another, so that in the last month most participants spent between a maximum of 60 hours/month and a minimum of 0. There was only one outlier, Mi who started out below the 100 level as others but achieved around 200 hours/month towards the end of the period.

The Pilot study generated similar results. The total number of hours that participants spent speaking English is summarised in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2: Pilot diary study- total hours of speaking English in a week**

Participants	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
LPH	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs
CH	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs
DA	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 5 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 5 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 21 hrs
THNH	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 10 hrs
LTR	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 3 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 1 hrs	≤ 11 hrs

On average, participants spent between 10 to 11 hours speaking English in a week, which roughly corresponds with the main study results. As in the main study there was an exceptional case: DA reported 21 hours in total, which is double that of others. On the contrary, CH though claimed an average of 11 hours in total, actually spent fewer hours than that. This is because CH chose ‘1 hour or less’ for the days when she did not speak English at all. This was due to the fact that the box “not at

all” was not included at the pilot stage. The diary template for the main study was amended upon CH’s recommendation (see 3.9.7.2).

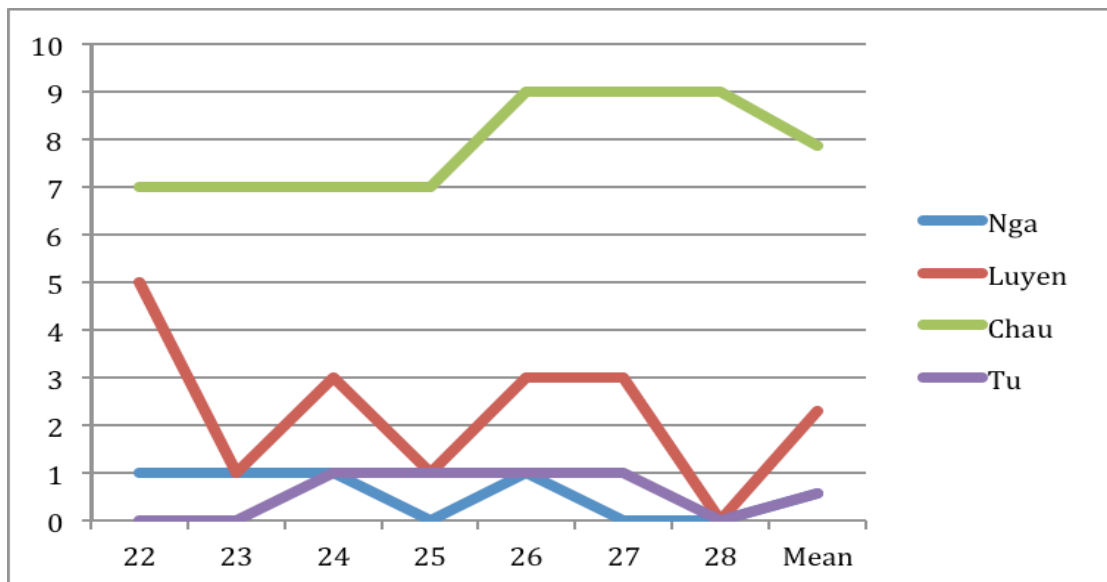
#### 4.2.2 Individual variation

Data presented in 4.2.1 might give the impression that there was no fluctuation in the number of hours spent speaking English, nor significant differences among participants. However, the fluctuations and differences can be best revealed when the data is viewed ‘close up’ on a daily and/or weekly basis. I have chosen a random week to present; day 22 to 28 (out of 84 days in total). The reason why I have chosen such a week is because there was no missing data during the week, and it is half way through the main study. The original line chart which included all participants is impossible to understand so I decided to select cases reflecting the sample range (including the case closest to the sample mean). Four participants were chosen, Nga and Tu (for the lowest), Luyen (closest to the mean) and Chau (the highest). Table 4.3 below illustrated the hours participants spent speaking English in the week between day 22<sup>nd</sup> to day 28<sup>th</sup> of data collection period.

**Table 4.3 Maximum hours spent speaking English by participants in a week**

Day	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	Mean
Sang	1	1	3	1	0	1	3	1.43
<b>Nga</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.57</b>
Mai	1	1	3	3	1	1	0	1.43
<b>Luyen</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2.29</b>
<b>Chau</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7.86</b>
Ha	1	1	1	3	1	0	0	1.00
Ly	1	3	1	1	3	1	1	1.57
<b>Tu</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.57</b>
Quynh	3	1	1	1	1	0	0	1.00
Hoa	3	7	5	7	7	7	3	5.57
An	3	3	3	5	5	1	1	3.00
Mi	1	5	3	3	3	3	1	2.71
Bac	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0.71
Thao	1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1.14
Mean								<b>2.20</b>

From Table 4.3 above, four participants are chosen: Nga, Tu, Luyen and Chau. Nga and Tu reported the lowest number of hour, only 0.57 on average. This means that Nga and Tu spent less than one hour per day on speaking English on a typical week. Chau is chosen because she achieved 7.86 hours per day speaking English. Luyen, as a middle range representative obtained 2.29 hours per day. The variation between the four participants shall now put in the Figure below to illustrate the variance among participants on a week.



**Figure 4.2 Hours spent speaking English in one week – selected participants**

As the figure above shows, the differences among the highest mean and the lowest is nearly 7 hours. The fluctuation can be seen in all participants except Tu who stayed at a stable level of 1 hour per day until the last day of the week. The upward and downward trends varied each day. Luyen, for example, moved from 5 hours to 1 hour and up to 3 hours. Nga fluctuated between 0 to 1 hour in the week. Apart from Chau, the hours spent speaking English decreased at the weekend (days 27 and 28).

#### **4.2.3 Individual routinisation**

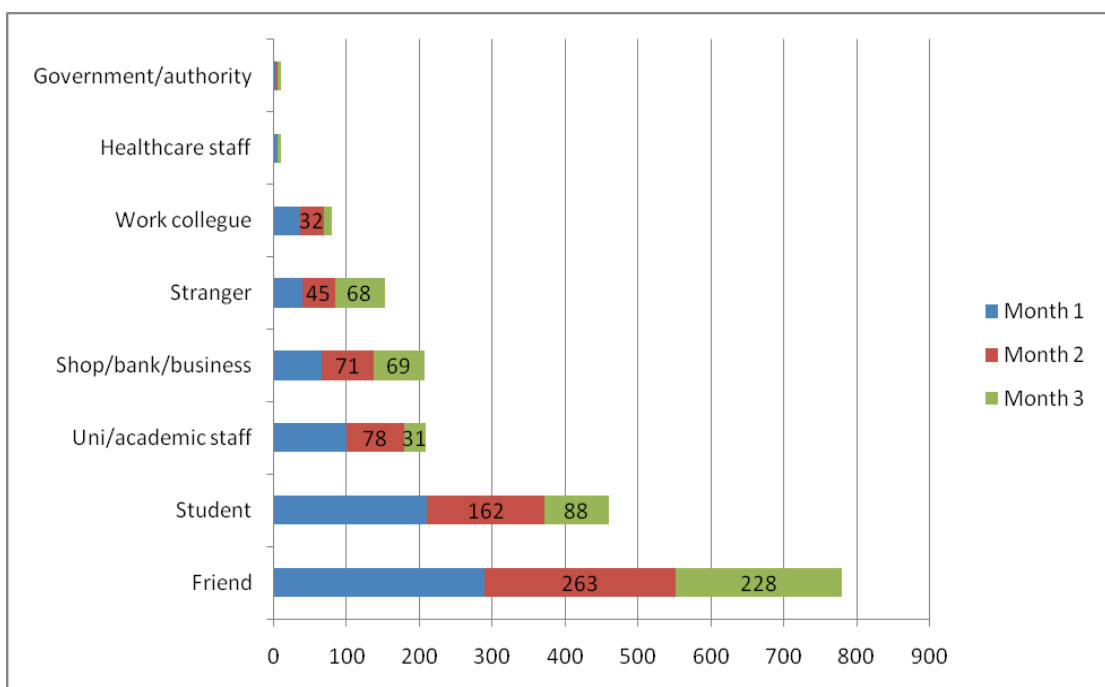
Interestingly, although there was variation *between* participants, and variation on a day-to-day basis, if the amount of time spent speaking English per week is the datum then each participant spent roughly the same amount of time speaking English each week. This suggests that individuals might construct and/or find themselves in daily routines and in ‘boxes’ which constrain them and prevent them

from speaking more (or less) English. Such ‘routinisation’ in L2 interaction is explored in the focus groups and is discussed in more detail later.

In short, there are two major trends in the total hours spent speaking English. First, participants spent only a limited amount of time speaking the L2 - around 11 hours per week - and even this was decreasing (4.2.1). Second, variation between participants is large (4.2.2), and individual participant seems to establish a routine which, over time, displays relatively little fluctuation (4.2.3).

### 4.3 Types of interlocutors

Question 2: Which of the following best describes who you spoke English with today?



**Figure 4.3 Total number of interactions with all interlocutors**

Figure 4.3 presents the number of L2 interactions participants recorded. There are 8 categories of interlocutors over the three-month study. A ninth category - ‘other’ - was also available for participants. For this category, Chau indicated ‘bus/coach driver’ which was then classified in the same category with ‘shop/bank/business’. Mi, Tu and Chau indicated ‘partner, boy friend and girl friend’, which is considered to belong to the ‘other’ category. The total number of interactions with all interlocutor in Figure 4.3 above will be broken down per each individual in the Table 4.4 below.

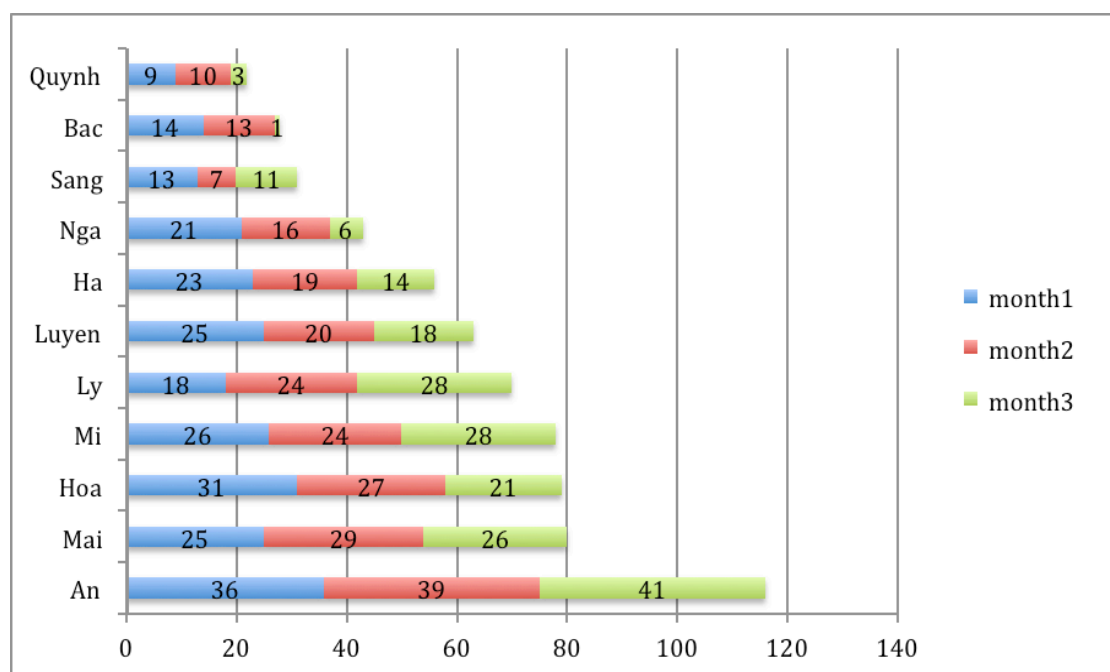
**Table 4.4 Total number of interactions with interlocutor per individual**

		An	Mi	Nga	Ha	Hoa	Ly	Sang	Mai	Luyen	Quynh	Bac	Total
Work	M1	1	7	0	17	4	0	1	0	0	5	1	36
	M2	0	7	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	32
Colleague	M3	0	3	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>82</b>
	%	0.4	8.1	0.0	33.6	3.1	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	12.5	6.3	
Stranger	M1	7	10	3	3	4	0	0	3	4	0	3	37
	M2	9	3	0	1	8	0	3	4	0	1	1	30
	M3	6	1	6	1	3	1	1	2	1	13	2	37
	<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>104</b>
	%	7.8	6.3	6.1	3.6	10.3	0.8	4.4	8.6	5.0	14.9	8.7	
Friend	M1	36	26	21	23	31	18	13	25	25	9	14	241
	M2	39	24	16	19	27	24	7	29	20	10	13	228
	M3	41	28	6	14	21	28	11	26	18	3	1	197
	<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>666</b>
	%	44	37	28.9	41.8	60.8	54.7	27.2	79.2	65.6	27.5	44.4	
University academic Staff	M1	8	18	14	9	9	11	3	3	5	1	2	83
	M2	10	15	9	3	10	8	0	3	3	1	5	67
	M3	9	0	3	0	7	2	0	2	0	2	0	25
	<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>175</b>
	%	10.4	15.7	17.4	9.0	20.0	16.4	2.6	7.9	8.3	5.0	11.1	
Shop/ bank/ Business	M1	24	3	8	0	1	1	3	1	0	2	5	48
	M2	33	5	6	0	1	1	2	2	0	2	5	57
	M3	27	0	9	3	1	2	1	2	0	8	2	55
	<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>160</b>
	%	32.3	3.8	15.4	2.2	2.3	3.1	5.3	5.0	0.0	15.0	19.0	
Student	M1	8	29	20	18	7	20	12	0	12	19	12	157
	M2	13	26	18	0	1	11	17	0	8	9	0	103
	M3	8	19	7	0	10	2	16	1	5	0	0	68
	<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>328</b>
	%	11.2	35.2	30.2	13.4	13.8	25.8	39.5	1.0	26.0	35.0	19.0	
Govern- ment	M1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	M2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4
	M3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>
	%	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.0	0.0	
Health- Care	M1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	M2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	M3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>
	%	0.4	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>Grand</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>1526</b>

The table lists participants' interactions with each category of interlocutor. An had the highest number of interactions (282) and Bac had the lowest (69). Individual variation was also significant. An's interactions ranged from 1 (work colleague) to 116 (friend); Mi (0 and 78); Nga and Sang (0 and 45); Ha and Ly (0 and 56); Mai (0 and 80); Luyen (0 and 63); Quynh (0 and 28) and Bac (0 and 28). Table 4.4 also shows the number of interactions with each category as a percentage of participants' total interactions. As discussed earlier, for most participants 50% or more of their interactions were with friends and students. Only around 10% or less of their interactions were with university and academic staff - surprisingly modest given all participants were students at the time of the main study.

#### 4.3.1 Interactions with Friends

In general, the number of interactions declines slightly over the three-month period. This accords with question 1's suggestion of a decreased number of hours spent speaking English (see 4.2.1). Participants had most interactions with friends.



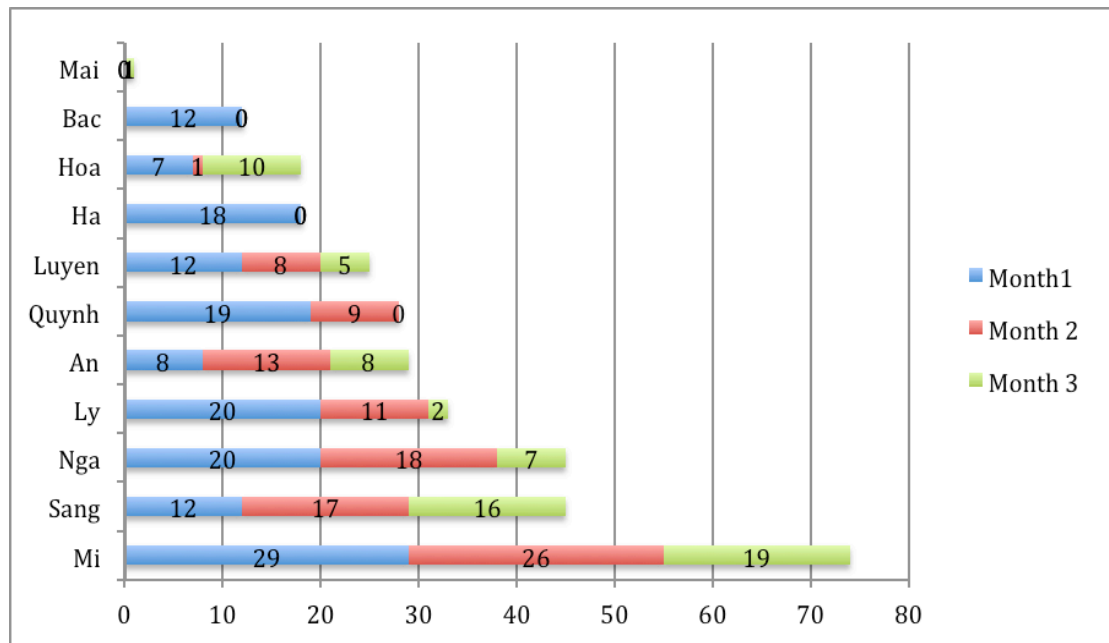
**Figure 4.4** Number of interactions with “friends” in three months

Figure 4.4 shows each participant's number of interactions with 'Friends'. There was a large gap between the highest (An, 116) and the lowest (Quynh, 22), but several participants' reported fairly similar numbers of L2 interactions with friends.



The second most frequent interlocutors were students with a total number of interactions of 328, almost half that of friends (666).

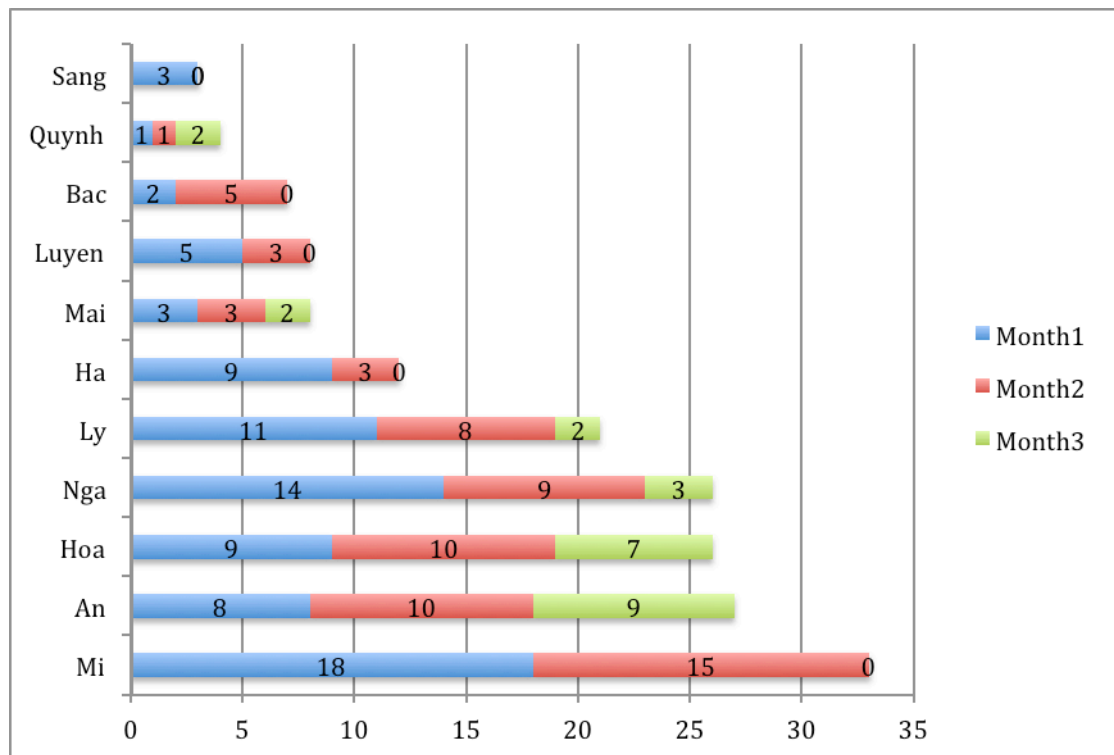
#### 4.3.2 Interactions with Students



**Figure 4.5** Number of interactions with students in three months

This category had the biggest gap among the 8 categories with the highest (Mi) reporting 74 interactions compared to Mai who reported only 1 encounter. Lessons from the pilot study had shown that there was some possible overlapping of data relating to “friends” and “students” (also see lesson from pilot study in 3.9.7.2). Therefore, during the training sessions for the main participants I defined the two categories. Nevertheless, it is probably sensible to still approach this data with caution. Mai differentiated between “friend” and “student”. Her number of interactions with students was the lowest (only 1), however, she had the second highest number in friends (80 interactions). She explained in the focus groups that her interlocutors were both students and friends but she considered them more friends than students.

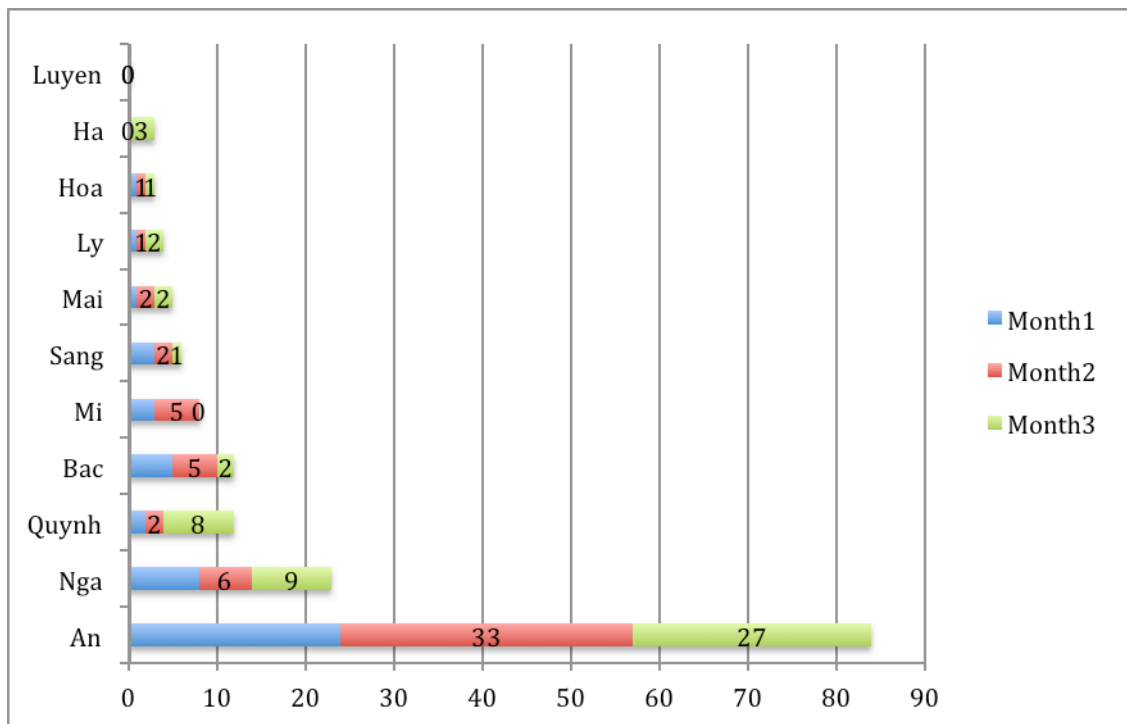
### 4.3.3 Interactions with university/academic staff



**Figure 4.6 Number of interactions with university/academic staff in three months**

Interactions with “university and academic staff” were quite high but steadily decreased with around 100 interactions in the first month to just below 70 in month 2 and 25 in month 3. This is in line with findings that participants experienced a decreased hours of interactions in English (see 4.2.1). Also the decline in the number of interactions happened during exam period in April 2009 (month 3) - participants spent more time revising for exams instead of going to lectures or seminars. Therefore the decline in the interactions with academic staff seemed to support the general trend as discussed in 4.2.1.

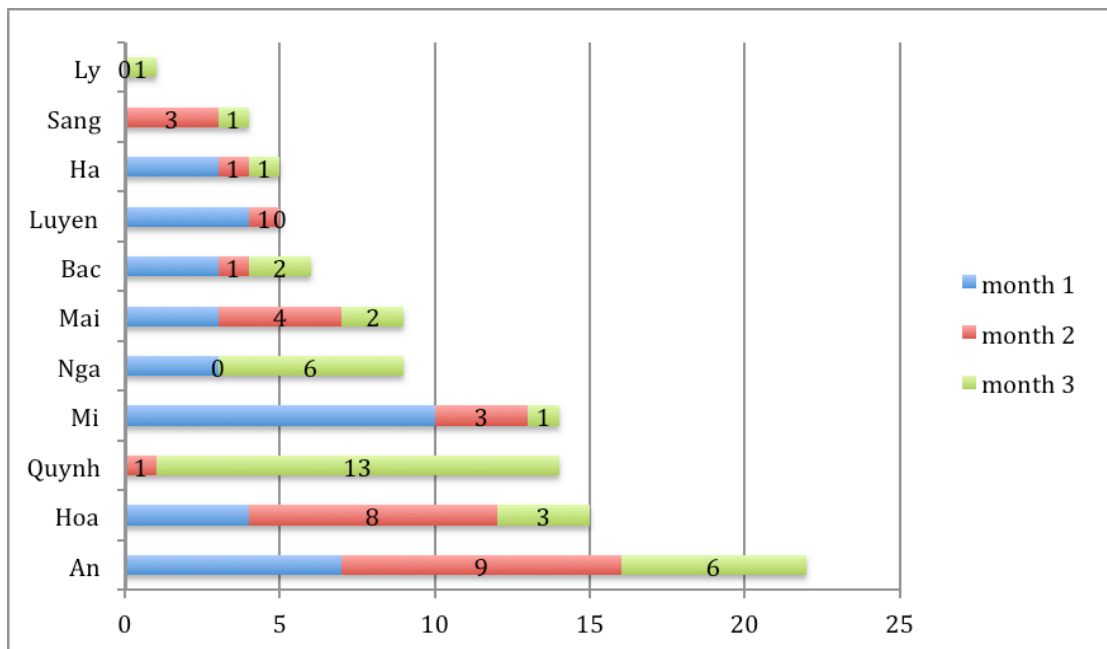
#### 4.3.4 Interactions with shop/bank/business



**Figure 4.7 Number of interactions with shop/bank/business in three months**

Interactions with ‘shops/bank/businesses’, were the middle rank of all interlocutors’ categories (earlier). Interactions with shop/bank/business were the only ones that stayed quite stable throughout the whole period at approximately 60 interactions per month. Figure 4.7 shows the stability at an individual level. Participants in general had a roughly similar number of interactions with shops/banks and businesses, except An who recorded 84 interactions - almost four times higher than the next highest, Nga with 23. This might be the fact that participants had settled into a relatively stable daily routine of contact with shops, banks and businesses. This supports the general trend of individual routinisation in their interactions (4.2.3).

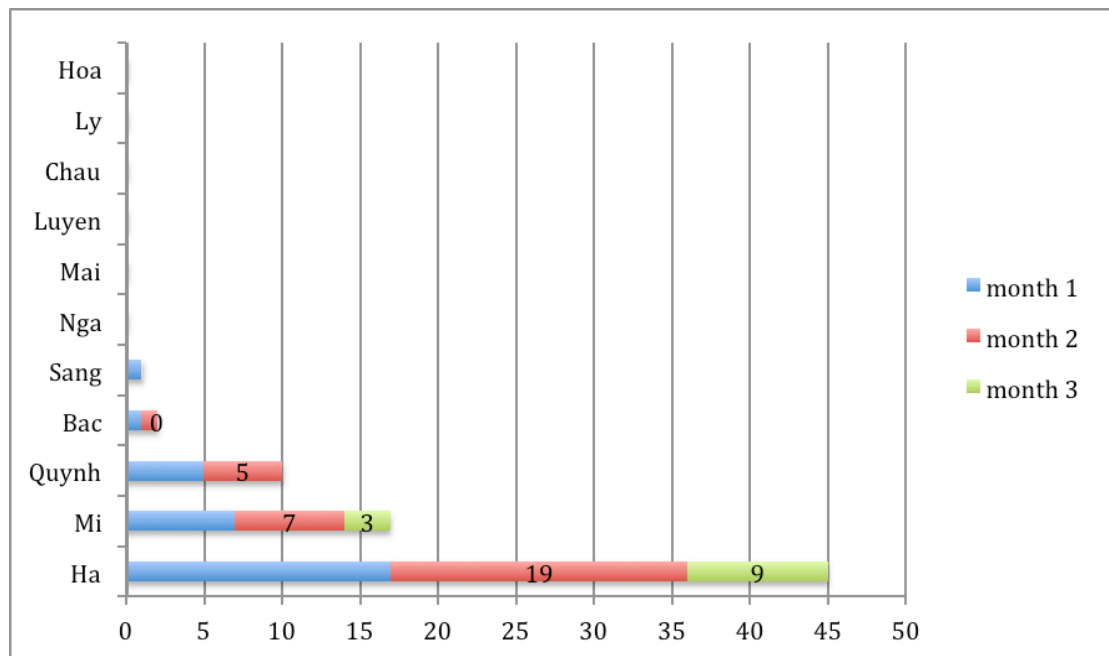
### 4.3.5 Interactions with Strangers



**Figure 4.8** Number of interactions with strangers in three months

In contrast to the general decline reported for other categories of interlocutors, the number of strangers that participants spoke English to remained quite stable at 37 in the first month, 31 in the second month and 36 in the last month. The gap between the top (An, 22) and the bottom (Ly, 1) was large. The big gap between individuals suggests that interactions with strangers depended on the personal circumstances of particular participant. Unlike other types of interlocutors such as students or academic staff who were more ‘provided’ with university life, strangers were purely those who one had interactions for the first time. Interactions with strangers therefore can be viewed as an example of how successful one can open his/her interactions. There was obvious inter and intra (month-by-month) variation.

### 4.3.6 Interactions with Work Colleague



**Figure 4.9** Number of interactions with work colleague in three months

The total number of interactions with work colleagues was among the lowest three rankings. However, the total count of interactions over three months was 82 events (earlier), which is less than half of the total interactions with strangers (approximately 170). This finding is interesting in that only 5 participants (Sang, Bac, Quynh, Mi and Ha) reported interactions in English at work even though 7 participants actually reported being employed at the beginning of the data collection process (Table 4.1 – Participants’ profile). The two participants that did not mention any L2 interactions at work were Chau and Hoa. Hoa did not mention any interactions with work colleagues at all throughout the period. In later contacts, Hoa and Bac noted that they had quit their jobs due to pressure of their exams. That explained why Bac reported very limited interactions while Hoa did not mention any in her diary at all (Figure 4.9). Chau’s experiences at work are explored in section 5.2.2.4 (Chapter 5). For the remainder of the working participants, their interactions with co-workers was limited. It started out at a similar level to that of “strangers” at 36 interactions but dropped by half to 12 by the end of the main study. Having a job did not increase the amount of time participants spent speaking English. Such figures might possibly show the ‘nature’ of participants’ relationships with their colleagues - they might have been slightly ignored, or they might have

spent time on their own or they might have used other languages (rather than English) at work.

#### 4.3.7 Interactions with government/authority and healthcare staff

Similar to data of interactions with work colleagues, interactions with government/authority, healthcare staff fell into the lowest groups. Participants showed a minimum amount of interactions with these two categories. There were only 9 interactions altogether for government/authority throughout the whole period. Interactions with gate-keepers (termed by Boxer, 2002) were minimal. This is similar to the pilot study (Table 4.5 later). Nga spent one week off sick but during the week she did not mention meeting healthcare staff, which indicated that meetings with health workers were only needed for a real health issue. There were only 4 interactions with healthcare staff over the three months.

#### 4.3.8 Interactions with Native and Non-native speakers

The table above shows the number of native (N) and non-native (NN) interlocutors in each category over the three month.

**Table 4.5 Number of Native and Non-native interlocutors in each category**

	Month 1		Month 2		Month 3		Total
	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	
Friend	54	235	71	192	60	168	<b>780</b>
Student	42	168	43	119	32	56	<b>460</b>
Uni/academic staff	72	28	62	16	23	8	<b>209</b>
Shop/bank/business	50	16	41	30	44	25	<b>206</b>
Stranger	22	17	32	13	38	30	<b>152</b>
Work colleague	24	12	24	8	12	0	<b>80</b>
Healthcare staff	1	3	1	0	1	3	<b>9</b>
Government/authority	1	0	4	0	3	1	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>1905</b>

Similar to findings in the pilot study (Table 4.6 later), participants spoke English with far more non-native speakers (1,148 interactions) than natives (757 interactions). This gap is most clearly observed in “friend” with 235 NN compared

to 54 N in the first month, 192 NN and 71 N in the second month, and 168 NN and 60 N in the third month. However, overall the gap was narrowed with every passing month with the number of non-native speakers at 479 interactions (Month 1), 378 (Month 2) and 291 (Month 3): at the end of the study period the number of non-native interlocutor interactions had dropped by almost 50%. No such steep decline was observed for NS interlocutors (266, 278 and 213). This trend accords with the decline in the number of hours spent speaking English (see 4.2.1) and that reported *vis-a-vis* interlocutor categories. The non-native number decreased due to the shrinking number of non-native friends and students (see 4.2.2). In contrast, more strangers (most of them are native) were reported as speaking English with the participants. The majority of shop/bank/business interlocutors were natives and only slightly decreased over time.

The table below presents the ‘types’ of interlocutors participants met during the pilot week. It shows the frequency and whether the interlocutors were native (N) or non-native (NN) speakers of English. One participant, THNH, failed to denote whether interlocutors were N or NN.

#### 4.3.9 Data from Pilot Study

**Table 4.6: Pilot diary study- types of interactions in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Students	-	4NN	4N 6NN	5	2N 5NN	6N15 NN
University staff/academic	2N	-	2N	3	2N	6N
Shops/banks/businesses	4N 2NN	-	1N1NN	4	2N 2NN	7N 5NN
Government/authority	-	-	-	-	-	-
Healthcare staff	3N	-	-	-	-	3N
Friends	7N6NN	5NN	2N4NN	7	7NN	9N11NN
Strangers	-	-	-	-	-	-
Work colleagues	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-

Participants in the pilot reported more interactions with friends (9N and 11NN) and other students (6N and 15 NN). In general, Vietnamese students had contact with more non-native speakers of English. Interactions with native gate-keepers (termed by Boxer, 2002) were minimal: university staff/academic (6N), healthcare (3N) and government/authority (none). Interactions with shops/banks/businesses were also limited: 7 N and 5 NN. In general, data from pilot study supports findings from main study. Interactions were limited, of which most interactions were with non-native speakers of English. The two most-frequent types interlocutors were friends, and students.

#### **4.3.10 Summary**

Section 4.3 has described the types of interlocutors reported by participants in the main study. The two most frequent types of interlocutors were Friend and Student. The total number of interactions were on a declining trend, similar to the decline in the total hours of interactions (4.2.1). However, the shrinking number of interaction events was not similar across all interlocutors types. The decline was more pronounced *vis-a-vis* students (4.3.2), university/academic staff (4.3.3), and especially with work colleagues (4.3.6). Interaction events with friends (4.3.1), shops/banks/businesses (4.3.4) and with strangers (4.3.5) remained relatively stable. This suggests that participants seemed to depend on university for their interactions. When the university closed down, interactions with university-related interlocutors (such as academic staff and students) were adversely affected. However, interactions outside campus such as with shop/bank/business or with friends were less affected. Data from the pilot study (4.3.9) also supports the findings from the main study.

#### **4.4 Types of interactions**

Question 3: When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today?



**Table 4.7 Types of interactions in three months**

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Total
Socialising	197	165	178	540
Simple transactions	124	86	99	309
Small talk	112	111	79	302
Academic discussion	89	68	35	192
Complex transactions	55	58	73	186
Learning English	6	3	1	10
Others				None

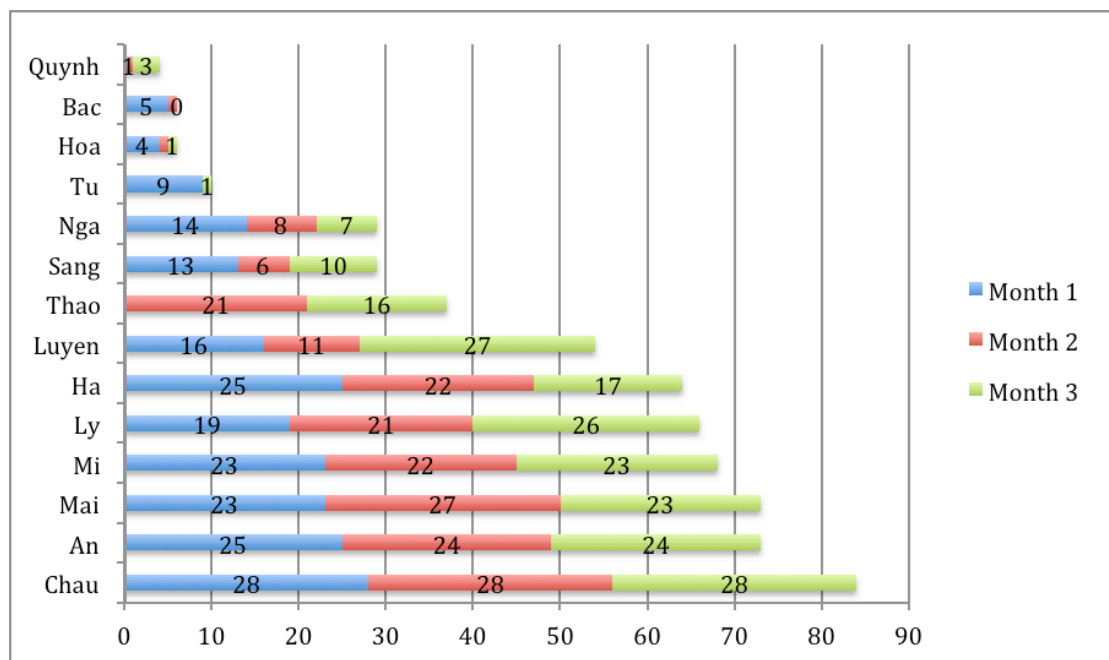
Table 4.7 shows the total number of interactions for all participants in each month. The types of interactions were categorised into six categories which were ranked in the order of the highest to lowest number of interactions: socialising (540), simple transactions (309), small talk (302), academic discussions (192), complex transactions (186) and learning English (10). An additional category - “others” – was provided for participants to include their own type of interactions which were not covered in the list. However, only Luyen used this, reporting “daily conversations” on two occasions. In the follow-up focus interview after the first four weeks, Luyen realised that her “daily conversations” (with friends) should be classified as socialising. Luyen subsequently recorded these types of interactions as “socialising” and her previous entries were re-categorised as socialising.

In general, the major types of interactions were: socialising (40.09%), simple transactions (22.94%) and small talk (22.42%). The results show that most interactions were quite simple and relatively undemanding and only approximately 20% of interactions were complex transactions and academic discussions. The formal learning of English was minimal, less than 1%. Detailed discussion of each type of interactions will be presented in the following sections. Given all participants were students in UK universities, it may or may not be surprising to discover that academic discussion constituted approximately only 10% of the total interactions. In addition, academic interactions experienced a steady drop over the three months, from 89 hours to 68 and finally to only 35. This was the sharpest

decrease of all types of interactions (apart from learning English – Table 4.7). This, however, was in line with the decreasing trend in the number of hours spent speaking the L2 (4.2.1) and in decreasing interactions with academic/university staff (4.3.3).

#### 4.4.1 Socialising

Socialising was the most popular type of interaction among participants with 540 interactions (1.5 times higher than the next highest category). It was defined as forming and maintaining friendships and acquaintances (see the Guidance).



**Figure 4.10 Socialising in three months**

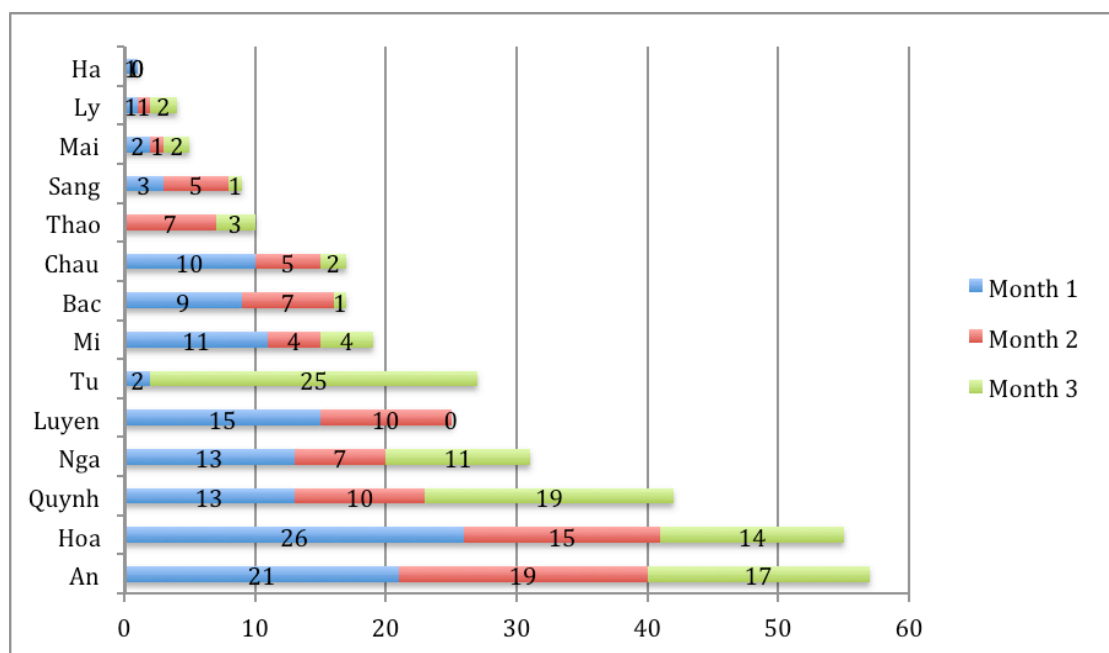
There was a rather big gap in the number of socialising interactions between the highest and the lowest participants. Chau, as the highest ranking, obtained 84 interactions, while the lowest one, Quynh, achieved only 4. This is in line with findings that participants varied largely in the total hours of interactions (4.2.1).

Individual routinisation in socialising interactions was also observed. Most participants reported a relatively stable number of socialising interactions over the three months. This is also in line with the finding in section 4.2.3 that participants routinised in their total hours of interactions. Only two exceptions were Nga and Luyen. Nga dropped from 14 in the first month to 8 and 7 in the second and third

months respectively. Luyen, on the other hand, almost doubled her interactions from 16 and 11 to 27 in months 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

#### 4.4.2 Simple transactions

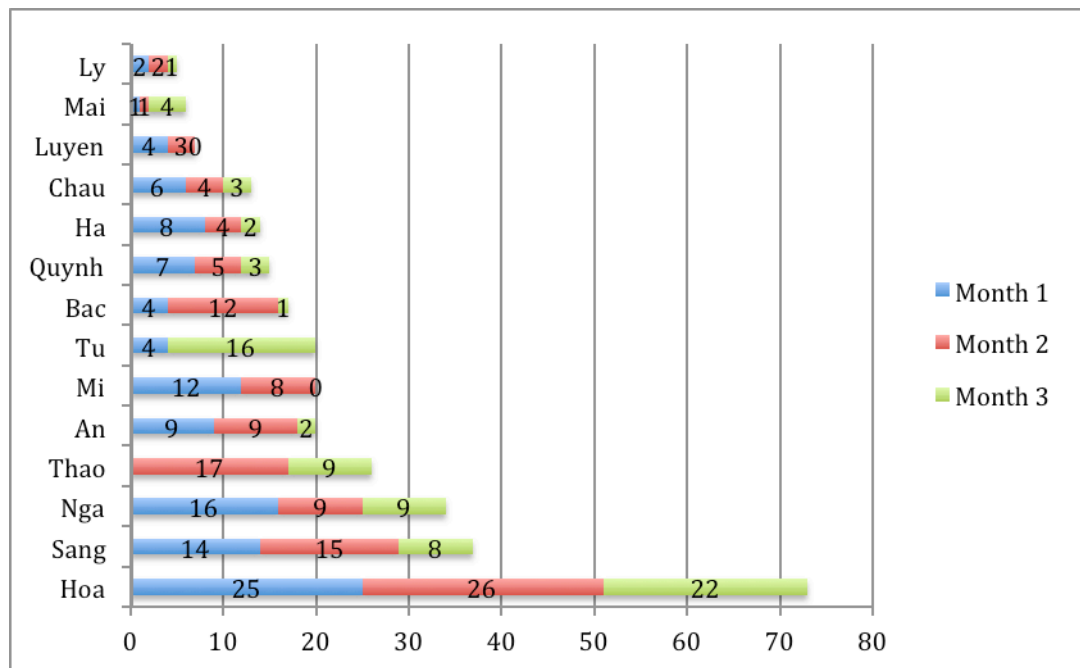
Simple transactions and negotiations were the second most common type of interaction recorded by participants. Simple transactions and negotiations include interactions such as shopping or ordering food in a café and when a relatively straightforward ‘objective’ or desired outcome is sought (see Guidance on how to complete the diary).



**Figure 4.11 Simple transactions in three months**

Similar to findings from socialising interactions, there are two general observations from simple transactions: individual variation and individual routinisation. The gap between the top, (An with 57 interactions) and the lowest, Ha (only 10) was reasonably big, though this gap was smaller than that in socialising interactions. The second observation: individual routinisation was also observed. However, simple transactions were on a general decreasing trend for the whole period.

### 4.4.3 Small talk



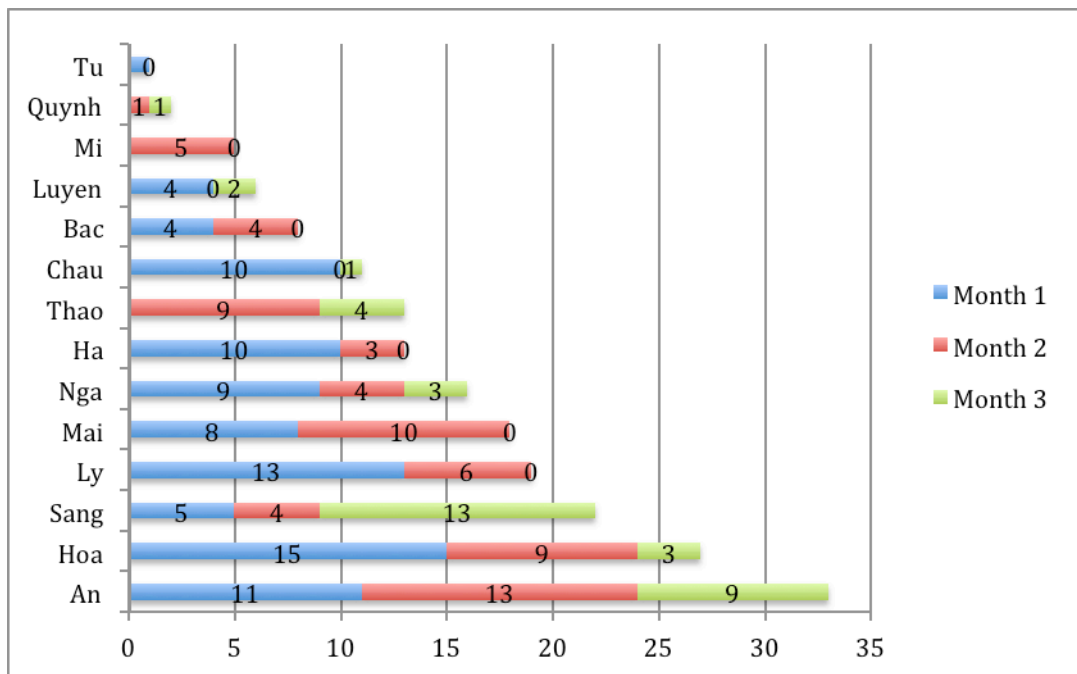
**Figure 4.12 Small talk in three months**

Apart from Hoa (as an outlier) most participants reported relatively few Small Talk interactions. Between-subject variation was still present, however, most participants' small talk interactions gradually declined over the three months. 'Small talks' went down sharper in the last month (from 112 to 111 and 79).

Small talk illustrates an example of the complex relationship between the types of interactions and types of interlocutors. Small talk is defined as random conversations mainly with strangers and they decreased gradually over the study period. But interactions with strangers remained relatively stable over the three months (4.3.5). This 'mismatch' suggests that interactions with strangers were not necessarily of small talk nature. In other words, the nature of any interactions cannot necessarily be predicted by the types of interlocutors.

### 4.4.4 Academic discussions

Academic discussions involved any conversation for academic purposes such as debates, group works, etc. As discussed earlier at the general description of types of interactions of section 4.3, academic discussions experienced one of the most dramatic decreases across all types of interactions (also see table 4.6).

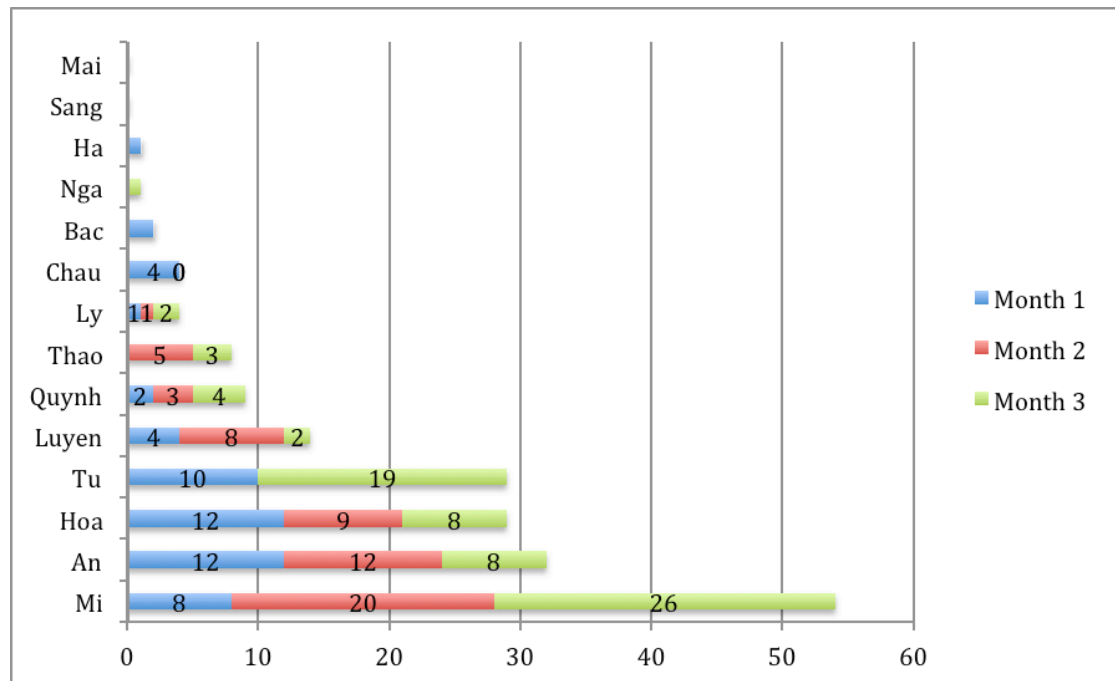


**Figure 4.13 Academic discussion in three months**

The university's closure in the last month (April) of the data collection period was one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of academic discussions. However, it should be noted that academic discussion only ranked fourth out of the six reported interaction types (see Table 4.6 at the beginning of section 4.3). This ranking is considered modest given all participants were full time students. A further observation regarding academic discussion is that the variation among participants was smaller compared to other types of interactions such as socialising (4.4.1). This suggests a substantial amount of 'dependence' on the university for L2 interactions. In addition, most participants also experienced a reduction in these types of interactions over three months, which is in line with the overall trend of interactions. Sang was the only exception – he doubled his number of Academic Discussion interactions from 5 in Month 1 to 13 in Month 3.

#### 4.4.5 Complex transactions

**Figure 4.14 Complex transactions in three months**



Complex transactions and negotiations were one of the least reported types of interactions. Nine out of 14 participants reported a total of less than 10 interactions over the three months. In particular, Sang and Mai reported engaging in no complex transactions and negotiations at all. Mi is clearly an outlier, recording 54 interactions, whereas the next highest, An, recorded only 34. This shows a big variation among participants in the total number of complex transactions. Similar to findings so far on other interactions, complex transactions also saw a decline trend over the three-month period.

#### 4.4.6 Learning English

Learning English was limited to 10 interactions throughout the three months (see table 4.6). Only Ly occasionally attended ESL classes for international students. The rest of the group did not report any learning English opportunity.

#### 4.4.7 Data from Pilot study

Table 4.8 shows the frequency of types of interactions that participants had during the pilot week. The most common category was small talk with 34 interactions, followed by socialising (17) and simple transactions (14). This is similar to the findings from the main study in that most interactions were of simple nature: such as socialising, simple transactions.

**Table 4.8: Pilot diary study- types of interactions in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Small talk	7	6	7	7	7	34
Simple transactions	4	2	2	3	3	14
Complex transactions	2	-	-	1	2	5
Academic discussions	2	-	2	1	-	5
Socialising	5	-	4	4	4	17
Learning E.	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-

Complex transactions and academic discussions were reported the same number of times (5). This also confirms findings from the main study that academic and complex discussions were modest, given participants were full time students. None of the participants had any ‘learning English’ opportunities in a formal English class. In summary, data from pilot study resembles data from the main study.

#### 4.5 Participants’ judgement of their L2 experiences

Question 4: How do you rate your experience of speaking English today in general?

Participants were asked to rate their experience of speaking English each day, with responses based on a six-point Likert scale: very positive, positive, mixture of positive, neither negative nor positive, negative and very negative. There was also an option of recording “no comments”. The reason to include ‘neither negative nor

positive’ in the main study diary template was discussed in section 3.9.7.2 – Chapter 3. The rating of experience is a ‘record’ or impression of how participants *felt* about their performances during L2 interactions rather than an objective measure of their L2 proficiency.

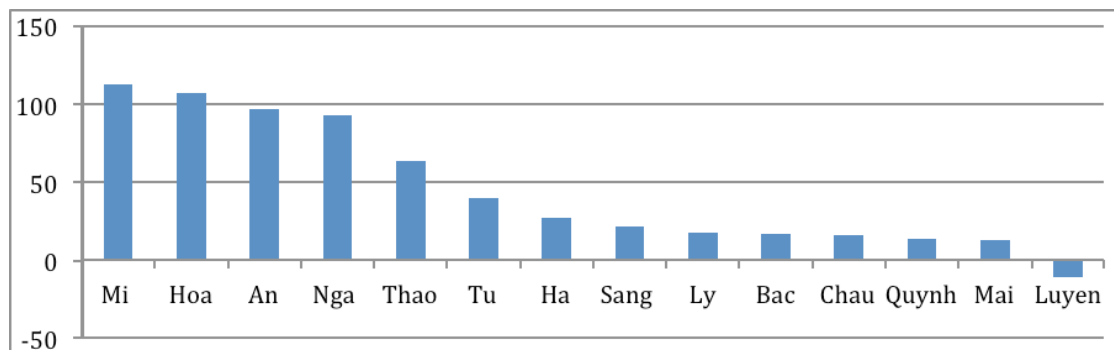
**Table 4.9 Rating experience in three months**

Participants	Very (+)	Positive	Mixture of (+) and (-)	Neither (-) nor (+)	Negative	Very (-)	No comment
Sang	0	29	27	18	5	1	3
Nga	41	11	1	0	0	0	31
Mai	0	26	19	18	13	0	8
Ly	0	1	0	58	12	0	13
Chau	0	16	44	24	0	0	0
Ha	2	24	7	29	1	0	21
Ly	0	19	1	60	2	0	2
Tu	1	39	14	0	1	0	29
Quynh	0	17	46	0	3	0	18
Hoa	35	38	3	6	1	0	1
An	22	53	2	1	0	0	6
Mi	39	35	9	0	0	0	1
Bac	1	15	19	0	0	0	49
Thao	14	18	13	3	0	0	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>197</b>

The general rating has more ‘positive’ and ‘very positive’ than ‘negative’ over the three months. Most ratings fell between the range of “very positive” to “mixture of positive and negative”, in which the highest number was observed in “positive” with 341 ratings. It was followed by “neither negative nor positive” (217) and “mixture of negative and positive” (205). “Negative” (38) and “very negative” (1) ratings were reported comparatively rarely. However, the ‘no comment’ column was rather high (197), which were mainly contributed by Bac, Nga, Tu and Quynh. Those participants belonged to the lower scale of the total hours of interactions (4.2.1). Diary template that have completed by those participants show that they often marked ‘no comments’ on days when they had limited interactions or did not



have any interactions at all. However, if we look at the rating per each individual, the rating is not as high as it looks in Table 4.9.



**Figure 4.15: Rating scores of each participant**

Figure 4.15 shows the rating scores of each participant. I gave 2 and -2 for the two top and bottom ratings (very positive/very negative respectively), 1 and -1 for positive and negative in the order mentioned, the middle rating (neither and mixture of negative and positive feelings) received 0 score. Figure 4.15 shows a big variance in the rating of L2 experience among participants. Luyen had the most negative experience rating (-20). On the contrary, Mi and Hoa enjoyed the highest rating of the whole group, followed by An and Nga. Thao stayed at the middle ranking, while the rest of the group (8 participants) rated experiences quite low.

Unlike with results of the main study, most participants in the pilot study seemed to be happy with their L2 experiences: 5 ‘very positive’, 25 ‘positive’ and 5 ‘mixture of positive and negative’. No ‘negative’ or ‘very negative’ interactions were reported.

**Table 4.10: Pilot diary study: rating experience in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR	Total
Very positive	2	-	1	1	1	5
Positive	5	5	5	5	5	25
Mixture of positive and negative	-	2	1	1	1	5
Negative	-	-	-	-	-	-
Very negative	-	-	-	-	-	-

In summary, data from both main and pilot studies suggest a similar finding that Vietnamese participants felt positive towards their L2 interactions in the UK. This is to note, however, that their positive ratings of the experience did not mean satisfaction with progress in L2 speaking skill. The expectation and assumption of progress in the English speaking skill were explored through focus groups and presented in Chapter 5 – section 5.5.1.

#### **4.6 Social roles occupied by participants**

Question 5: Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week? Please rank them in order from 1 to 11.

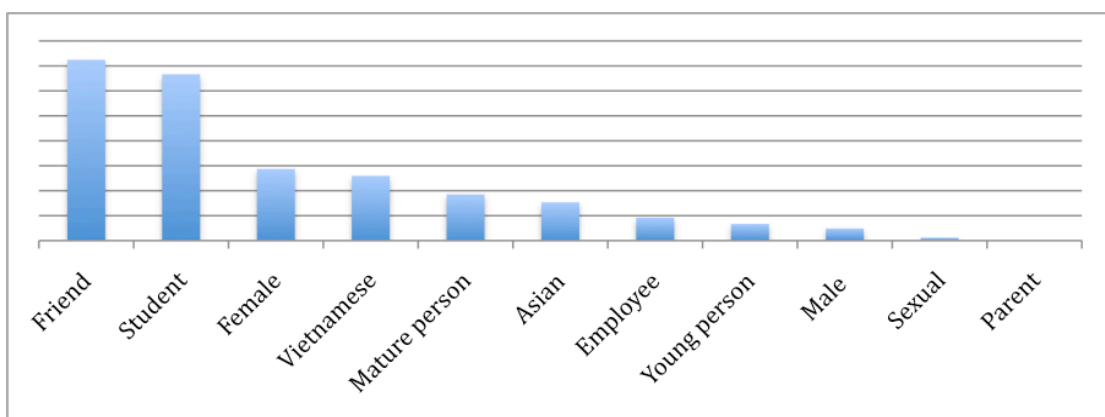
The 11 social roles are listed in Table 4.11 below. Most participants reported/ranked three social roles per week (An and Hoa occasionally ranked a fourth and fifth social role). During the diary training participants asked how they could conclude which social role(s) they felt they had occupied each week. Hoa and An, for example, mentioned that by the end of the week they might have forgotten how they felt at the start of the week. One suggestion which emerged from these discussions was to record the social role daily, and add them up at the end of the week in order to rank them. However, I emphasised that this “solution” was optional: there was no rule of thumb as such. Participants were also encouraged to add any social roles which were not covered by the list (Hoa indicated “tourist” and Mi, Chau and Tu indicated “lover, boyfriend/girlfriend” on several occasions). Nevertheless, Tu, Ha and Quynh did not rank the social roles in the way I expected. They indicated which roles they had occupied, but did not rank them. I did not want to treat this as “missing data” because they play an important part in the whole data set. I contacted Tu, Ha and Quynh and retrieved the missing the data (although their data is excluded from the table below).

**Table 4.11 Social roles ranked first in twelve weeks**

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
Female	2	4	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	21
Male	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexual	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Parent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Friend	5	4	6	5	4	5	6	3	2	5	4	2	51
Employee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vietnamese	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	7
Mature person	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	0	8
Student	3	2	3	3	5	5	4	1	2	1	2	5	36
Asian	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Young person	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2

Table 4.11 lists only the top ranking roles over twelve weeks of data collection. The social roles remained fairly stable over time. The highest ranked role was ‘Friend’ (51), of the participants chose it as the primary role. ‘Student’ was ranked first only 36 times, lower compared to the top social role (Friend). ‘Female’ was the third ranking (21) while none reported the social role of ‘Male’. Only three participants were male (section 4.1), therefore it might explain the absence of ranking ‘Male’ in diary data. ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Mature person’ were ranked first 7 and 8 times respectively.

I listed 11 social roles in the Diary and requested participants to rank them in order of importance. The 11 social roles seemed to adequately embrace the participants’ experiences during the main study.

**Figure 4.16: Overall ranking of participants’ social roles in three months**

Vietnamese participants were asked to rank from 1 to 11 the social roles they felt they had occupied each week. Each ranking was then given a mark, which was then added up to produce the above Figure. Two social roles, Friend and Student, were ranked the highest. The role of ‘Friend’ is not necessarily bound to campus or university life whereas being a ‘Student’ is more likely to be experienced within the context of university and campus life. ‘Friend’ is a much broader concept than ‘Student’ and embraces a much wider range of activities (some of which may overlap with being a ‘Student’ – helping a classmate plan his or her essay for example).

The lowest ranking roles were ‘Sexual’ (20) and ‘Parent’ (0). ‘Parent’ was not ranked because none of the students had children. ‘Sexual’ was referred to twice by Tu. Tu explained that he chose ‘Sexual’ because of his role as a boyfriend. No Vietnamese females reported any sexual harassment. Polanyi (1995) described the harassment of American female learners in Russia and how this impacted negatively on their SLA. In week 10 Hoa noted in her diary that she was offered a job and a house if she moved to London with an Arabian man that she had met. Hoa did not describe the situation as harassment but she was clearly disturbed by his pestering, which eventually stopped. She described in her diary (original emoticon):

*I am very annoyed with the guy who phoned me up again today. He said when I finish my degree, just move to London, he will find me a job and an accommodation. I said to him that stop daydreaming, he can't use money to buy me. I shut him up on the phone. Poor guy ☹*

When I asked her if she would like to tell me more she said it was “over” and she did not have anything else to say about it. Hoa never ranked ‘Sexual’ in her identity list even during the period when the incident took place.

The second-highest ranking group includes social roles of Female, Vietnamese, Mature Person and Asian. However, the ranking was less than half compared to the ranking for Student and Friend. This suggests Vietnamese participants mainly adopted two social roles, Student and Friend, which was a shift from the roles that they used to adopt before they arrived in the UK. As discussed in section 2 of this

Chapter, participants were professionals with middle class backgrounds in Vietnam. Norton (2000) argues that the decline in social and economic status of the immigrants in her research had influenced their identities adversely. I would not argue that Vietnamese participants had undergone a similar decline in social status; however, it is safe to say that their social roles had changed dramatically. They had limited roles (mainly Friend and Student) which were bound to university life. In terms of fully participating in UK social life, Vietnamese students had not yet achieved full membership. Their daily routine was defined by university schedules. Financially they had left behind white-collar jobs and privileged middle class life styles, entered a new social setting and were mostly reliant on personal savings in one of the world's most expensive countries.

Similar ranking of social roles was found in the pilot study (Table 4.12). The highest ranking was 'Student' (4). 'Friend' was only inserted after reviewing the pilot (see Modification of diary template 3.9.7.2 – Final box) so there was no comparable data with regards to this social role. 'Female' was ranked first by one participant. The second ranking included 'Asian' (2) and Man (1). 'Vietnamese' was ranked fourth only once.

**Table 4.12: Pilot diary study– Ranking of Social role in a week**

	LPH	CH	DA	THNH	LTR
Male	-	-	2	-	2
Female	1	-	-	-	-
Student	-	1	1	1	1
Asian	-	2	3	2	3
Mature person	-	-	-	3	-
Vietnamese	-	-	4	-	-
Parent	-	-	-	-	-
Employee	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual	-	-	-	-	-
Young person	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-

Due to time constraints, the pilot diary study was carried out within one week. For that reason, it was not possible to observe temporal changes.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has provided a detailed description of data collected from the main diary study, with some reference to data from the pilot study. There are six important findings which have emerged from the data. (1) The amount of time spent speaking English, was on a downward trend and was limited, with participants typically speaking the L2 for just 11 hours per week (see 4.2.1). Here, there was a large between-subject variation (see 4.2.2), and less within-subject variation over time, suggesting routinisation (see 4.2.3). (2) In terms of whom participants spoke English with (or Interlocutor ‘Types’), the number of L2 interactions with specific interlocutor types also declined over time. ‘Friends’ are the most common L2 interlocutors by a large margin; followed by ‘Student’ and ‘University/Academic Staff’. Interactions with other ‘types’ of interlocutors were all very rare. Within-subjects variation is limited for ‘Friends’, but more pronounced for ‘Students’ and ‘University/Academic Staff’ (see 4.3). (3) With regards to whether participants spoke English with NS or NNS, the majority of L2 interactions were with the latter. The gap between NS and NNS interactions narrowed by the end of Month 3 however, but this was due to a reduction in interactions with NNS rather than an increase in interactions with NS (see 4.3.8). (4) In terms of Interaction types, ‘Socialising’, ‘Simple Transactions’ and ‘Small Talk’ are the most common types of L2 interaction. The amount of ‘Socialising’ increased over time. There is between-subject variation but also evidence of less within-subject variation (see 4.4). (5) With regards to participants’ own perceptions of their L2 communication experiences a majority of participants reported being different in their L2 speaking experiences (see 4.5). Most participants (8) ranked their experienced relatively low. (6) Finally, in terms of Social Roles, ‘Friend’, ‘Student’ and ‘Female’ are the most common social roles reported by a wide margin. Other social roles are acknowledged, but only rarely. (see 4.6). The following chapter explores participants’ L2 experiences using data acquired from the focus groups before a substantive discussion of the findings (and triangulation) to be presented in Chapter 6.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Focus Groups Analysis and Findings**

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This chapter presents the findings from the focus groups in the Main study. The chapter commences with a brief discussion of the process of recruitment and administration. The actual data analysis is divided into two sections: with the first addresses issues concerning the quantity and quality of participants' L2 interactions of the second part examines individual variations in L2 interactions. Throughout the chapter, there are also references to the findings from the pilot focus groups.

#### **5.1 Recruitment, administration and data analysis**

##### **5.1.1 Recruitment of participants**

The method of recruitment was discussed in the Pilot study (see Chapter 3 – Methodology) and Diary analysis (Chapter 4). To aid the following discussion, some of the main characteristics of the recruitment method used and participant's profiles are presented again here. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis via the Vietnamese Societies in Leeds and York.

Fourteen MA students enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year agreed to participate in the research – to maintain a daily diary over 12 weeks and attend regular focus groups in February 2009. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Ly and Ha were based in York, and the remainder lived and studied in Leeds. Table 5.1 above presents the participants' profiles.

**Table 5.1 Main study – participants’ profiles**

Participants	Age	Gender	Major	Part-time job
Ly	25	F	Social Science	N
Ha	24	F	Business and Finance	Y
Sang	29	M	Natural Sciences	N
Luyen	25	F	Business	Y
Quynh	23	F	Business	Y
Tu	27	M	Business	N
Nga	24	F	Business	N
Hoa	24	F	Business	Y
An	26	F	Science	N
Mi	24	F	Social Science	Y
Bac	27	M	Business	N
Thao	25	F	Business	N
Chau	25	F	Business	Y
Mai	27	F	Business	Y

Participants were aged between 24 and 29, with a mean age of 24.14. The majority (10/14) were studying for an MA in Business. Of the rest, 2 were majoring in the physical sciences and 2 were majoring in social science. When data collection began eight students (57.1%) had a part-time job. Almost 80% (11/14) of the sample were female.

### **5.1.2 Focus group schedule and administration**

Ten focus groups were conducted between 10 March 2009 and 21 June 2009. For practical purposes, and to facilitate data collection, the 14 participants (12 in Leeds and 2 in York) were divided into three focus groups. Each group was interviewed once every four weeks (see Chapter 3 – Methodology for the main study focus group schedule). The first three focus groups were held in mid-March 2009, by which point



participants had kept a diary for 5 weeks (diary-keeping commenced on 02 February 2009). As discussed previously (Chapter 3 – Methodology), the focus groups were retrospective and mainly discussed issues raised in participant’s diaries over the previous four weeks. Figure 5.1 below illustrates the focus group and diary schedule.

Feb.09	Mar.09	Apr.09	May.09	Jun.09
Diary				
		Focus groups		

**Figure 5.1 Main study fieldwork schedule**

The total number of focus groups remained the same (10) as planned but the interview schedule was extended by three weeks into late June 09 (see research design in Chapter 3 for original scheduling). The extension was necessary because participants sometimes could not agree on appropriate dates and times for the focus group. Originally, I expected and attempted to ensure that all participants within each group attended all their focus groups. However, after the first three focus groups, I realised that this was unrealistic because if I kept on waiting for a convenient time and date to be agreed by all the members of a group the research progress would be considerably slowed. Therefore, I decided to be more flexible in order to maintain progress of the main study and because the timing of the focus groups was crucial in terms of facilitating identifying temporal shifts in attitudes and behaviours etc (see Chapter 3 - Methodology). I therefore adopted a ‘mix and match’ approach – attempting to agree dates with each group but prepared to in-fill with members of other groups according to availability. This strategy made it easier in terms of administration and created opportunities for participants to interact with different members. It should be added that the approach did not result in individual members interacting with strangers - all participants had been socialising with each other for at least 6 months. This issue naturally did not emerge in the cross-sectional pilot focus groups.

### **5.1.3 Dealing with missing data**

All focus groups were digitally recorded, uploaded to my computer for storage, and backed-up. The data was not accessed by any other parties. In addition to the difficulties associated with identifying dates and times for particular sets of students I

had to address missing data caused by ‘no-shows’. The two participants in York did not miss any focus groups. Table 5.2 summarises the focus groups in Leeds.

**Table 5.2 Focus groups in Leeds**

	Set 1			Set 2		Set 3		Number of focus groups missed
	10 Mar	15 Mar	23 Mar	3 Apr	18 Apr	20 Jun	21 Jun	
Hoa	√			√		√		0
An	√			√		√		0
Tu	√				√	x		1
Mai	√			√			√	0
Nga	√			x		√		1
Sang	√			√			√	0
Thao		√			√		√	0
Quynh		√		√		x		1
Luyen		√		√			√	0
Bac			√	x		√		1
Mi			√	x		√		1
Chau			√		√		√	0
Total	6	3	3	6	3	5	6	5

Each participant was asked to attend three focus groups during the main study period, which amounted to an expected total of 42 attendances. Table 5.2 shows that 5 participants each failed to attend one group (or 11.9 %). These participants shared no particular characteristics. The main reasons cited for not attending were: study

commitments, social events and travelling. To recover missing data, as recommended by Kruger (1998), I contacted absentees and conducted telephone and/or e-conversations. Most participants (Tu, Quynh, Bac and Mi) chose to hold telephone conversations with me. Nga, however, opted to use e-mail and instant messaging. I made copies of the diaries completed by Tu, Bac and Quynh which I posted to them, in advance of the subsequent conversation, so that they could be used as a memory aid (Nga and Mi had retained electronic copies of their diaries so they could refer to these). I explained that even though they had missed a focus group, their future attendance was important. All conversations and correspondence were recorded as normal as it is recommended by Krueger (1998:75) that no information is disregarded. I was aware of the fact that any comments or opinions given in such circumstances should be noted as having occurred in a one-to-one context when being analysed.

#### **5.1.4 Transcribing, coding and translating**

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, focus groups were conducted in Vietnamese. The interviews were also transcribed and coded in Vietnamese for analysis. Additionally, I recruited a Vietnamese MA TESOL graduate – otherwise unconnected to my research - to act as an independent transcriber and translator of my transcriptions. This was to minimise any mistakes that I might have made during the transcription and translation process. The MA TESOL is experienced in transcribing and translating Vietnamese/English and currently teaches English in Vietnam. The total number of hours of the focus group interviews are summarised in table 5.3 below:

**Table 5.3 Summary of main study focus groups**

Month	Date	Location	Length	Number of participants
1	10 March 09	Leeds	1h35 minutes	6
	15 March 09	Leeds	1h14minutes	3
	20 March 09	York	48 minutes	2
	23 March 09	Leeds	1h09 minutes	3
2	3 April 09	Leeds	1h11minutes	6
	26 April 09	York	35 minutes	2
	16 May 09	Leeds	52 minutes	3
3	9 June 09	York	35 minutes	2
	20 June 09	Leeds	36 minutes	5
	21 June 09	Leeds	50 minutes	5
	Total		10h 25 minutes	

## 5.2 Quantity of L2 interactions

According to the focus groups, most opportunities that participants had to speak English originated from two main sources: university-related interactions and off-campus social interactions. Amongst the two main sources, university played a more important role in that it generated the majority of opportunities to speak English for the majority (10/14) of participants. Only four students (An, Hoa, Mi, and Chau) managed to obtain social interactions which took place outside campus. The interactions accounted for most variation in the frequency of interactions between individual students. The following sections will deal with the quantity of interactions on campus before describing the quantity of interactions off-campus.

### 5.2.1 Interactions on campus

At the point of data collection, participants had been in the UK for at least six months. Opportunities to speak English on campus were considered as the primary source of interactions for most participants. Even so, participants considered such opportunities to be “*surprisingly limited*”, as Nga put it.

Many participants (Chau, Nga and An) believed “*there is not enough opportunity*” for them to take advantage of. However, others (Sang, Luyen and Bac) believed this was because they “*did not tap fully the opportunity*”. They felt there were opportunities available which they had not fully taken advantage of. None of the participants were satisfied with the quantity of interactions generated on campus. The following section discusses in detail the two main reasons for such limited interactions on campus as mentioned by participants: not enough opportunities *per se*, and difficulties in accessing (the limited) opportunities that did exist.

### **5.2.1.1 Not enough opportunity to speak English on campus**

Evidence for this comes from both the main and pilot focus groups. Findings from the main study will be discussed first. Chau believed universities did not generate many opportunities to speak English:

*It is terribly wrong when many (Vietnamese) people believe that they can improve their English by going to the university everyday. I find more opportunity to practice English when I go out.*

Chau emphasised that most of her contacts and interactions occurred outside her studies and off-campus. She explained that most students speak relatively rarely during seminars. In seminars, no matter how enthusiastic they were, they could only speak for 5 or 10 minutes at most because they had roughly one hour to share among the group. Nga agreed with Chau claiming that there were no discussions in lectures and that speaking opportunities at seminars were minimal:

*I just sit and listen in lectures. There is no discussion with teachers. I mainly talk with classmates but only few minutes and then I go home.*

For An, talking with her tutors was the only chance to speak English on campus but these opportunities were rare:

*I think I don't speak much English when I'm at the university. The only time I can think of speaking English is with my supervisor but such a meeting is not often.*

An's report of infrequent meetings with her supervisor was supported by other participants during the focus groups.

#### Pilot study data

Participants in the pilot study believed that research students had fewer opportunities to speak English compared to undergraduate students. P considered the chances to practice English had declined since he became a PhD student:

*When I was doing MA I had lectures from 9 to 5 with lots of speaking so my skill developed dramatically then. Because everyday I was having lots of speaking opportunities, both from academic debates to small talks during break time. Once I start the PhD I just go to the office, saying hi, and without much debates or discussion because other PhD students are working so I feel like I'm taking up their time, really, if I talk to them, and the number of students that I meet is also smaller so...*

As P pointed out the limited opportunity to speak English was resulted from the time participants had to spend on independent research/study, and therefore fewer interactions in classrooms, etc. However, HA, another PhD student (Table 3.2-Chapter 3) described equally limited interactions in classroom settings:

*In general, there is limited interaction in the classroom. There are several questions and answers during seminars. I came to classroom 5 minutes earlier and hanged around 10 maximum after that, so speaking with classmates is not a lot, and we hardly use technical terms which are used by the lecturers. So it does not really help me with the technical terms.*

HA believed the limited opportunities in the classroom was also the reason for his limited English academic vocabulary. Undergraduate participants were thought to enjoy the most favourable conditions: they had more interactions with NS in and outside the classroom. They were also younger and more outgoing, arguably finding it easier to learn new things and more willing to get involved in the full range of University social activities, many of which deliberately or accidentally attract a younger audience.

In sum, accounts from participants in pilot group confirm some of the main findings in the main study. First, most participants were dissatisfied with the quantity of interactions. Second, the interactions on campus were limited, therefore if one wants to open interactions he/she will have to identify off-campus opportunities. Research students (MA and PhD) reported fewer interactions in English because they had to spend more time in independent study, and consequently had less time for interactions, especially those outside campus. In addition, findings from the pilot focus groups also suggest that younger graduates had more interactions, because they had a more active social life and a lighter academic workload.

### **5.2.1.2 Difficulties in taking advantage of opportunity to speak English**

University both facilitates and constrains opportunities to speak English. One reason for not being able to “*tap opportunities fully*” is the university academic regime itself. Being a student interfered with opportunities because of academic workloads, pedagogic specificities and the requirement to prioritise academic needs. Quynh cited the curriculum and academic pressure as an explanation for her limited interactions:

*My MA course requires a lot of self-study at home or in the library. I don't have time to go out and talk to people.*

Nga described her typical day as ‘*just university and then work at home. There is no more opportunity (to speak English)*’.

Luyen offered an explanation for the impact of university life on participants’ interactions. According to Luyen, it took the Vietnamese up to two months to get to know their classmates and to reach a level of familiarity which permitted regular socialising. But just as they reached this stage, more and more of their time was being filled by the academic demands of their courses. This was supported by Thao who described how she had to study even during holidays:

*My hours of speaking English will decrease because all of my classmates will go home on holiday. I will be busy writing so I have no chance to go out.*

Academic pressure also shaped Thao’s daily routine:

*After lectures I have to sit in the library for the rest of the day, come home late, cook something to eat and then next day the same routine starts. I don't have time to go out and practice my speaking.*

Some participants clearly decided to put their academic needs first, before the need to practice speaking English. Thao and Sang admitted that opportunities to speak English must be balanced against the pressure of academic deadlines and assignments. Thao said:

*There are quite a few opportunities here to practice speaking English but I have not made full use of them. I have other commitments.*

Sang also had to balance his SLA progress and his academic progress:

*My speaking is not improved much as I expected but I guess I have to balance between my academic study and my English level, so I don't feel too bad.*

Bac and Tu also mentioned this 'sacrifice' couched in terms of the hours they spent studying in the library which left them with little time for anything else:

*The priority is given to other things rather than just improving English, like I might decide to spend 3 hours a day in the library to read all the books on the suggested reading list that was given by the teacher.*

The second difficulty involves the costs of socialising. Tu found it hard to socialise because it costs money: *"I might not be able to socialise as much because I want to save a bit of money"*.

Tu was not the only Vietnamese student who had to sacrifice opportunities to practice English in order to save money. Bac had moved to cheaper accommodation, which reduced his chances to speak English. His new housemates were all Vietnamese whereas he used to share with several (non-Vietnamese) international students. Bac never regretted moving because it enabled him to save some money and the new house was closer to the university. Mai, though keen to improve her speaking skill, could



only afford to attend one social event at the university due to the cost. Both Hoa and An could only attend free social events organised at university. Quynh mentioned that the university charged a large fee for an activity she was interested in (visiting English families to understand more about the target culture) which she was consequently unable to attend.

The third reason for limited interactions on campus was that of “*letting opportunities slip away*” as Ly put it. According to participants this was due to the ‘transient’ nature of university. Ly comments:

*Sometimes I meet new people who seem quite interesting but then we did not have a chance to meet again.*

University life comprises a multiplicity of short-lived encounters, which according to Ly are difficult to sustain. Ly blamed herself:

*Our contacts are limited because we don't try to open them by going out. I guess it is my weak point. Sometimes I have some friends to talk to but just limited to small talks. ...*

Similarly, Ha acknowledges that she failed to maintain regular contact with the people she befriended:

*I think my weakness is I don't open my contacts. I have very limited interactions.*

Both Ha and Ly described feeling “*trapped in a box*” which constrained their interactions. Ly agreed with Ha that she did not experience any significant interactions with the students on her course. Ly described how her fellow students were allocated to study groups randomly at the beginning of the year and the majority of interactions occurred only with members of her group. Ly and Ha both felt it difficult to establish new contacts in order to develop new opportunities to speak English. They described a situation of being “trapped”:

*The opportunity was set up randomly at the beginning of the academic year. I was placed in a study group by chance. Activities among groups*

*were almost nothing... If one does not take the initiatives to go out, he/she will be confined in one group. Originally it was for the study purpose, then it trapped you there.*

Ha and Ly described themselves as passive. They did not do anything to improve the situation even when they recognised the “trap” forming around them. Crucially, both wanted to “get out” and to make more contacts, but never did. When asked why, Ha and Ly both said that it may have reflected their individual personalities. However, interestingly, in another conversation Ha revealed that she had lots of friends in Vietnam and spent considerable time on Facebook keeping in touch with them. Ha was thus able to socialise successfully with Vietnamese friends in a virtual community but could only maintain a sub-optimal level of socialising in the UK. Therefore, Ha and Ly may not have been as passive as they described themselves. In another account they described organising a BBQ to deliberately attract British students so that they would enjoy more opportunities to socialise with the “*local people*”. They also criticised their university for not supporting international students e.g. by organising social activities after classes.

Pilot study data:

Findings from pilot study also confirm the limited opportunity to speak English on campus. Most participants reported only limited opportunities to speak English. In addition, language was also reported as a problem in interactions in the classroom:

*I have to admit that when I first arrived, I got tongue tied, really, it was the truth. It was really difficult to listen to lecturers...at least for the first 1 or 2 months I did not understand a single word.*

(HA-Male, second year PhD in social science)

*Yes, I remember in the past, when the teacher was lecturing. I was sitting with my mouth wide open... he (the teacher) clearly understood what he was saying but I had no clue.*

(S-Male, last year Foundation course)

*I remember sitting silent from the beginning to the end of lectures and seminars during the first couple of weeks. I did not understand what people*

*were saying. So I was sitting in silence.*

(P-Male, last year PhD in science)

In short, interaction opportunities associated with university life were considered limited. Opportunities to speak English were eroded by academic demands even during holidays. Participants felt that their university's needed to do more to encourage extra-curricula inter-cultural events, and for these to be financially accessible. At the same time, there is evidence that some participants needed to work harder to access the limited opportunities that were available.

### **5.2.2 Interactions outside campus**

As mentioned earlier, ten participants' main source of interactions was based around their university regimes, whilst only four participants (Chau, Mi, Hoa and An) managed regular interactions off-campus. This section will discuss the quantity of interactions outside campus, including socialising and in employment.

#### **5.2.2.1 Dependency on university for interactions**

For most participants (10/14) interactions on campus accounted for the majority of total interactions that they experienced. This means that university served as the main source of interactions, which also implies that interactions outside campus accounted for a modest proportion. Data from the focus groups shows how participants considered the university's closure to have a negative effect on the quantity of their L2 interactions. Nga remarks:

*My interactions will definitely go down because the university is going to close for holidays.*

Nga did not report other L2 speaking opportunities outside campus so for her the end of term affected negatively her hours of interactions in English. Similarly, Luyen chose to stay at home during the holiday:

*I think from next week (April 2009), my speaking hours will decrease because the university is going to close. And you know, it means I will literally stay in all the time, even not walk out of my door. I will not go anywhere at all, so I won't have a chance to talk to anyone either.*

Ha considered university as the primary source of her L2 interactions:

*If we don't have to go to the university, we will just stay at home. The university does not organize activities to involve people gatherings when we don't have to go to lectures or seminars.*

Ha just stayed at home and was critical of the university for failing to offer international students extra-curriculum L2 interaction opportunities. Ly agreed:

*The university is where I come along for study purposes only. There are no other social activities for us to meet after class.*

In sum, data suggests that most participants experienced the end of term as a major reduction in their L2 interactions.

#### **5.2.2.2 Social events**

Ha and Ly both made regular efforts to befriend English students but did not have any English friends at the time of data collection. As Ly described, she joined international social events in York to socialise. However, she did not see British students there, and the events were mainly attended by international students. The English students were largely uninterested, even in events such as barbecues, which were considered to be popular amongst the English. Ha and Ly complained about the lack of social activities on campus in York. Their criticism can be understood as the need for more social activities. Meanwhile, Leeds participants refused to take part in the activities organised by their university. The main criticisms were: the activities were not interesting enough (Chau, Bac); they were unaffordable/costly (Hoa, Mai, Tu) and/or they were held at unsuitable times and/or on unsuitable days (Sang). Mai, on the other hand, said that she felt uncomfortable socialising in large groups and with strangers. For Thao the topic or themes of many of the events were unappealing. Luyen chose not to take part because they tended to be “full of non-native speakers”.

Whether or not social events were available, participants experienced a lack of opportunities to speak English outside campus. The end result was that Vietnamese students in both York and Leeds rarely participated in social activities, which presumably took place during term time only. At the end of the main study only Sang was ‘socialising’ regularly (at bible classes organised by the Christian Union in Leeds).

Ha and Ly did want to meet more people but could not due to the lack of social activities at their university in York. Most participants in Leeds did not attend social activities for various reasons. Hoa and An did not participate in some events because of the cost, but when the Ghanaian society organized a free festival they attended and did meet new people. Hoa and An did not refer to a decline in their interactions during the focus groups: unlike the rest of the group they did not believe the university closure would cause much of a problem because they were very proactive and tried to “*stay positive*”.

Participants reported feeling ‘put off’ by the nature of social events organised by British students. Many of the clubs and societies run and organised by British students revolved around pubs and alcohol and/or featured party themes and certain styles of music either unpopular in Vietnam or incompatible with Vietnamese sexual and cultural values. According to Mi:

*They (westerners) are keen on drinking which I am scared of. I came only once and then I never joined any such event again as it takes me several days to recover from such a drinking event. I did not find it fun at all.*

### **5.2.2.3 Opportunity to speak English at home**

Five Vietnamese students (Chau, Mai, Quynh, Hoa and An) shared accommodation with British or non-Vietnamese international students. The rest shared with fellow-Vietnamese, so Vietnamese was spoken at home (except for Mi and Tu). Nevertheless, neither Chau nor Mai experienced regular or sustained interactions with their NS housemates. Chau described how her British housemate made no effort to accommodate Chau’s L2 shortcomings and never expressed any interest in her cultural background – despite studying a Masters Degree in Asian Studies.

*He (the English housemate) sometimes sees me in the kitchen. I thought it would be OK for us to start chatting a bit but he does not pay any attention. He came in just to check his cooking potatoes for example, disappeared in his room, came out again and then disappeared again without saying anything to me... We wanted to cook some Vietnamese meal to invite him but he was never available for that... towards the end we just ignored each other.*

Chau said that at home she only managed to speak English with two European international students. Similar to Chau, Mai also shared a house with two British students but they never became friends. Mai met them sometimes in the kitchen and their conversations were minimal. But Mai did become friends with two other Asian housemates, who became her main source of L2 interaction. Therefore neither Chau nor Mai experienced regular or sustained interactions with their NS housemates.

An and Hoa lived in the same house which they shared with a British student and both report slightly more success in engaging him in conversation. However, Hoa emphasised that her interactions with him were still minimal (they never became friends for example). Both Hoa and An attempted to befriend him by doing his washing up in the kitchen and even offered to cook for him (he declined, politely):

*I tell him that he looks quite skinny recently. If he is too busy to cook for himself I can help. However, he just said thanks and that he can look after himself. (Hoa)*

Even towards the end of the data collection period, Hoa and An had failed to improve their relationship with the housemate or increase the amount of time engaging with him: “*He still remained very quiet*” (An said). In fact, none of the participants shared a house with UK students with whom they became friends, but they did make friends - and speak English - with non-Vietnamese international housemates.

Thao shared a house with other Vietnamese students, which also meant she spoke Vietnamese when she was home. The ‘pull’ of the Vietnamese ‘community’ seemed strong, as Quynh admitted:

*Vietnamese people always tend to stick to each other. And when we are together we just speak Vietnamese, of course. It is easy to understand why because we speak the same language and share many things in common.*

Quynh shared a house with an English chef and some Vietnamese students. She said that interactions with the British housemate were limited. Quynh mainly used Vietnamese with her Vietnamese housemates. However, Tu and Mi took a different view. Tu spoke English with his Vietnamese girlfriend at home while Mi and a Vietnamese housemate (not a participant of this research) agreed to communicate with

each other in English at home: Tu and Mi were prompted to do this after realising how limited the actual opportunities to speak English were. Quynh, Ha and Ly did not believe that the time they spent speaking Vietnamese was at the expense of time spent speaking English, so they preferred speaking Vietnamese with other Vietnamese students.

In general, most participants had limited domestic opportunities to speak English, especially with British housemates. If English was used at home, it was with international students (even when NS housemates were available) as in the cases of Chau; Hoa; Quynh; Mai and An; or, in the cases of Mi and Tu, with other Vietnamese housemates.

Data from the pilot study also suggests limited interactions at home among participants whose housemates are English speakers. TH (in York) moved out to live with fellow Vietnamese after an unsuccessful experience with British housemates.

*They (housemates) were working people so we did not share common topics. In London, I was sharing a double room with a friend. Landlord was living in the same house but in fact we hardly ever talked. They were actually isolated with us.*

TH considered himself ‘different’ from his housemates. Feeling “*isolated by the landlord*” TH later decided to move out and live with Vietnamese housemates. Similarly, HA moved out of the house which he used to share with English people. He was sharing a house with three other Vietnamese females at the time of data collection. HA remarks:

*I used to share a house with English speakers too. I thought it would create more interactions but in fact we did not have time... only 10 minutes everyday... just basic social exchanges.*

Most participants emphasised the need to be able to “get on well” with housemate over the opportunity to speak English.

#### 5.2.2.4 Opportunity to speak English at work

Seven participants reported working part-time at the beginning of data collection process (Table 5.1 in section 5.1.1). Participants did not consider L2 interactions at work as a reasonable opportunity to practice English. First of all, participants did not work many hours. All participants worked less than 12 week. Luyen worked as a tutor only one hour per week. The second reason for limited L2 speaking opportunities at work was that most of the time the jobs themselves did not involving speaking. Ha, for example, was a cleaner and a lone worker and there was limited interaction with other people at work. Sang, Mai and Chau all worked in catering and also did not have to speak very much. Sang and Mai also added that the pressure at work prevented them from chatting with work colleagues. Mai recalled an occasion, when she was trying to talk to one of the chefs in the kitchen. He told her to stop talking and let him concentrate on his work:

*Mai, I know you are a friendly girl but I need to concentrate on my work so can you please not trying to talk to me.*

Though chef's request was polite and reasonable Mai reports feeling embarrassed and concluded that work is not an ideal environment to practice speaking skills. She admitted that since that exepreicne Mai never dared to initiate a conversation with that chef even in a more relaxed atmosphere such as when they were on a break.

Chau's experiences support those of Mai's. As a waitress Chau spent most time bringing food from the kitchen to tables, and communicating with customers was mainly the responsibility of front of house staff. Chau remembered serving food to some customers who made fun of her accent/pronunciation:

*They repeated what I said in a stretchy voice. I knew I was not saying the word right but they made me so embarrassed.*

Chau therefore also did not find work to be a good environment within which to practice her speaking skill. As a waitress, Chau's job offered some opportunities to speak English, but she found it a limited and de-motivating environment.



Participants in the pilot study also reported L2 communication difficulties at work. LA, a female final year PhD student, remembers one exchange with a customer in the café where she worked:

*The first time when I was at work, they asked me to give them a “cup”, just a simple word, a “cup” to drink tea from, but I did not figure out what they wanted.*

LA reported feeling extremely embarrassed when, in a public setting, she was not able to understand a simple word. Busy workplaces are not ideal environments for participants to improve their L2 communication skills.

### **5.3 Quality of L2 interactions**

The quality of interactions in English is influenced by two factors: language (as a barrier) and culture. The influence of these factors are discernible in both academic and non-academic contexts.

#### **5.3.1 Language barrier**

The language barrier was described as the biggest problem for participants in academic discussions. Academic discussions reportedly involved study groups, presentations, seminars, etc. when participants had chance to speak English with their classmates and supervisors. However, Vietnamese participants did not consider themselves especially active in such discussions and attributed this to their L2 proficiency. In particular: inadequate level of vocabulary and (perceived lack of) fluency in speaking skill, listening comprehension and pronunciation.

In terms of vocabulary, especially in academic contexts Luyen comments:

*Sometimes during the middle of a discussion, I have to pause for not being able to recall a technical term. And you know, when this happens I have to tell others to wait till next time after I look it up again.*

Luyen believed that in situations like this she “*had already lost in the debate*” even though she believed she had strong arguments. Sang agreed, saying that in most debates those with more fluent English speaking skills tended to dominate the discussions, leaving the less-fluent with minimal opportunities to express their ideas,

even though the former did not necessarily possess the best arguments. Sang suggested that he sometimes felt he had the better ideas but that his English speaking skills were holding him back. Luyen and Sang found such situations extremely frustrating and intimidating.

Nga and Tu described their language problem slightly differently: they found it hard to express their ideas concisely. Both felt that Vietnamese people tend to present and develop ideas in a less direct manner compared to Western people. Since seminars were relatively short Nga and Tu felt under pressure to make themselves understood more quickly. According to Tu, his “*lengthy presentation style*” meant he lost his audience’s interest and patience. Tu did try to amend his speaking style and make more concise contributions, but it did not come natural to him and, again, he felt under pressure. Nga also admitted that the ‘*pressure to present well*’ in academic discussion made her nervous. Towards the end of the research Nga even reported that the situation “*is getting worse*” and she realised that her problem was not purely language related:

*I find myself mumbling in front of people, I don't understand why. It is getting worse... I only have that problem in English not in Vietnamese... I think it is due to psychological problem...*

Nga admitted to a fear of being judged when speaking English to native speakers even though she never actually experienced any negative comments or attitudes from them. Inadequate vocabulary and fluency in speaking skill placed Luyen, Sang, Nga and Tu at a disadvantage because they believed they could have participated in academic discussions more successfully if only their L2 was better. Ha also feared being judged and reported remaining silent most of the time in seminars. Ha also thought that her natural soft voice made it hard for people to hear and understand her well, and she chose to be silent to be ‘*on the safe side*’. Even though

Bac also considered himself frequently ‘*lost in debates*’ due to his listening comprehension:

*Their (his classmates) English is better than me so in academic debates I often lose because I can not understand them.*

Bac described following others' arguments with difficulty and this prevented him from participating effectively. Bac believed there was a significant 'mismatch' between English language education in Vietnam and real-life (spoken) English. The English accent that Bac became familiar with in Vietnam was different to the real-life accent(s) he often encountered at university. Several other participants (Hoa, Nga, Chau, Tu and Mi) also admitted problems with their listening skills, with some blaming it on their unfamiliarity with the British (Yorkshire) accent(s). Mi, Chau and Hoa learned American English and seemed to have the most problems. According to Mi:

*...to be honest I'm kind of "allergic" to British accent. I can't understand till now. I just can't understand what they say... I have been trained in American English since I was much younger... and people here they speak Yorkshire accent...oh my God, I can't make any sense.*

Mi describes feeling frustrated at sometimes not being able to understand what was happening in the classroom. Mi considered this very embarrassing because she passed the TOEFL test in order to study in the UK. However, she said TOEFL is a test of American English which she understands better. Mi was shocked when she arrived in Yorkshire and could not easily understand the local people's accent. She questioned her L2 skills and felt humiliated. Mi says she "shut the door", refusing to make any effort to understand English and avoiding spending much time with her new English acquaintances. In fact, she considered the English accent spoken by English people uncomfortable to listen to. S, a participant in the pilot study, reported similar difficulties, even in everyday situations:

*The first time when I got on a bus, the driver asked me something but I couldn't catch it. I just repeated the word "pardon?" all the time.*

Apart from listening skill, Vietnamese participants also reported problems with their pronunciation. Bac said that even in a more relaxed environment, such as a one-to-one discussion with his supervisor, Bac's pronunciation caused difficulties for the teacher. Typically, after several attempts of re-pronouncing the same word(s) Bac gave up:

*When I talk to my teacher the other day, I was trying to say things but he could not understand me. After repeating several times, I gave up.*

Luyen reported problems in pronouncing technical words. Luyen explained that sometimes she knew exactly how to spell a term but could not pronounce it correctly, which made her speaking less fluent and, she believes, less interesting.

The language barrier was also a problem in non-academic discussions. Non-academic discussions involve any conversations/interactions outside campus or not for academic purposes and include socialising and communicating at work. Lack of vocabulary remained a problem for Thao outside the classroom. She was keen to tell her friends about Vietnamese cuisine (which she was very proud of) but she did not have enough vocabulary to describe it:

*Sometimes I feel so angry that I can't get my message across. When I was trying to tell a friend how tasty 'Pho' (Vietnamese noodle) is I used only words like delicious or very nice, etc. but in fact 'Pho' deserves far more beautiful adjectives than them. It was so frustrating...*

Mi also reported problems when she went shopping, but would sometimes ask her friends to accompany her and help her communicate with shop keepers.

#### Data from pilot study

Also similar to data from main study as discussed above, participants in the pilot study believed they were disadvantaged by the 'mismatch' between how English is taught and experienced in Vietnam and actual spoken English in the UK. The first 'mismatch' was the unfamiliar accent of local English people. Vietnamese students have generally only encountered standard British English or American English throughout their education in Vietnam. They were not aware of variations in accent, style and vocabulary as used in Leeds and the North of England in general.

*Actually, the spoken English in this region sounds different with what we have been taught at home. So it is really confusing.*

(LA, last year PhD in social science)

The speed at which native speaker's spoke was also a problem: participants considered it too fast, and they had not experienced this in Vietnam.

A second 'mismatch' concerns the grammar-oriented teaching of English in Vietnam. In the pilot, P, a male PhD student, indicated that English teaching in Vietnam focused too much on grammar. However, his experience in the UK suggested that a more simple grammatical structure was common and more emphasis in Vietnam should have been placed on acquiring listening and speaking skills. Accordingly, he believed that Vietnamese students had been "mis-coached" and were ill-prepared for the language challenge in the UK.

In addition, two other female participants (HI and HY) and one male participant (V) described themselves as "defective products" of Vietnam's English education. They blamed their errors in pronunciation on their Vietnamese teachers: they were taught incorrect pronunciation. This had resulted in difficulties in understanding NS. At the time of the focus group they were consciously trying to correct these mistakes, which they had practised for so long that they often lapsed into them unconsciously. The 'shock', accompanied with frustration, became greater as they realised, through their encounters in the UK, that they needed to make multiple amendments to their speaking in order to be coherent.

### **5.3.2 Cultural problem in interactions**

The cultural problems in interactions are best revealed through interactions with British people, and interactions with international students. Cultural differences were considered as a hindrance in interactions with British people while cultural similarity was reported as a 'propeller' in interactions with other international students (mainly Asian). The discussion below will start with the cultural issue in interactions with the British people, then it will

#### **5.3.2.1 With British people**

Cultural differences were believed to be the main obstacle in interactions between Vietnamese participants and their NS interlocutors. This was true in both inside and outside classroom contexts. Within the classroom setting, Hoa noticed a physical 'divide' between international and 'home' students in the classrooms:

*British and other western students often sit in a group, often at the back of the class. Asian students often sit together in the front, mainly so that we can listen to the teacher better.*

The above may be attributable to different learning/linguistic needs, but such an arrangement also functioned to limit the interactions between international students and British students. There were insufficient opportunities to mix with British students in a classroom context, let alone outside classrooms. Hoa tells an interesting story:

*... he ( a British classmate) sat next to me just because I said 'hi' to him first when he walked in. However, we never really talked to each other. The following classes, as soon as a German student joined us, he (British) started talking to him (German) straight away. Sitting at the same desk with us were three more Indians who speak perfect English but he just not talked to them either ... **I think it is not due to my English which might be not good enough, they (British people) simply prefer people from Europe.***  
(Emphasis added)

Hoa here suggests that British students may purposely choose avoiding speaking to Asian students. Even though Hoa was not sitting at the front (with the majority of Asian students) and did initiate a conversation with the British student she was ultimately unsuccessful. Such attitudes of the TL speaker may be attributable to racism or cultural distance. So the limited interactions between Vietnamese and British students may sometimes be attributable to an unwillingness on the part of the latter.

Luyen had the most negative experience with TL speakers. She was the only one who described British students' behaviour towards international students as "discriminatory":

*I think there is a discrimination among the British students towards international students. I can tell you evidence. They never join us on any social event or activities in the class. I can understand why. They don't feel like the atmosphere, the culture, food, etc. ... They will have to spend time and efforts explaining a lot to us. They are not interested in other*

*communities, cultures, etc. I can understand all of those but it even makes the gap between us bigger.*

Similar to Hoa, Luyen believed the ‘gap’ between British and Vietnamese students was mainly due to the ‘uninterested’ attitude from the British people. Luyen explained that such an attitude made her feel ‘inadequate’ or a ‘nuisance’ in interactions with English people, especially when seeking clarification. Luyen said that she had generally stopped asking British people questions, because she could see that they were not happy answering her.

Towards the end of the data collection process, Luyen became more critical of British people and her interactions with them. Luyen withdrew from interacting with one British friend because she found him very ‘unhelpful’. During conversations, Luyen was asking for repetition and clarification of some ‘slang’ words but the British friend just told her to “leave it”. Consequently, Luyen lost confidence and became unwilling to talk to him, because she was afraid that she could not understand him or make herself understood. This withdrawal represented a *volte face* in Luyen’s attitude: at the beginning of the data collection process, Luyen preferred interactions with native speakers - when she mentioned her reason for not attending social events she said it was because they were ‘full of international students’ whereas Luyen preferred interacting with TL speakers.

Ly and her classmates (all international students) organised a barbecue. They assumed that barbecues are very ‘British-friendly’ and would attract native speakers. To their disappointment, the British students did not attend:

*We have organised barbecues sometimes and invited the British classmates but they never turned up. Only international students did.*

This was similar to Luyen’s observation that British students rarely attend international students’ events.

Similarly, Mai felt as if she was an imposition during interactions with British people:

*I feel like I’m wasting their (British people’s) time when I talk slowly or ask them for repetition or clarification.*

The perception of being a nuisance discouraged Mai from getting access to interaction opportunities with TL speakers. Mai mentioned that she only dared to access such opportunities when she felt ‘safe’ in doing so. She recalled talking with a passenger on a coach for two hours. She said she started talking to him because he was middle aged:

*... if he was the same age with me, I would not have done. The younger British are not patient as the olders.*

Mai believed that younger British people were more “arrogant” and “less interested in other cultures than older British people”. She described older British people as “kinder and more patient” in their conversations. Younger people did not listen carefully or repeat words or explain things properly to Vietnamese interlocutors. During the focus groups, Mi and Luyen also agreed with Mai, describing situations in which older British people would be very helpful whilst the younger ones (often the same age as the Vietnamese) would ignore them.

Mai considered the above encounter on a coach a success and described it as two hours of practising English whilst travelling. She told a similar story involving her housemates. Most of the interactions took place in the kitchen and were very brief. She felt as if she was imposing on the British housemates and convinced herself that they did not wish to talk to her - so she deliberately kept contact to a minimum.

Quynh described how she exercised care when in conversation with her chef housemate. Their conversation focused on Vietnamese cuisine because the chef was interested in Asian cooking. Quynh refrained from talking about other topics because she could see that the housemate was not interested. Their relationship therefore could not develop any closer. Quynh was ‘luckier’ with another friend who is African British, and always showed ‘sympathy’ for the difficulty that L2 learners have when talking to NS. Quynh felt touched when her African British friend listened to her carefully and politely corrected her mistakes. Quynh clearly wanted to be treated similarly by native speakers but she reported this only happened to her once. Quynh believed that the African origin of her friend helped her develop insights into the difficulties of a L2 learner like Quynh, so she was willing to help. Quynh and her British African friend therefore challenge some SLA research (see Chapter 2) by suggesting that interactions with native speakers are more beneficial than those with



non-native speakers. Quynh was clearly supported to improve her English by her African friend, whilst left feeling inadequate and irritated by conversations with NSs.

Part of the reason why Vietnamese students found British people ‘*uninterested*’ can be discerned from participants’ accounts in the pilot study. Throughout the discussion, participants in both York and Leeds revealed a belief that most English people knew little about Vietnam. The participants told stories of how English people still asked if Vietnam was still at war or still divided into a North and a South (the country was unified in 1975). P mentioned that some NS he met were even not sure which continent Vietnam belonged (e.g., Asia or Africa). Britain’s colonial history has extended all over the globe, but Vietnam was never part of this. And, of course, Vietnam was the country that fought a legendary (televised) war against the Americans.

As well as problems caused by the “*unfriendly or uninterested attitude*” from British people (as perceived by Vietnamese participants) data also suggests problems rooted in participants’ own Vietnamese centric perspective. During the first focus groups, Thao considered cultural differences as the major problem:

*Cultural differences are the main reason to really put me off. Sometimes after 5 minutes of discussion I just want to leave. The cultural clashes just make it so hard to see an agreement...*

Thao believed that a lot of disagreements in group work resulted from her judgements based on Vietnamese cultural practice. Thao described a situation when she volunteered to be coordinator of a group discussion, just to find her classmates were “*very rude*”. They turned up, discussed and then left straight afterward, not even expressing thanks or showing appreciation of her efforts. Thao was very disappointed because such behaviour was unacceptable in Vietnamese culture. Outside classroom contexts, Thao also faced problems in understanding cultural references such as jokes. She found “*their (British) jokes nonsense, everyone else was laughing while I felt it was not funny*”. Thao mentioned that such a situation made her uncomfortable because she had to either ‘*force a smile*’ or ‘*just sit like an idiot*’. Thao confirmed that her discomfort was not due to the English language -she understood the joke perfectly - but rather could not relate to it culturally. However, towards the end of the data collection,

Thao understood that cultural differences could be interpreted and approached as learning opportunities, not just communication obstacles:

*I just realise now that not everything different from your culture is sub-standard. The way people act differently from you does not mean they are wrong or weird. I didn't think like that when I was back in Vietnam.*

This shift in Thao's beliefs was not limited to her understanding of social contacts, it also influenced the way she thought academically:

*In Vietnam, we have been trained that there are things which are always wrong and certain things which are always right. Since I came here I have found out that there are no such things. It all depends on how good your arguments sound. If you fail to defend your idea, you are simply wrong.*

Thao's account suggests that the "cultural clashes" were mainly due to her original Vietnamese-centric judgments about things.

Changing attitudes towards British culture were also expressed by Sang. During the first interviews, Sang considered British people and society arrogant and hierarchical. However, towards the end of the data collection period Sang enjoyed spending leisure time with his NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying on in the UK for several years. Sang said:

*I used to not really enjoy the talks when we had a drink with friends here (UK), it is not the same in Vietnam. In Vietnam, when I went out for a drink, it felt different. I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually, it has its own right.*

Sang's initial discomfort with socialising in the UK stemmed from unfavourable comparisons with socialising in Vietnam – he typically evidenced extreme criticism. However, towards the end of the main study, Sang stopped comparing things with Vietnamese practice:

*You know, last time I told you that I would not consider living in this country after I finish the MA course but now I think I will want to do so.*

There seems to be a link between the way Sang adapted to cultural difference and his communication: as Sang socialised more with his friends (both natives and non-natives) he started to enjoy the conversations with them.

Conversely, many clubs and societies run and organised by UK students revolved around pubs and alcohol, and as Mi put it:

*They (westerners) are keen on drinking which I am scared of. I came only once and then I never joined any such event again as it takes me several days to recover from such a drinking event. I did not find it fun at all.*

However, Chau had a different view on the British people:

*They (British) are just reserved. It does not mean they are not friendly. They need to spend time with and get to know each other. Then they can be very helpful.*

But Chau also suggests that “*Asian people are in the last priority*” for the natives to make friends with, because “*Asians are not funny or crazy enough*”.

Similar to findings from the main study, participants in the pilot study also reported limited interactions with British people. Most participants agreed that the difference between the two cultures was a barrier to communication. Topics related to lifestyle, entertainment, and celebrities etc. were especially difficult to cope with, requiring a degree of cultural understanding - the participants experienced problems in ‘catching up’ with and relating to their interlocutors. More participants in Leeds were studying postgraduate degrees than in York (see pilot participant profile Table 3.2 - Chapter 3). Anecdotal evidence suggested there was a relative lack of social opportunities for slightly older postgraduate students than for undergraduates. Undergraduates in York therefore had more experience of small talk with NS.

### **5.3.2.2 With international students**

In contrast with the often difficult and limited interactions with British people participants reported closer/deeper relationships with non-native speakers of English. Participants reported greater cultural and experiential commonalities with international students, especially with students from Asia who shared a similar cultural background.

Chau, though claiming to have an extensive network of British and non-British friends found it “*more difficult*” to communicate with British people or Westerners (a term used loosely to describe all non-Asians) than with other Asian students: *I have to admit that it is somehow easier to find topics to talk with Asians...* Similarly, Bac claimed he was comfortable engaging with international students while feeling anxious in interactions with British people:

*If I meet up with Indonesian or Malaysian, we can always find things to talk about, but with the English I have to stay quiet for a while. Last time I met an English classmate in our department party, I did not know what to say to him. He did not start the conversation with me or neither did I. Eventually we just proposed a toast and split up.*

Mai was also sharing a house with two British and two Asian students. However, Mai only developed a relationship with the two Asian housemates and had very limited interactions with the British:

*I get on well with my two Asian housemates. Though we have just met since I came here but we become as close as my best friends back home. We are planning to go to the university and make a video about us for memory.*

Mai compared favourably her relationship with her Asian housemates to that with her ‘*best friends back home*’. Such a level of attachment was not reported by any other participants *vis-a-vis* British friends. Relationships with British people were either deeper as boyfriend (as in the case of Chau) or as social friends (Hoa and An).

In general, participants did not believe interactions with non-native speakers could contribute to their speaking skills. Ly said:

*Talking with them (non-native speakers) is fun but their English is just like ours, more or less, they can't correct us if we make mistakes. I don't really think we can learn much from them.*

Similarly, An did not consider speaking English with international students to benefit her speaking skill because her mistakes were not corrected:

*I think they (international students) are no better than us in terms of English so we don't know if it is us or them make a mistake.*

Hoa, however, considered speaking English with international students to be part of making friends - she did not consider this an opportunity to practice English:

*I never consider talking in English with other international students as a way to improve English. I just need friends around as I used to in Vietnam.*

In short, interactions with non-native speakers were clearly not viewed as potential learning experiences among Vietnamese participants.

However, data from pilot study suggests an opposite point of view from that of the main study above. There were no preferences in interactions with NNS or NS among the pilot study participants. They did see the NS as model speakers, but they also valued practising English with other international students. Most participants in the pilot study agreed that they found it easier to listen and talk to international students. Their accent, though imperfect, was not an obstacle because they spoke discernibly slower. However, Vietnamese students compared their English speaking skills to be better, in general, than that of several other national groups.

#### **5.4 Individual variation in L2 interactions**

So far the quality and quantity of L2 interactions have been described. In general, participants were dissatisfied with both the quality and quantity of L2 interactions. Problems and difficulties in their interactions were described and categorised throughout sections 5.2 and 5.3. However, there were exceptional cases (Chau, Mi, Hoa and An) who managed to achieve more interactions than the rest. Two other participants, Sang and Tu, also reported an increase in their interactions towards the end of the data collection process. The next section is devoted to a discussion of these 'success stories'. Their success reflects two different 'pathways'. The first one was based on more L2 interactions accessed via partners (boyfriend/girlfriend). The second concerns participants adopting positive attitudes towards their interactions.

#### 5.4.1 L2 interactions via partners - Chau and Mi

Chau and Mi enjoyed extensive interactions with friends outside their studies and off-campus, which were secured and operationalised via their boyfriends. Mi described her boyfriend as ‘a bridge’ to help her establish contacts and get to know people. Chau insisted that without her boyfriend’s help she would have been unable to establish her extensive network of friends. Chau said that she had more opportunities to speak English by going out compared to campus life. Chau and Mi both reported a dramatic increase in their interactions in English since they started dating their boyfriends, which began three months before the data collection period and before which both reported only very limited interactions. Chau said her opportunities to speak English were so rare that each time she did so she became ‘*tongue tied*’ and considered her English speaking skills to have deteriorated compared to in Vietnam. Mi also mentioned that opportunities to speak English prior to meeting her boyfriend were so limited that she relied on a Vietnamese housemate to practice English with. Mi said:

*Before having my boyfriend, I was trying to get out and gain new contacts but I had never been able to.*

Chau also experienced a similar situation:

*I used to have very limited interactions before I met my boyfriend.*

During the first 3 to 4 months of residing in the UK they reported very limited opportunities, and both felt their English speaking skills had deteriorated dramatically during this time. Mi had to practice English with her Vietnamese housemate in order to maintain an acceptable standard. Their opportunities to speak English improved dramatically when Mi started dating an American and Chau started dating a fluent English-speaking Pakistani. Mi and Chau felt more confident when speaking English if their boyfriends were also present and participating. Mi believed that her boyfriend had served as a ‘bridge’ to make her more confident.

*...boyfriends and girlfriends serve as a bridge, clearly we need it. We need the bridge not to have access to other relationships but to build up our ability at the start so that we can have other relationships. (Mi)*

The confidence that Mi was referring to positions her boyfriend as a ‘rescuer’ figure. Chau echoes this belief and describes how her boyfriend helps her:

*When I’m out in a group of all natives I feel left behind because my English remains limited. At first the natives might be polite, slow down or repeat things for me to catch up but then I start to feel like being forgotten... but when I have my boyfriend... people might not care about me as they consider me a friend... but my boyfriend takes care of me by explaining things so people are reminded that I need support.*

Neither Chau nor Mi felt they could successfully impose the right to be heard on a group of NS unless they were able to draw on the identity resource of “girlfriend”. Chau and Mi confirmed that they did go out and make contacts but their interactions only really increased since meeting their boyfriends. Chau described that her partner helped her keep up with the conversation, which in turn reminded the interlocutors that Chau needed extra support. According to Chau “... *without my boyfriend I feel easily neglected*”. Chau thought her inability to impose the right to be heard was gender-related:

*I think girls often find it more difficult to find opportunity to get out than boys. Boys have games, sport, pool to mix with each other. Without a decent level of English... girls find it more difficult not having her boyfriend there with her.*

Chau suggested that gender played a key role in defining her opportunity to interact. Therefore, as a female, she negotiated access through a male. The most suitable male figure is ‘boyfriend’, because he would be particularly willing to help. Mi avoided holding conversations with British accent speakers and experienced shock and doubted her English skills when she first arrived in the UK because she could not understand the accent. She then felt humiliated at not being able to communicate in English. She ‘shut the door’, refusing to make much effort to understand English and avoided spending much time with her new English acquaintances. In fact, she considered the English accent spoken by English people uncomfortable to listen to.

*I just look for American-English speaking people on campus to talk to or those who can understand my American accent*

Perhaps the most obvious example of how Mi ‘just looked for Americans’ to speak with was the fact that she started dating an American man. It is even more interesting that the American man was not based in Leeds. Mi ‘met’ him through a chat room on the internet. At the time of data collection, Mi was also visited by an American friend who travelled all the way from America to see her.

*Here (Leeds) does not provide chances for me, I had to seek them elsewhere, my (American) friend has been invited round here, he is not here already for me to talk to. I had to find him.*

Mi sought opportunities to practice American English because she felt “more valued” when she spoke to Americans because they could understand her better and she understood them more easily. It would be incorrect to describe Mi as more motivated or active in creating opportunities than Chau. Chau, too, was actively seeking opportunities to speak English. But unlike Mi she was prepared to seek out the opportunities that existed in Leeds. Chau was fascinated by topics about other cultures, not just English culture. Her circle of friends was not limited to those with links to the university campus, having expanded due to her socialising and employment. Her opportunities to speak English were therefore less influenced by the university and course regimes. In general, Chau was more willing to immerse herself in English culture and society, whereas Mi considered the English as “other”. Chau attributed her extended opportunities to ‘luck’ - thanks to the help of her boyfriend in Leeds. Mi and Chau may have adopted subordinate Vietnamese female roles and were dependant on their partners to locate and access opportunities. Mi and Chau’s contacts were based at their boyfriends’ locations. As Mi’s boyfriend was residing in America, all of her contacts were based there. Chau’s boyfriend resided in Leeds, and she went out to mix with other English people (while Mi spent time in chat rooms at home).

In short, Chau and Mi accessed greater interactions through their roles as girlfriends who then were in the position - through their boyfriends - to impose the right to be heard. Without the help of their boyfriends, Chau and Mi may have experienced more



limited interactions as per the majority of the group. Chau termed this situation as ‘lucky’ because she did not perceive it as evidence of initiative on her part.

#### **5.4.2 L2 Interactions via partner - Tu**

Similar to most participants, Tu reported very limited interactions in English during the first 6 months of residing in the UK. However, his interactions in English changed when he started dating a Vietnamese student. Tu’s girlfriend was studying in Birmingham and Tu visited her there every Friday afternoon, returning to Leeds University on Mondays. Tu decided to practice speaking English with his Vietnamese girlfriend in order to compensate for the limited opportunities he had thus far encountered.

Tu’s actions – electing to speak the L2 with a fellow L1 native speaker (who is also a significant other) - can be interpreted in two ways: he was making positive efforts to create opportunities to practice English (in this case with his girlfriend); or he was desperate and was failing to maintain interactions. Discussions with Tu in the focus groups suggest the second interpretation is most applicable. Tu’s girlfriend provided him with a ‘fall-back’ that no longer required him to proactively seek interactions with NS. Tu was not actively looking for more interactions during his three days in Leeds. He spent most of his time studying, watching TV, and reading.

*Now that I am in a relationship, I don’t feel like going out and get mixed up with others too often. We (Tu and his girlfriend) need to spend time together instead.*

Like Chau, Tu’s hours of speaking English were increased via interactions with his girlfriend/partner. But unlike Chau and Mi, Tu’s relationship cannot be conceptualized as a ‘bridge’ with which to achieve more substantive or varied interactions.

#### **5.4.3 Being proactive**

Some participants were particularly proactive in seeking out L2 interaction opportunities, remaining positive and creating opportunities to speak English themselves, which took place either on or off campus.

### 5.4.3.1 Hoa and An

Whilst some participants considered language as the major barrier to their success in academic debates (see 5.3.1) Hoa and An adopted a different point of view. Hoa and An did not feel inferior about their inadequate English skills. They believed that one does not need perfect English to be able to perform well in academic situations. Hoa provided an example of how she managed to ‘tutor’ her classmates regarding a complex problem. She knew that she had some problems with vocabulary and pronunciation at times but her classmates still understood her:

*My classmates somehow believed that I know better than them in solving some math problems so they often asked me to ‘tutor’ them. At first I thought my English is not good enough and I also lack vocabulary. However, I managed to make myself understood by using simple words, though my pronunciation is not clear at times.*

Hoa’s limited vocabulary and imperfect pronunciation did not cause her problems. Her peers understood her, and Hoa considered this a success. Hoa therefore adopted a similar attitude in academic debates where she believed arguments mattered most. An also reported problems with her pronunciation and grammar; however, she believed these were not so serious as to prevent her communicating effectively and make friends. An said she tried to think positively about her ability to speak English and believed that confidence (in communication) was the key to opening up more interactions. Hoa too was aware of her limitations in pronunciation and vocabulary, but did not perceive them as signs of “inadequacy” in interactions. Hoa related a story in which an English classmate talked to her for 15 minutes about how his motorbike was stolen, but when they said “goodbye” she asked him where his bike was - only then did she realise that her friend’s bike had been the main topic of conversation. However, Hoa was not embarrassed; she just laughed and told her friend to make sure she understood him next time. Hoa was also unembarrassed by her poor pronunciation: she downplayed and/or ignored her limitations.

Similar to Hoa, An described her meetings with her supervisor as “*perfectly fine*” regardless of her grammar and pronunciation problems. An also reported a recent

conference trip to Birmingham where she found she could function perfectly well. An's belief was that language differences would not play a decisive role in academic discussions which are predicated on ideas.

An and Hoa and actively made efforts to expand their network of friends, both native and non-native speakers. Although Hoa did not perceive any improvement in her pronunciation or grammar, she was untroubled by this. Her goal was to be able to communicate well enough with the people around her and to make more friends. Hoa did not view making friends with NS as a means to improve her speaking skills: she was simply used to having lots of friends in Vietnam, and so she tried to replicate this in the UK.

As a result, Hoa and An regularly socialised with a number of English speaking friends who they met at the start of term. Hoa enjoyed and valued these interactions and friendships:

*I often hang out with friends in pubs, restaurants or cinema etc. We talked a lot and generally have a great time. Now wherever they go, they will drag me in with them. Can you believe that I even get on so well with my friends' housemates than my friend herself?*

Similarly, An spoke with English speaking friends on a regular basis. In fact, An and Hoa socialised in the same network of friends:

*I think I have made quite a few friends here in the UK. It's really fun to be out and about. I can't imagine my life without hanging out with friends.*

#### **5.4.3.2 Sang**

Sang considered British people and society arrogant and hierarchical. However, towards the end of the data collection period they both enjoyed spending their leisure time with their NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying on in the UK for several years.

There seems to be a link between cultural adaptation and accommodation, opportunities for interactions in the TL and perceptions regarding communicative

competence. As Sang socialised more with his friends (both NS and NNS) he started to enjoy the conversations with them:

*I used to not really enjoy the talks when we had a drink with friends here (UK), it is not the same in Vietnam. In Vietnam, when I went out for a drink, it felt different. I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually, it has its own right.*

Sang's initial discomfort with socializing in the UK stemmed from unfavourable comparisons with socializing in Vietnam – he typically evidenced extreme criticism. However, towards the end of the main study, Sang stopped evaluating.

There is also evidence from the pilot study suggesting that some participants were more proactive than others. For example in response to P's complaint that '*the English people don't have time for us*', V explained that "*the English people actually want to talk to us but we need to initiate the conversation*". V commented that Westerners saw Vietnamese students as more or less identical to Chinese who, he believed, "*tend to keep to themselves*". In his experience, once V introduced himself as Vietnamese and started a conversation with British people, he felt the British treated him "*more special*". V emphasised that English speakers wanted to speak to Asian people too, but feared that doing so would take up too much time. The stereotype of seeing all Asian people as Chinese and an accompanying belief that Chinese people prefer to keep themselves to themselves was also raised by other participants. V agreed with P that in conversation with British people Vietnamese students always had start the conversation first. Commenting on this, V said he believed it was worth the effort because British people are "*nice and polite and willing to talk too*": they just needed message signal that they would not be interfering etc. However, the participants expressed a reluctance to take the initiative all the time. One conclusion is that students can persist with their 'investment' to initiate small talk, and will consequently be relatively successful in creating chances to practice English; but they must persist and overcome inevitable feelings of tiredness and/or shyness - otherwise future chances will slip away.

This topic was also raised separately in the pilot focus group in York, by HNG, an undergraduate female. HNG referred to stereotyping by the Vietnamese:

*The distance (between English and Vietnamese) is made up by us as well as them. For example, we also call them (English) “westerner” (“Tay” in Vietnamese language).*

HNG believed the chances of speaking English would be improved if one could “*adapt fully to the life style in the UK*”. HNG “*hanged out*” with NS by going to pubs. She said that by going there and by drinking she could remain in their network and, therefore, maintain lots of opportunities to practise English. She believed that it was necessary to change one’s “*mindset*” in order to continue to mix successfully with native speakers. In Vietnam women are not encouraged to visit pubs: those who do are considered ‘bad girls’. Indeed, ‘good girls’ are not even supposed to drink alcohol. HNG, however, overcame the “*mindset*” in which she did not evaluate the English pub culture based on her “*Vietnamese mind*” to gain access to practising English. However, HNG did not “*fully integrate*” by dropping Vietnamese values and lifestyle:

*I think the best way (to improve speaking skill) is to adapt to the lifestyle over here (the UK). But I advise against the idea of fully integrating so that we lose our Vietnamese life style.*

Even though she admitted that her speaking skill was “*held back*” by not fully adapting to the lifestyle in the UK, HNG did not regret her choice. Clearly, HNG wanted to be adaptive in order to maximise her opportunities to make friends and speak English, but also considered it important to hold on to her ‘Vietnameseness’. Since it is actually very difficult to change fundamentally one’s ‘self’ the limits to change may in fact be natural and more-or-less fixed limits rather than conscious decisions. She certainly did not choose “*Vietnamese woman*” when she spent time in pubs with NS. In order to continue being able to socialise with NS and to practice English, HNG discarded an extremely powerful code of conduct associated with the traditional Vietnamese female identity:

*I think the best way is to be yourself. There are both good and people in any country. Just be yourself and they (NS) can’t think otherwise.*

The sense of “pride of being Vietnamese” was also present in HN’s account, another undergraduate female in York. HN “*always introduced myself as a Vietnamese*”. HN remembers one occasion when, after she introduced herself as Vietnamese, her interlocutor “*shouted oh my God...I was told that your people are living in poverty and your government is corrupt... Is it all true?*” This did not offend HN but, rather, prompted her to be more active in ‘correcting’ her interlocutor’s misconceptions of Vietnam. HN “*spent loads of time fixing the image and suggested him visit Vietnam*”. Unlike the rest of the group who described how interlocutors’ ignorance of Vietnam made them feel distant (see 5.3.2.2) HN was “*quite excited to meet such a person*” because she could help them understand more about the modern Vietnam.

## 5.5 Expectation and judgements of L2 interactions

### 5.5.1 Assumption of progress in speaking skill

The assumption that Chau mentioned above made a number of participants hold high expectation (Mai, Bac, Sang) towards progress in speaking skills. Among them, Mai had the most ambitious goal of all – to sound like a native-speaker. She imagined herself as ‘*the returning student*’, returning to Vietnam from the UK, where she would be expected to be able to evidence the linguistic and cultural benefits and knowledge of a protracted stay in the UK. She admitted she wanted to speak like a native speaker as much as possible. She admired a younger Vietnamese colleague, a former student in the UK, who she described as “sounding like a native speaker of English”. Mai believed that this was a product of enhanced opportunities to speak English during her colleague’s stay in the UK:

*There is a new trainee Vietnamese at my company in Vietnam, she graduated from a university in the UK. She can speak English just like a native speaker. I really want to be as good as her.*

Mai had never actually asked her colleague to establish precisely the contribution that living and studying in the UK made to her L2 skills or her L2 proficiency prior to studying in the UK.

Such a motivation/aspiration was shaped by the fact that in Vietnam she worked alongside a Vietnamese graduate trainee who had graduated from a UK university and spoke English like a native-speaker. Mai also admitted that prior to studying in the UK she had succumbed to the commonly held belief that living and studying in the target

language culture would result in a “*magical improvement*” in English language skills. Other participants in Mai’s group thought this was too ambitious. An, especially, was more “realistic”. An did not believe in “magical improvements” before departing for the UK, and on her return to Vietnam claimed that she would denounce this belief for the benefit of future generations of Vietnamese students contemplating studying abroad. An believed there was no “magic”: improvement depended upon one’s personal circumstances and efforts.

As suggested by the data, Mai anticipated the identity of a ‘triumphant’ near-native-like English speaker returning to Vietnam from the UK. Wishing to confirm the expectation that she would speak English like a native speaker, Mai tried hard to improve her accent and vocabulary. Sang and An however, believed that acquiring a near-native accent was impossible. They pointed out the fact that there were variations in accents among the English themselves. Sang believed that even though his English speaking skills would not improve as much as he expected, upon his return they would still be superior compared to peers who had never been to the UK. Sang was satisfied anticipating the identity of a returning student who could simply speak English discernibly better than most Vietnamese and did not strive for or require fluency. It is interesting to observe that before leaving Vietnam Sang had similar expectations to Mai about his speaking skill potential. However, he had realised that it was impossible to achieve fluency and adjusted accordingly. Sang said:

*Before I came to the UK I thought my speaking skill would be cool after one year but now I understand that it is not going to happen.*

English language improvement was not a primary goal, therefore the rest of the group was more relaxed because they had adopted less ambitious expectations of foreign students pursuing a MA degree in the UK. Participants were enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year, which meant that before the interviews they had stayed in the UK for at least 6 months, which would have been adequate for them to detect any possible improvements in speaking skill. However, none of them expressed satisfaction with their improvement in speaking English compared to their expectations in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, levels of dissatisfaction seemed to reduce towards the end of the main study, except for Mai who remained frustrated. Those who were reasonably happy with their progress (Luyen, Hoa, Mai, Sang, Chau and Thao) provided two explanations. First, they had seen some progress in the later months. Second, they had or were coming to terms with the fact that they needed to lower their expectations about what they could achieve. They realised that over the past six months they had not made any considerable improvements in their speaking skill, so it was unlikely to happen in the remaining four months or so. Data from the focus groups showed that after 6 months of staying in the UK the participants' expectations regarding improvements in their speaking skills was purposely lowered and rationalised. Sang said:

*My speaking skill is not improved as much as I expected at home. I was unhappy about it before but now I understand that I have got to balance things, I have to share time for my academic work so I don't feel too bad.*

Together with their reduced expectations, the students were also less motivated. Whilst at the beginning of their stay in the UK some participants attached significant importance to the goal of improving their English after 6 months it had paled into insignificance compared to the importance of doing well in their formal studies:

*Before I came to the UK I thought my speaking skill would be cool after one year but now I understand that it is not going to happen.*

Vietnamese participants had to lower their expectations in order to keep up with their academic workload. As a result, the motivation to improve their English decreased. This was interesting in that it showed the realities of student life. Pressure to read in English and write in English and to do well in these – in order to pass their exams and return to Vietnam a success – may actually impede their L2 (speaking skill) acquisition.



Data from pilot study also suggests that participants shared similar assumptions about the richness of opportunities to speak English in the UK and the progress they would consequently be able to make:

*It is often expected among Vietnamese that when we are over here, our speaking skill will become perfect but in fact...*

(HA-Male, 3rd year PhD student in Social science)

*We are expected to be as perfect as English speakers, right? ... (laugh) ... It should be admitted that I was thinking like that before I left Vietnam, I assumed that when I return my speaking should have been really good.*

(P-Male, 4th year PhD student in Science)

Opportunities to speak English were not solely dependant on the effort each participant made to negotiate access to NS.

Nevertheless, most participants agreed that once settled in the UK, they realised that they had overestimated opportunities to become immersed in numerous opportunities to practice English:

*HA. we don't have chance for lots of talking*

*P. I thought going over here (England) would create many opportunities to practice speaking but it turns out not true. P. Back in Vietnam everyone thinks that once we are over here, we will definitely speak better but it is not always the case.*

*HA. yes, absolutely. We have to try hard, to take advantage of opportunities.*

*P. it requires lots of self efforts, not just for granted*

So physically being in the UK does not guarantee chances to speak English. Opportunities to do so are not displayed like items in supermarkets for students to peruse and pick up at will. Students had to negotiate access. The assumption of “superior” opportunities in naturalistic context has been challenged by several SLA researchers (see Block, 2003 for a detailed discussion and is further confirmed in this research.

### 5.5.2 Assumption of the ‘richness’ of TL environment

Much of the assumption about the progress in speaking skill comes from the assumption about the ‘richness’ of opportunity to practice the TL language in the UK. Participants assumed that they would interact with more British people and therefore would benefit from such interactions. The university environments populated by the participants appeared to contain just as many international students as domestic ones – so just as many NNS of English as NS. This runs counter Vietnamese participants’ assumptions. Thao said:

*I don't have chances to talk to native people because most of people in my course are Asian students: Indonesian, Malaysian or Chinese, etc.*

Ha also found “*Most classmates are international students*”. Most participants spoke English most frequently with non-native speakers. This was due to the fact that many of their classmates (the main source of daily interaction) were also international students. Hoa shared similar experience:

*I think except law, most other subjects are attended by students from other parts of the world rather than the native English.*

There was discernable surprise and unhappiness about the lack of native speakers to interact with, which may be explained by the strength of the assumptions regarding the extent of opportunities in the UK. Ly even said:

*Where are the English people? I asked myself such a question when I came to my first lecture.*

Vietnamese students were even more surprised to see international academic staff (although contact with native staff was three times higher than with non-native staff):

*Some of my tutors are non-native speakers, for example my tutor of economics is from Nigeria (Chau)*

Chau indicated her unhappiness when she discovered that several of her tutors and professors were also non-native speakers of English (Chau did not appear to be aware that English is the official language of Nigeria). Her argument was that as an international student she had paid a lot of money to be in the UK and for some reason therefore expected to study alongside and be taught by English people. Clearly, Chau possessed powerful assumptions regarding the benefits of interactions with native speakers and even adopted a rather narrow definition: ‘proper’ English is only spoken by British people. She believed that listening to non-native

tutors did not help her improve her listening and speaking skills. Chau believed that English spoken by non-natives is sub-standard, and reported difficulties understanding the Nigerian tutor's accent. However, in other accounts (see 5.4.1) Chau revealed that she also had difficulty in understanding British people too and was reliant on her boyfriend for clarification. Experiencing difficulty in listening comprehension in conversations with both native and non-native speakers, Chau nevertheless preferred interactions with native speakers. This supports SLA research that suggests native speakers are considered superior. Other Vietnamese students shared these feelings. In general, they did not believe interactions with non-native speakers could contribute to their speaking skills. Ly said:

*Talking with them (non-native speakers) is fun but their English is just like ours, more or less, they can't correct us if we make mistakes. I don't really think we can learn much from them.*

An believed that her English is even better than other international students so she would not be able to 'learn' from them:

*I think they (international students) are no better than us in terms of English so we don't know if it is us or them make a mistake.*

Hoa also shared similar idea in that interactions with non-native speakers were clearly not viewed as potential learning experiences. However, Hoa was different with the rest of the group in terms of motivation for her interactions:

*I never consider talking in English with other international students as a way to improve English. I just need friends around as I used to in Vietnam.*

### 5.5.3 Credentialism

There is data to suggest that Credentialism existed among Vietnamese students, and the UK universities were seen as a good choice. To illustrate, An expressed this view in one of her accounts:

*In Vietnam, a degree from a UK university means you are very good, you can be more competitive. Also a degree in the UK implies that you can speak English well which makes you even more qualified. I chose to come over here because of those.*

An's view is shared widely among other Vietnamese students: to get a UK degree and improve their English.

Four participants - Sang, Thao, Nga and Ly - were in receipt of scholarships. Scholarships in Vietnam are rare and the application process is highly competitive. Students in receipt of scholarships are generally under considerable pressure by their sponsoring organizations to work hard and acquire new skills, which, upon their return to Vietnam, adequately 'compensates' the organizations for their original investment. The rest of the group were funded by their families. The brother of one participant (Quynh) was also studying in the UK (at the same institution) at the same time; both Quynh and her brother were funded by their parents. The tuition fee for a Non-EU international student ranges from £10,000 to £12,000 per academic year (2008-2009). Living costs are, of course, additional to this, and prospective students are typically required to provide evidence that they have sufficient funds available before being accepted. The University of York, for example, normally advises that students need at least £9,000 per year to cover living costs. The information is provided in the offer letters to international students. Therefore, to be able to afford the cost of MA degree in the UK, it is reasonable to conclude that Vietnamese participants are from middle class background, even though there was no direct questions to collect data on participants' economic background. Vietnam is a developing country, therefore studying abroad is certainly not an option for those from poorer social strata. Whether in receipt of a scholarship or supported by one's family, the size of (financial) investment associated with international study means that pressure and expectations of one form or another exist and those who willingly subject themselves to such forces can be assumed to have a strong desire to get a degree in order to consolidate their fledgling professional status. Students in receipt of scholarships are generally under considerable pressure by their sponsoring organizations to work hard and acquire new skills, which, upon their return to Vietnam, adequately 'compensates' the organizations for their original investment. Individuals supported by families may therefore also experience familial pressure to 'do well'.

#### **5.5.4 Changes in motivation and expectation in L2 progress**

Data from focus groups and diaries show that Vietnamese 'investors' soon considered that their beliefs about the opportunities to speak English in the UK were mistaken. When first interviewed in February 2009, after 6 months of living and studying in the UK, all participants expressed disappointment with their improvement in speaking English. They felt they had not improved their speaking skills as much as they expected to before departing for the UK. Their levels of frustration and disappointment can be examined through the high expectation and motivation level. The expectations stemmed mainly from prior assumptions concerning the 'richness' of opportunities in the target language. This 'richness' refers to both the quality and quantity of opportunity.

Bac said that once in the UK his motivation to improve his English actually reduced: physically being in the UK gave him a reason to not try as hard as when he was in Vietnam. Bac was similar to Mai in that he had a ‘built-in’ assumption that his English would improve naturally once immersed in the target language:

*Since I came over here (UK) I found myself less motivated to learn English. Because when I was in Vietnam my main goal was to pass IELTS or TOEFL test, now that I had achieved it, I will just need to work on my major at the university.*

Bac’s idea was shared by Hoa who cited lower motivation as the cause. She said that when she was learning English in Vietnam, she was highly motivated because she wanted to pass the IELTS test. Now that she had achieved the score to be admitted to a UK university, her motivation had diminished. In Bac’s and Hoa’s cases motivation was typically instrumental (passing the IELTS test). Bac also shared the similar idea with Hoa but added that he believed he would be able to improve his English by staying in the UK. In Vietnam, all participants attended formal classes. In the UK they assumed that the need for such classes would be more than compensated for by the “natural setting” so their motivation decreased. Mai, however, became frustrated about the fact that she had not improved her speaking skill as much as she expected.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed key findings from the focus groups based on data from the main study and has also incorporated findings from the pilot study. In general, Vietnamese participants reported limited quality and quantity of interactions in English. In terms of quantity, the main source of L2 interactions originated from university campuses (see 5.2.1.1). But participants reported surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (because they were engaged in independent study - see 5.2.1.2). Off campus, social events were rarely attended by Vietnamese students. Participants were critical of their universities for not organising more interesting and affordable events (see 5.2.1.2). Vietnamese students were keen to participate in events where they could meet British people but such events were often considered to be culturally unsuitable (see 5.2.2.2).

At home, interactions in the L2 were mainly with other international students, even when creating/accessing interactions with English NS were readily available, e.g. when sharing accommodation with British housemates (see 5.2.2.3).

Some participants had part-time jobs, but the work environment was considered poor in terms of providing opportunities to practice speaking English. This was due to the pressure of work and the fact that participants either worked very few hours or as lone workers (see 5.2.2.4).

In terms of the quality of interactions, language and cultural differences are cited as the two main problems impeding interactions in the L2. Participants generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation and inadequate listening skills (see 5.3.1).

Vietnamese participants believed there was impatience on the part of British interlocutors which sometimes deterred them from either initiating conversations or engaging properly (see 5.3.2.1).

Outside academic contexts, matters relating to culture were also thought to cause problems). This was a two-way street, with both Vietnamese participants and British people holding particular views about one another which may have shaped the content and conduct of their interactions (see 5.3.2.2). While cultural dissonance was considered a problem in interactions with British interlocutors, cultural and experiential similarity help to explain the more frequent and closer relationships with international students; but such interactions were not seen as beneficial learning experience for Vietnamese participants (see 5.3.3).

Six participants managed to access a significantly greater number of interactions than the others, mainly based on their interactions outside campus. They were proactive in their efforts to access L2 interactions (see 5.4.2) and/or accessed a greater number of interactions via key relationships (see 5.4.1). These six participants were reasonably content with their L2 interactions and SLA.

The remaining eight participants were, however, generally dissatisfied with the opportunities they had to practice the L2 in the UK and with the progress they had made. Prior to arriving in the UK most participants had high expectations regarding the

opportunities to speak English and improve the L2 in the UK and they had to revise these expectations when faced with the reality (see 5.5). The next chapter examines these key findings in greater detail and triangulates them with findings from the diary (Chapter 4) using the key SLA theories discussed in Chapter 2 to understand them.

## Chapter 6

### Discussions

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The chapter starts with a discussion of the main findings identified in Chapters 4 and 5, simultaneously drawing on relevant theories to make sense of the findings. The chapter then seeks to identify key relationships (between identities, interaction experiences and communicative competence) in order to answer the research questions:

- Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments?
- How-if at all- is identity implicated in Vietnamese students' interactions in the English language?
- Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how ?

#### 6.1 Key theories

I will use three theoretical frameworks to critically analyse and make sense of these findings: Norton's theories of social identity and investment; Barna's stumbling blocks in intercultural communication and Giles and Byrne's intergroup model. These theories have been described in more detail in Chapter 2, but the key assumptions are presented below in Table 6.1. Each theory helps to shed light on the actual interactions of participants from a different perspective. Norton (2000) argues that the success or failure of a L2 learning process depends on the social roles that learners take which help them impose the right to be heard; and become legitimate participants of social interactions. Barna (1998) attributes problems in communication among people from different cultures to six 'stumbling blocks', which may be rooted in cultural differences. Giles and Byrne's (1982) intergroup model emphasises the impact of group identification on individuals' L2 learning, asserting a dynamic 'border' dividing contrasting cultural and linguistic camps which some people may more successfully traverse than others.



**Table 6.1: Key frameworks and assumptions**

Theory	Assumptions	
	Interactions (quality and quantity)	Social roles
<b>Social identity and Investment (Norton, 2000)</b>	Mediated by power relations – reflects resources	New, ‘foreign’ learner
<b>Stumbling blocks to intercultural communication (Barna, 1998)</b>	Influenced by cultural differences	Vietnamese (Asian culture) in UK (Western culture)
<b>Intergroup Model (Giles &amp; Byrne, 1982)</b>	Dependent on dynamism between different groups	Vietnamese, Asian, Other

## 6.2 Identities of Vietnamese participants

As discussed in 2.3.2, Norton’s (2000:19) definition of social identity is used in this thesis. Norton emphasises that identity must be considered a dynamic concept; which may change over time and differs from one social context to another and/or when subjected to shifts in personal disposition. The discussion below will discuss the sources that were found to have influenced the formation of identities of Vietnamese participants. First, it discusses the social and cultural influences on participants’ identities. Second, it focuses on the identity re-construction process of Vietnamese participants while residing in the UK (over time or affected by particularities of community and experience).

### 6.2.1 Influence of Vietnamese social and cultural backgrounds

Hetch (1993:79) points out that “identities are a source of expectations and motivations”. First of all, information from participants’ profiles (see 5.1.1) suggests that participants were all more-or-less fully-formed adults by the time they arrived in the UK and each possessed individual personalities, expectations, skillsets and identities. These must be accounted for, since they represent the inputs or ‘raw materials’ of the SLA (SA context) process. Norton (2000) sees learners as investors who are willing to invest (time and money) and expect worthwhile returns.

Vietnamese students were clearly investing financially, and this is further evidence of high motivation and expectation which is again linked to credentialism at home. Credentialism in Vietnam remains important and a UK degree is highly valued in Vietnam's highly competitive economy and labour market (King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2008). As described in 2.6.5, Vietnam is a developing country and only the Vietnamese middle-class can generally afford the high tuition fees and living costs associated with study in the UK. As King, Phuong An Nguyen and Nguyen Huu Minh (2008) suggest, the middle class in Vietnam are those who can afford and are most willing to invest in study abroad because it is considered a financial investment to improve their career prospects and consolidate their social status.

For the majority of participants, studying in the UK is a big investment financially and emotionally. Vietnamese participants, therefore, can be described as highly motivated to study in the UK. Participants were all employed as young white-collar semi-professionals in Vietnam. They gave up their jobs, and travelled thousands of miles to the UK, to pursue MA degrees in order to consolidate their skills or acquire better careers. Their motivation to study in the UK can be traced back to two reasons: the credentialism in Vietnam (see 2.6.5) and participants' assumptions regarding the progress in English language proficiency (especially speaking skill) considered achievable whilst studying in the UK (see 5.5.1 and 5.5.2). Evidence to support credentialism among Vietnamese participants is discussed in detail in 5.3.3. The expectation that a UK degree would further their careers was generally accompanied by a belief that a UK degree also demonstrates proficiency in English – and that studying in the UK would almost guarantee this. English proficiency is highly valued in Vietnam, and the UK is constructed as a destination full of opportunities. Some participants' beliefs regarding the L2 benefits of living and studying in the TL culture were greater than others, but prior to leaving Vietnam most generally believed that studying in the UK would improve their English proficiency (see 5.5.1) and that simply living and studying in the UK – even for a relatively short period - would consolidate and develop their speaking skills. Participants also had high expectations regarding the opportunities to speak English and improve the L2. UK universities therefore continue to exert a significant pull on young, early-career Vietnamese

professionals – and their sponsoring employers and families. Vietnamese students in the UK are generally highly motivated to get MA degrees from the UK, to improve their English language, consolidate their careers and enhance their social status. Their economic motivation is underpinned by a series of expectations regarding what ‘life’ as a student will be like in the UK in terms of interaction opportunities. Upon entering the UK as young professionals from middle class backgrounds, Vietnamese students encountered a range of experiences which can be understood in terms of their social positioning.

### **6.2.2 Social roles reported by participants**

Findings from section 4.6 show that ‘Friend’ and ‘Student’ are the most common social roles reported by a wide margin and the majority of participants’ L2 interactions occurred on campus where these two roles were foregrounded. Other social roles are acknowledged, but only rarely. This supports Norton’s theories (see 2.3.2) in which language learners’ identities are influenced by social contexts and key institutions such as universities. Participants made sense of their social roles through university as an institution and interactions around campus. According to Norton (2000), this can be explained by the fact that participants had experienced a major change in social setting (from Vietnam, in Asia, to the UK, in Europe) – social context could reasonably be expected to press hard on participants’ own processes of making sense of their new situation. This supports Norton’s understanding of the way that the ‘social’ influences identity i.e. by focusing on how it constrains the roles people can play in society. Norton (2000) describes how the deteriorating socio-economic status of immigrants affects their identities. There is evidence to support this. There is a clear ‘shift’ away from the social roles that Vietnamese students used to occupy before arriving. All participants were professional workers, with middle-class backgrounds. While residing in the UK, Vietnamese participants felt culturally different (see 5.3.2) and were also relatively financially impoverished (see 5.2.1.2). For example, there were accounts from participants who could not socialise as much as they wanted due to the costs. One, Bac, had to move out of his accommodation to save money which subsequently cost him opportunities to practice more English (also see 5.2.1.2).

The data is interesting for what it does not find as much as for what it does find. There was, for example, considerable difference between participants' perceptions of their own 'Vietnameseness' between the main study and pilot study. In the main study the social role of 'Vietnamese' was rarely reported, but participants in the pilot study reported strong feelings of 'Vietnameseness' during conversations with native English speakers. Sometimes participants were simply attempting to distinguish themselves from the Chinese whilst at other times participants were purposely expressing their culture and nationality – putting their 'Vietnameseness' on display for British people. This supports Norton's arguments *vis-à-vis* how social interactions and social roles are concatenated. However, Mi, a participant from the main study, is more typical and commented '*there is not a lot in the UK to remind me of my Vietnamese identity*'.

The difference between the pilot and main study groups in terms of Vietnamese identity may be explained by their differing lengths of stay in the UK. Participants in the main study had been in the UK for approximately six months, while the pilot study participants had already spent several years in the UK. It is tempting to assume that new arrivals to the UK may feel more 'other' than those who have been in the UK longer, and that one basis of their 'other' – their 'Vietnameseness' – may be particularly prominent. This would, for example, accord with Barna's concept of 'shock'. Alternatively, the research suggests that participants put their 'Vietnameseness' on hold – it took some time before they acquired the social and intercultural skills and confidence to express and project their cultural background and nationality. Norton (2000) would understand this as evidence of SLA as an often protracted social process of negotiation for meaning. Mi offers another reading. The Vietnamese community in the UK is relatively small and although formal and informal institutions and networks have coalesced (including VietSoc) it may have taken participants some time to either discover them and/or access them routinely (if at all) – these networks and institutions were important reservoirs of 'Vietnameseness' which new arrivals were unable to draw instantly from.

### **6.3 Implications of identities in social interactions**

The previous section has described the sources influencing participants' identity construction and the types of social roles they occupied while residing in the UK. This section will explore how such identities are implicated in L2 social interactions.

### 6.3.1 Limited social roles and limited social interactions

Diary data in 4.2.1 shows that the majority of participants spent less than 1.68 hours/day speaking English. Further, the number of hours speaking English was on a general downward trend. The diary data is reinforced by data from the focus groups (see 5.2.1.1) in which participants attribute their limited L2 speaking to insufficient opportunities for them to speak the L2 and/or obstacles preventing access. The limited hours spent speaking English can be explained by social roles.

There is considerable evidence suggesting that participants' identities were influenced by their social contexts. The second most commonly reported social role was 'Student' (see 4.6) and the second most common type of interlocutor was also 'Student' (see 4.3). If 'studentness' and interactions with students are so prominent one might expect 'Academic Discussions' to also feature high up on the list of interaction types; but it does not (see 4.4). In fact, participants described in the focus groups interviews how they generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their language skills (see 5.3.1) and although the university was considered the main source of interactions for the majority of Vietnamese students, campus still only offered limited opportunity to speak English (see 5.2.1.1) and participants certainly did not engage in regular academic discussion there, reporting surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (see 5.2.1.2). Opportunities to speak English on campus were not only limited but the number of interactions available there decreased over time. The prominence of 'studentness' therefore suggests that participants' social roles are influenced by context (and interlocutor-types) just as much by the content of their interactions: being on campus and/or talking to students – even about non-academic matters – is sufficient to foreground one's 'Student' identity.

Further evidence to support the relationship between social roles and social interactions comes from one of the least reported social roles. There was a link between the reporting of the lower ranked social role 'Employee' (see 4.6) and the equally less common interlocutor-type 'Colleague' (see 4.3). Ranking of the social role of 'Employee' was considered rare given that half of the participants occupied part-time jobs (see 4.3.6). Discussions in focus groups revealed that interactions with

work colleagues were minimal (see 5.2.2.4). Here, Vietnamese participants ranked 'Employee' low because they did not have frequent interactions with colleagues at work. Therefore, this suggests that participants ranked the social roles in relation to the frequency of types of interlocutors and types of interactions that they experienced, rather than context.

The relationship between social roles and social interactions is also found where participants' number of social roles seems to reflect the quantity of their L2 interactions. For example, the two cases (Chau and Mi) who claimed more social roles also reported more social interactions and spent more time speaking English (see 4.2.1). At the other end of the scale, Nga and Bac, who claimed only 'Student' and 'Friend' status, had the lowest total hours of speaking English (also see 4.2.1). This suggests a relationship between the number of social roles occupied and the extent of L2 interactions.

This suggests that the social roles that Vietnamese participants felt strongest were influenced by social contexts and social interactions. In other words, the identities that Vietnamese participants adopted were influenced by social forces. The social influences on identities of Vietnamese students can be explained by the fact that participants had experienced a major change in social setting (from Vietnam, in Asia, to the UK, in Europe). This was anticipated: *social* influences would make a significant contribution to any processes associated with identity construction and reconstruction among participants. This supports Norton's understanding of the way that the 'social' influences identity i.e. by focusing on how it constrains the roles people can play in society.

Except for Chau, Mi and Tu the rest of the participants mainly reported the identities of 'Student' and/or 'Friend' influencing their patterns of interactions. Again, Norton's theory of power relations can apply to low-interaction scenarios. There seems to be a link between limited - and limiting - social roles and similarly limited interactions. 'Student' status did not contribute positively to processes of accessing opportunities to speak English. Instead, being a student interfered with opportunities; because of

academic workloads, pedagogic specificities and the requirement to prioritise academic needs (see 5.2.1.2).

Vietnamese participants were therefore negotiating different levels of interactions by taking advantage of their social roles. Social roles seem to have played an important part in deciding the quantity of interactions of Vietnamese participants. It supports Norton's theory of power relations which suggests that the success of the L2 learning process depends on how participants can exploit their social roles, to impose the right to be heard and achieve full participation in the TL community.

### **6.3.2 Power relations manifested in social interactions**

Norton (2000) argues that L2 learners have a complex social identity, which can be understood through power relations. Power relations therefore are seen best through five social interactions which will be discussed below.

#### **6.3.2.1 In interactions with NS**

Vietnamese students were keen to interact with the TL community and attempted to participate in events where they could meet British people. However, many of these events were often considered to be culturally unsuitable (see 5.2.2.2) and participants deliberately avoided them.

#### 'Lion's share'

Norton argues that L2 learners have to perform the 'lion's share' during interactions with native speakers. Discussions from the focus groups seem to support this. Vietnamese participants felt obliged to put the 'lion's share' of thought and effort into interactions with native speakers simply because they have a stronger preference for interactions with native speakers.

At home, interactions in the L2 were mainly with other international students, even when interaction opportunities with English NS were readily available. Evidence from 5.2.2.3 shows that Vietnamese participants did not have many interactions with British housemates. Any L2 interactions at home were mainly with other Asian or international housemates. Reported interactions with British housemates evidence the 'lion's share' that the Vietnamese participants had to bear. For example, Quynh described how she exercised care when in conversation with her chef housemate.

Their conversation focused on Vietnamese cuisine because the chef was interested in Asian cooking. Quynh refrained from talking about other topics because she could see that the housemate was not interested. Their relationship therefore could not develop any closer. In Quynh's account, despite having performed the 'lion's share' her relationship with her British housemate still did not develop, neither did her L2 interactions at home. Quynh was '*luckier*' with an African British friend who always showed '*sympathy*' for the difficulty that L2 learners have when talking to NS. Quynh felt touched when her African British friend listened to her carefully and politely corrected her mistakes. Quynh clearly wanted to be treated similarly by native speakers but she reported this only happened to her once. Quynh believed that the African origin of her friend helped her develop insights into the difficulties of L2 learners like Quynh, so she was willing to help.

Quynh and her British African friend therefore challenge some SLA research by suggesting that interactions with native speakers are more beneficial than those with non-native speakers. Quynh was clearly supported to improve her English by her African friend, whilst left feeling inadequate and irritated by conversations with NS. Chau also emphasised the need to be '*patient*' in conversations with British. Chau believed British people are '*nice and friendly*' but they expect other people to take the initiative and talk first. In other words, in interactions with the British, Vietnamese people are expected to make greater efforts. This is also supported by participants V. and P. from the pilot focus groups (see 5.4.2.2). V and P believed that British people want to talk to them too, but V and P had to initiate the conversation. While both V and P experienced and understood 'the rules of the game' in conversations with British people, V said he did not mind, but P expressed his disappointment that he had to '*talk first all the time*'.

#### 'Ambivalent' attitudes of TL speakers

Norton also describes how immigrants in her research felt 'marginalised' by the ambivalent attitudes from the native speakers of the TL. Data from focus groups also supports this. Mi, Luyen and Mai believed that younger British people were more "*arrogant*" and "*less interested in other cultures than older British people*". They described older British people as "*kinder and more patient*" in their conversations.



Younger people did not listen carefully or repeat words or explain things properly to Vietnamese interlocutors. The discussion in 5.3.2.1 shows that Vietnamese participants' views of British people ranged from "*uninterested*" (as P described it), to "*discriminatory*" (as described by Luyen). Though the problems were attributed to cultural differences participants in general considered British people unsupportive. Towards the end of data collection process, several participants (Bac and Luyen) withdrew completely from interactions with British people. In a response to a suggestion from Chau that Vietnamese should be more understanding and patient in their interactions with the British, Bac commented "*it's not worth it*". Bac's point of view supports the literature regarding 'respect and responsibility' in Vietnamese culture (see 2.6.2). According to this cultural norm, interactions between people are equal regardless of their economic or social status. Bac, therefore, requires and expects equal effort from interlocutors, and was not comfortable taking the 'lion's share' in interactions with British people. Bac's behaviour also supports Kim's (1993) and Davis and Proctor's (1989) description of middle class Asian men as strong, responsible and demanding respect from their family, friends and wider society.

Another finding which possibly supports the 'ambivalent' attitude from the TL speakers is that the Vietnamese' relationships with British classmates was never as close as that with international students (see 5.3.2.2). The 'ambivalent' attitude from British people was also found at work (though not intentionally) from one of Mai's colleagues (see 5.2.2.4). Mai was told to 'stop talking' to a British chef in the kitchen where they were working together because he needed to concentrate. Though Mai understood the reason for this request, she was clearly upset by it and the fact that she could not talk to a colleague even during a break. Mai's account can help understand why half the participants had part-time jobs, but only one participant (Ha) reported regular L2 interactions at work (see 5.2.2.4). The work environment therefore was considered poor in terms of providing opportunities to practice speaking English. This was due to the pressure of work, the fact that participants either worked limited hours or as lone workers and because work colleagues were generally regarded as unfriendly (see 5.2.2.4).

The ‘ambivalent attitude’ from British people that Norton (2000) describes in her research caused problems in L2 interactions among Vietnamese participants and was undoubtedly a surprise to many participants given how much they preferred interactions with native speakers and their assumptions regarding the benefit of NS interactions before leaving Vietnam (see 5.5).

#### ‘Catch-22’

Norton also describes a Catch-22 in which L2 learners have to ‘perform’ while being judged by native speakers. This situation is also observed in Vietnamese participants. There is some evidence to suggest that participants adopted the identity of a learner when they spoke English in front of NS. Sang, for example, was hoping that his British friend would correct him when he made a mistake. At the same time, just like a student in front of a teacher, Sang was afraid of making mistakes. If the NS interlocutor did not correct him, he thought that person insufficiently supportive; but if corrected, Sang - although grateful – also felt embarrassed. Sang admitted he often lost confidence whilst interacting with native speakers. This is similar to the Catch-22 that Norton describes: L2 learners do not have enough ‘space’ within which to develop their skills because they constantly feel nervous about being judged by native speakers. In Sang’s case, to put himself at ease he chose to speak English with NS that he already knew and who had become accustomed to his inaccuracy.

The strongest evidence for the Catch-22 possibly comes from the participants’ accounts in section 5.3.1. Participants (Luyen, Nga, Tu and Bac) described how they felt ‘lost’ in academic debates due to their inadequate language, especially in comparison with NS classmates. Nga admitted to the fear of being judged when speaking English to native speakers even though she never actually experienced any negative comments or attitudes from them. The fact that English is their second language and making mistakes is a natural part of any learning process did not put participants at ease. They were clearly embarrassed and under pressure to perform well in front of NS.

### **6.3.2.2 Limited social interactions**

The majority of L2 interactions occurred on university campuses (see 5.2.1.1), but participants reported surprisingly few opportunities to practice speaking English either during classes or after them (because they were engaged in independent study - see 5.2.1.2). Off campus social events were rarely attended by Vietnamese students. The difficulties associated with accessing L2 interaction opportunities support Norton's suggestion that access to TL speakers occurs within and is patterned by specific social contexts (e.g. campus life and course regimes) and must be negotiated and managed - they are not automatic. According to Norton, the success of these negotiations will reflect asymmetries of power between language learners and the TL community.

### **6.3.2.3 More simple than complex interactions**

The three most common types of L2 interactions are: 'Socialising', 'Simple Transactions' and 'Small Talk' which together accounted for approximately 75% of all L2 interactions (see 4.4). Approximately 24% of encounters were complex transactions and academic discussions.

Vietnamese participants were engaged in minimal academic discussions. Data in section 4.4 shows that academic discussion accounted for about 12% of total interactions. This is a modest figure given that participants were enrolled in full-time MA courses. In addition, academic discussions decreased over the three months, together with interactions with 'University/Academic Staff' (see 4.3). Focus group data (see 5.2.2.1) suggests that this reflects the effect of the Easter holiday in the last month of data collection process. 'Complex Transactions' slightly increased in the last month. Evidence from the focus groups shows that a number of participants were holidaying, sightseeing and/or attending conferences during April 2009, which may have influenced the 'Complex Transactions' headline figure.

Most of the time participants were therefore engaging in simple and relatively undemanding conversational activities more so than complex ones. This may simply reflect participants' sub-optimal L2 skills (see above). An alternative, positive, way of understanding this is to see the acquisition and maintenance of simple and undemanding conversational skills as an essential requirement for day-to-day life. Rather than being restricted (against their wishes) to mundane conversations (by

forces beyond their control) participants are instead routinely exercising a skill which they have more-or-less mastered – one which functions to preserve their overall L2 confidence and compensates for shortcomings elsewhere. However, participants were generally dissatisfied with their communicative competence over the research period which casts doubt on this explanation.

There is nothing to suggest that such interactions were gradually being replaced by more complex conversations - as might be expected under Barna's framework - as participants acclimatized and overcame 'shock'. The persistence and relative dominance of 'Simple Transactions' and 'Small Talk' therefore endorses Norton's theories regarding L2 learners' failure to be considered 'worthy to speak' and/or 'worthy to listen' by attributing L2 interaction experiences to social forces and roles which individuals cannot quickly or easily amend/overcome. This view is reinforced by focus group data in which participants commented that some British people were reluctant to enter into meaningful conversation with the Vietnamese, displaying "*impatience*" and a desire to terminate any conversation as quickly as possible (see 5.3.2.1). This phenomenon is explored in more detail below.

#### **6.3.2.4 Limited types of interlocutors**

In terms of whom participants spoke English with (or Interlocutor 'Types'), the number of L2 interactions also generally decreased over time, mirroring the overall reduction in time spent speaking English. 'Friends' are the most common L2 interlocutors by a large margin; followed by 'Student' and 'University/Academic Staff'. Interactions with other types of interlocutors were all relatively rare. Within-subject variation is limited for 'Friends', suggesting participants were able to sustain certain key relationships and/or patterns of socialising, but more pronounced for 'Students' and 'University/Academic Staff' (see 4.3), possibly reflecting course regimes and university closures.

#### **6.3.2.5 More interactions with NNS than NS**

According to diary data in 4.4, the number of NNS encounters was three times that of NS encounters. The gap between NS and NNS interactions narrowed by the end of Month 3 however, but this was due to a reduction in interactions with NNS rather than an increase in interactions with NS (see 4.3.8) and is consistent with data from the

focus groups suggesting that most participants' classmates and friends on campus – participants' main interlocutors - were fellow international students (see Chapter 5). Very roughly, participants tended to speak to NNS whilst on campus and NS off campus, although there were obvious exceptions (such as when shopping). One less obvious exception includes participants' L2 interactions at home, where they mainly spoke English with other Asian housemates even if sharing accommodation with British students (see 5.2.2.3). Vietnamese participants mainly spoke Vietnamese with other Vietnamese or English with other (non-Vietnamese) Asian housemates (see 5.2.2.3).

The patterning of L2 interactions described above is generally compatible with the theories of Norton's (2000) power relations – of Vietnamese participants' inability to impose the 'right to be heard' by compelling interlocutors from the TL community to ignore and/or overcome their own reservations *vis-à-vis* intercultural communication. Since non-Vietnamese NNS were viewed in the same situation as the participants (see 5.3.2.2), power is more evenly distributed, facilitating communication.

#### **6.4 Stumbling blocks in participants' L2 communication**

Barna's (1998) six stumbling blocks were found helpful to make sense of the data collected regarding participants' social interactions. Five out of the six stumbling blocks (also see 2.7.3) were found relevant: Language differences, anxiety in communication, tendency to evaluate, assumption of similarity and stereotype. There is, however, enough data to confirm the last stumbling block which is non-verbal misinterpretation.

##### **6.4.1 Language differences and anxiety**

Inadequate L2 competence has been reported by Vietnamese participants as an obstacle preventing participants from engaging in L2 conversations. Accounts by participants in 5.3.1 show that their English proficiency remained a problem in communication for Vietnamese participants across a range of interaction types from simple transactions to academic debates. Even though all participants passed the English requirements to gain entry to UK universities, they reported 'shock' upon arrival in the UK. Vietnamese participants blamed this on being "*ill prepared*" for the

“*real English*” spoken in the UK. As Boxer (2002) suggests in her research of international students in America, international students, having passed English language tests, typically fail to understand the norms and rules of interactions in the TL environment. As a result, they failed to recognise and take advantage of opportunities to practice the TL language. Vietnamese participants had passed either IELTS or TOEFL tests before coming to the UK. They were confident about their English in Vietnam and expected it to improve further after one year of studying in the UK (see 5.5). However, Vietnamese participants soon discovered that the opportunities to practice speaking English were not as plentiful as they thought (see 5.2.1.1 and 4.2.1).

There is evidence to suggest that Vietnamese participants experienced high anxiety in communication in English, especially in interactions where native speakers were present. This may explain why participants found it difficult to access and function successfully in academic settings (including with their supervisors) i.e. in an institution which they have paid to receive a service from which should ostensibly afford them a degree of power. Further, several participants, such as Nga, reported experiencing anxiety during the focus groups but did not interpret these as negative L2 interaction experiences because they believed the problem was a personal one, not an inherent product of their L2 encounters. Anxiety on the part of the participants is therefore likely to explain certain unsuccessful L2 encounters. Accounts from the focus groups (see 5.3.1) show that Nga, for example, found herself “*mumbling*” in front of her classmates, whilst Ha chose to remain silent in academic discussions (although Ha attributed this to her soft voice which she thought would cause difficulties for her classmates). Bac avoided interactions with British people (see 5.3.2.1) and reported the lowest number of interactions among the group (see 4.2.1). After several attempts trying to make himself understood in conversations Bac would often just give up and withdraw completely. Bac also reported experiencing anxiety, possibly caused by the fear of being judged by NS.

Anxiety is viewed by Norton (2000) as the result of unequal power relations between NNS and NS. However, Barna’s concept of anxiety challenges the suggestion. Barna explains high anxiety as a common feeling when people from a different culture come

to a new culture/country. In this sense, moving to an alien country/culture is the main cause of anxiety in communication. For most participants (except Tu), studying in the UK represented the first time they had lived away from their homeland for a long period of time. Some participants, such as Thao, clearly evaluated UK culture from a Vietnamese-centric perspective, which according to Barna (1998) is the cause of another stumbling block – a ‘tendency to evaluate’.

#### **6.4.2 Stereotypes and the tendency to evaluate**

Data suggests that participants experienced two of Barna’s obstacles: stereotypes and the tendency to evaluate. Stereotypes happened when Vietnamese participants did not have as many interactions as they wished with the British. In fact participants’ views regarding the (un)friendliness of British people are themselves stereotypes. Some participants found British people in general ‘unfriendly’ whilst others felt that this mainly applied to younger British people. Another stereotype about the British people was the impatience on the part of NS. Participants believed this deterred British people from both initiating conversations and engaging fully in them (see 5.3.2.1).

This was a two-way street however, with both Vietnamese participants and British people holding particular views about one another and approaching interactions cautiously, ultimately shaping the content, conduct and frequency of their interactions (see 5.3.2.2). For example, Chau believed that the British considered all Asians to be “boring” and on the “*bottom list to make friends with*” (also see 5.3.2.1). In another account, V believed that British people think Vietnamese people look like Chinese and “*all Chinese tend to stick to themselves*” so the British would not initiate any conversations for fear of being a nuisance.

It is also important to note that there is also evidence of cultural learning occurring – of stereotypes being abandoned, of open mindedness and of ‘difference’ being accommodated and even celebrated. Sang, for example, initially considered UK socialising habits boring and less stimulating than those in Vietnam, but he persisted, concluding eventually “*I used to find it boring here. However, recently I have started to find out the experience here (UK) is quite interesting actually. It has its own right*”.

Sang’s account shows that Sang fell into the stumbling block of ‘tendency to evaluate’. Sang used to evaluate interactions in the UK and compare them

(unfavourably) with those in Vietnam. Therefore Sang was not happy because “*hanging in the pubs in the UK are not the same as in Vietnam*”. The most obvious changes in attitude towards British culture were expressed by Hoa and Sang. They actively evaluated British culture and also displayed a level of proficiency in adapting to it. During the first interviews, Hoa and Sang considered British people and society ‘*arrogant and hierarchical*’. However, towards the end of the data collection period they both enjoyed spending their leisure time with their NS peers. At the time of the study Sang even considered staying in the UK for several years. This shows that once participants stopped evaluating, they started to enjoy their interactions in the TL more.

### **6.4.3 Assumption of similarity**

Barna’s first stumbling block– the assumption of similarities – asserts that people mistakenly assume that as humans we are all similar and consequently should be able to communicate relatively easily. Barna believes that the inevitable revealing of difference generates ‘shock’, hindering communication. Barna also argues that culturally different interlocutors are prone to stereotyping and a ‘tendency to evaluate’ which interferes with the development of mutual understanding. It follows that encounters with interlocutors who are (considered) less culturally and experientially different would therefore generate less anxiety and fewer opportunities to evaluate.

### **6.5 Making sense of L2 interactions using Intergroup Model**

Similarly to the stumbling block of ‘assumption of similarity’, Giles and Byrne’s (1982) Intergroup Model emphasises the importance of cultural and/or linguistic similarity in patterning intercultural encounters – notwithstanding individuals’ abilities to transit between cultural and linguistic camps, the ready availability (or absence) of own- and like-group members, networks and institutions is likely to shape *inter alia* who people talk to and how frequently they do so.

Giles and Byrne’s intergroup model maintains that cultural and linguistic commonalities and differences are likely to facilitate and limit interactions between different linguistic and cultural groups. If the intergroup model is correct we would expect to see Vietnamese participants ‘drawn to’ and spending much – even most of – their time with fellow Vietnamese students and with other groups with whom they perceive themselves to share key linguistic, cultural and experiential reference points



etc. There is data to support the dynamism that govern interactions between cultural/linguistic groups that Giles and Byrne advocate. First, interactions between Vietnamese participants and British interlocutors were limited. Data from both focus groups and the diary suggest that Vietnamese participants had limited interactions in English (see 4.3 and 5.2.2.1). Participants also spoke English with more international students (mainly Asian) than British students. Most participants found it “*more difficult*” to communicate with native English speakers than with other Asian students. The most striking example is how Vietnamese participants only became (close) friends with other international housemates/classmates even whilst sharing accommodation with British people and attending MA courses with British students. Chau and her English housemate never developed a relationship as friends, instead maintaining a distance from each other. This was interesting because Chau and her housemate enjoyed favorable conditions to become closer. They shared a house, he was studying Asian Studies and Chau was keen to improve her English and learn more about British culture. Chau’s experience supports Giles and Byrne’s argument that ethnolinguistic and cultural convergence facilitates L2 interaction. The Vietnamese and British culture and language differences did not facilitate mutual attraction. The Vietnamese students seemed to be more comfortable talking with other international students because they had similar cultures and more common points of reference.

### **6.6 Identity and communicative competence**

First of all, data suggests that most participants were not satisfied with their L2 experience. Diary data in 4.5 shows that 9 out of 14 participants scored their communication experiences less than average ( $\bar{x} = 45$ ) with scores ranging from -11 to 113 (out of a maximum available mark of 168). Further, participants became increasingly dissatisfied with their L2 interaction experiences over the course of the study (although there was significant between-subject variation). Focus groups also suggest that participants were not happy with their progress in English speaking skill (see 5.5.1).

As discussed in 2.4, the sense of communicative competence can be investigated through: the frequency of L2 interactions, the management of stumbling blocks in

communication, and the self-identification in relations to groups, and the power relations in social interactions. Each will be discussed in detail below.

### **6.6.1 Frequency of L2 interactions**

MacIntyre & Charos (1996) believe communicative communication is manifested in L2 communication frequency. In which, the more opportunities L2 learners have to practice the TL language, the more satisfied they would feel with their communicative competence. According to this, the low rating of L2 experience among Vietnamese participants can be understood in terms of the limited social interactions they had in the UK. Evidence from both the diaries and focus groups confirm this (see 4.21, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.2). In addition to the limited opportunities, Vietnamese participants also experienced problems in taking advantage of opportunities even when they became available ones (and even on campus). University and campus life provided the majority of L2 interaction opportunities but participants reported several obstacles preventing easy access to them. ‘Hard’ external obstacles include: demanding academic workloads, the high cost of socialising and inadequate support from university authorities. However, participants also cite ‘soft’ cultural differences and their own sub-optimal L2 skills as additional obstacles (see 5.2.1.2). With regards to the latter, participants generally struggled to communicate effectively in an academic setting due to their limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation and inadequate listening skills (see 5.3.1). Cultural differences and misunderstandings undermined the appeal and success of various initiatives designed to transcend national and cultural barriers and occasionally functioned to erect invisible barriers between different geo-cultural student groups limiting intermingling and/or L2 interactions. A mix of social, cultural and individual (cultural and skill-centred) factors are therefore implicated in participants’ precise L2 interaction experiences.

Another reason for the dissatisfaction with their L2 interactions was the fact that interactions with NNS were far more common than interactions with NS, while participants valued interactions with NS more than with NNS. The results suggest that participants’ interactions with NNS were not considered useful learning experiences - because they themselves were thought to have sub-optimal L2 skills – resulting in fairly high levels of persistent dissatisfaction. Relatively low satisfaction scores might also reflect participants’ irritation at their continued inability to successfully access

NS and the TL community. The overall downward trend in satisfaction ratings can then be understood as linked to the decrease in NNS encounters relative to encounters with NS over the course of the study – participants see tricky encounters with hard-to-reach NS as the litmus test for their communicative competence, with more-or-less easy-going encounters with NNS serving to offset any disappointments. Data from the focus groups confirms that participants were both unhappy with the limited L2 speaking opportunities they had in the UK and with aspects of the actual encounters themselves.

The majority of Vietnamese participants reported limited interactions in their diaries (see 4.2.1) and lower level of dissatisfaction. They also admitted overestimating both the L2 interaction opportunities available in the UK and improvements to their L2 skills associated with prolonged exposure to the TL community (see 5.5). The fact that these high expectations were not met may explain their high levels of dissatisfaction – in contrast, those with more conservative expectations report more L2 interactions and higher satisfaction (see 4.2.1 and 5.2.1.1).

The unhappiness about the L2 experience can be understood in light of the identities that were observed in section 6.2 earlier. With high motivation and expectation to study in the UK, Vietnamese participants were hoping to experience ‘golden’ opportunities to improve their English proficiency, especially speaking skill (also see 5.5.1 and 5.5.2). The reality of real life in the TL environment therefore explains why participants rated their L2 experiences low. This also links in with the concept of investment (Norton, 2000), which will be discussed in the following section.

### **6.6.2 Imposing ‘the right to be heard’**

As discussed in the previous section, the low rating of L2 experience can be explained by the concept of investment (Norton, 2000). Vietnamese participants are considered investors who invest their time and money to study in the UK and in return expect to achieve MA degrees and improved English speaking skills. However, the ‘investors’ soon experienced difficulties with fully tapping into opportunities in the TL environment, which according to Norton (2000) can be attributed to the unequal distribution of power. Norton (2000) believes that power relations help to explain the social roles that learners can claim - social roles assist learners to negotiate access to

interactions, to impose the ‘right to be heard’ and to become legitimate participants in social interaction. The more successful in imposing the right to be heard, the more competent one is in his/her communication. As discussed in 6.3.2, power relations are manifested in the social interactions of Vietnamese participants.

There is, in fact, both evidence to support and challenge the influence of social roles on L2 interactions. This chapter has illustrated how some Vietnamese participants occupied social roles that enabled them to access more interactions. The chapter – and, indeed, the thesis as a whole - has described how key formal and informal social settings and institutions can constitute a structuring backcloth patterning L2 interaction opportunities. Discussions throughout section 6.3.2 shows that the majority of Vietnamese participants did not avoid successfully ‘being marginalised’ in social interactions due to unequal power relations.

As Norton (2000) suggests, the success or failure of L2 learning depends on how well learners negotiate interactions (through their social roles) and impose the ‘right to be heard’, therefore becoming a legitimate subject of, and party to, a conversation. In this sense, the low rating of L2 experiences of participants can be understood as they had yet to become a full participant in social interactions, or successfully use their social roles to impose the ‘right to be heard’.

### **6.6.3 Overcoming stumbling blocks in intercultural communication**

The discussion in 6.4 shows that Vietnamese participants experienced five out of six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication as suggested by Barna (1998). Communicative competence, according to Barna (1998) is an inner capacity to overcome those stumbling blocks in communication (also see 2.7.3). Therefore, this helps explain why most Vietnamese participants were not satisfied with their communicative competence. However, Barna (1998) does not point out how to build the inner capacity as such; in other words, how to overcome those stumbling blocks in communication. Barna (1998) sees anxiety as a matter of fact when two people from different cultures meet. Norton (2000), however, understands anxiety as a result of unequal power relations. As discussed in 6.4.1, anxiety is most observed in communication with NS. Accordingly, anxiety will not exist when there is an equal relation of powers. The evidence to support this comes from participants’ interactions

with NNS. The suggestion that feeling ‘equal’ in communication can help individuals to manage their anxiety is found in accounts by Hoa and An (see 5.4.3.1) and Sang (5.4.2.2). For Hoa, the most important point in academic debates is how good the arguments or ideas are. Hoa admitted to language problems but she did not let them distract her from her objective of making herself understood. An also adopted a ‘positive’ attitude and was confident in her communication. Neither Hoa nor An treated their interactions as opportunities to learn English; but, rather, as socialising events, through which they developed a network of friends as they used to do back in Vietnam – they therefore placed themselves under much less pressure. Sang changed his view towards “*Western people*” since arriving in the UK. Whilst working in Vietnam, Western people were believed to be experts at work, earning much higher pay than Vietnamese nationals. However, since arriving in the UK, Sang realised that he was just as clever and competent as his British classmates. As a result, Sang felt more confident in interactions with NS.

Similarly, the finding that more interactions with NNS than with NS is attributed to unequal power relations can also be understood from the point of view of cultural differences in communication. Cultural dissonance was considered a problem in interactions with British interlocutors, and cultural and experiential similarity help to explain more frequent and ‘deeper’ interactions with fellow international students (although interactions with NNS were not seen as beneficial learning experience by Vietnamese participants [see 5.3.3]). Barna (1998) does not refer to cultural differences explicitly (all the six stumbling blocks are ‘anxiety’, ‘language and nonverbal misinterpretation’, ‘tendency to evaluate’, ‘assumption of similarity’ and ‘stereotypes’). Data therefore suggests Kim’s (1991) range of ‘stumbling blocks’ is also relevant. According to Kim (1991:259), intercultural communicative competence refers to “the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely cultural differences, and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, and the accompanying experience of stress” (also see 2.4). Discussion in this section (6.6.3) shows that there is data to confirm the ‘cultural differences’ and the ‘accompanying stress’. The ‘inter-group posture’ resembles Giles and Byrne’s (1982) Intergroup Model, and will be discussed in the next section.

#### 6.6.4 Self-identification in relations to groups

Barna (1998), by attributing L2 success or failure to individuals' abilities to overcome and manage 'shock' and to cultural distance in part reintroduces the centrality of 'the individual' to his/her L2 progress. Intergroup Model blends social level perspectives with individual level explanations and would explain variation in terms of the attractiveness of own-group formal and informal institutions and networks which either function as a bridge to intercultural interactions or a barrier to them. Variation in time spent speaking English – particularly the between-subject variation which is more pronounced – suggests that it is individuals themselves who exercise most influence over their L2 communication experiences albeit within a social world which constitutes a structuring backcloth and natural limits.

Yet there is also evidence that the different linguistic and cultural 'camps' identified in this research do interact – they are not sealed from each other. In fact the boundary is dynamic and Giles and Byrne (1982) is primarily interested in understanding the processes governing the interactions and movements that occur here – why, for example, are some people able to traverse the boundary more so than others? Lantolf (2000) and Trueba (1989) consider moving to a new culture/country as a challenge to one's self identification. According to Miller (2003), the identities of L2 learners are often linked to their first language when they travel away from their homeland. However, data collected runs contrary to this suggestion. The social role of 'Vietnamese' was ranked very low among participants in the main study (see 4.6). This can be explained by the fact that Vietnamese participants had difficulties relating to and expressing their Vietnamese identity during their early time in the UK. The finding that 'Vietnameseness' was not an important social identity supports Giles and Byrne's (1982) suggestion that the dynamism between two groups is strongest when they share similar cultural and linguistic features. However, diary and focus groups data suggest that participants in the pilot study, having resided in the UK for a longer time, claimed a stronger sense of 'Vietnameseness': once acclimatized, they were in a stronger position to express their cultural identity. There is data from the pilot study to show that 'Vietnamese' was chosen as one of the most important social roles (see 6.1.2). According to Phan Ngoc (1998), Vietnamese people have a strong sense of community (see 2.6.1). The personal identity of a Vietnamese person is shaped by

his/her relations with surrounding people. Upon travelling to the UK, Vietnamese students instantly experienced more limited interactions with other Vietnamese people: their interactions were divided unevenly between English and Vietnamese languages. Their sense of Vietnameseness was challenged by the unequal power relations in interactions with British people (ignorance about Vietnam, uninterest etc.) and made participants feel ‘inferior’ in their communication. Accounts from 5.4.2.2 show that only two participants (HN and HNG) asserted their Vietnamese identity during their L2 communications.

### **6.6.5 Individuals autonomy in L2 communication**

Six participants (Chau, Mi, Hoa, An, Sang and Tu) managed to access a significantly greater number of interactions than the others, mainly based on their interactions outside campus. They were proactive in their efforts to access L2 interactions (see 5.4.2) and/or accessed a greater number of interactions via key relationships (see 5.4.1). Mi, Hoa, and An are among the top three participants who ranked their L2 experience much higher than the rest of the group (see 4.5).

#### **6.6.5.1 Challenging the relationship between social roles and social interactions**

There is evidence asserting the importance of individual agency. To illustrate, Hoa and An reported occupying similar roles as other participants but they both report particularly high levels of L2 interactions. Similarly, Tu reported a higher than average number of social roles and L2 encounters, but only modest hours speaking English (see 4.2.1), whilst several other participants who also reported a higher than average number of social roles instead reported high levels of L2 engagement. These examples suggest that the influence of social roles on L2 interactions is probabilistic, not deterministic – either individual factors are likely to be influential or, alternatively, perhaps certain social roles are better than others in ‘unlocking’ speaking opportunities.

Norton (2000) does not discuss explicitly the issue of which social roles matter more in terms of accessing interaction opportunities, just that social roles are important because they facilitate or constrain learners’ efforts to impose the ‘right to be heard’. For example, taking the social roles of ‘Friend’ and ‘Boyfriend/Girlfriend’, it would

seem that the ‘right to be heard’ can be more comfortably asserted on boyfriends/girlfriends, compared to normal friends or strangers.

Diary data (see 4.2.2) therefore shows that individuals vary from one another in the number of hours of interactions over three months. The influence of social roles on the quantity of interactions is here challenged by the variation in hours spent speaking English among participants who reported identical or similar social roles. If social roles were significant in deciding if L2 learners can impose the ‘right to be heard’ (and therefore gain better access to the TL), Vietnamese participants who share similar social roles might be expected to report roughly the same level of interactions. However, Hoa and An do not fit this template. They managed to achieve more interactions (see 4.2.1) by being confident, positive and friendly, rather than by occupying a particularly efficacious role (see 4.6 and 5.4.3.1). Unlike Chau, Mi and Tu - who gained more access and/or L2 experience through their partners - Hoa and An were successful in opening up contacts via their ‘normal’ ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ status.

The above pattern suggests that the influence of social roles on Vietnamese student’s interactions does not ‘press’ evenly on participants. Non-student roles seem to be implicated in Chau, Mi and Tu’s total hours of speaking English because the figures for all three increased even during the Easter holidays. Data from the focus groups shows that their main interactions did not originate from the university, as was common with the other participants, and their speaking opportunities were not confined to university friends. Chau, Tu and Mi’s main sources of interactions were social events and speaking English with their partners. The significant between-subject variation coupled with relatively low within-subject monthly variation in L2 speaking hours suggests that participants were on their own individual and routinized interaction pathways.

Data to support Norton’s belief in the importance of social roles in daily interactions is especially pronounced in the cases of Chau, Mi and Tu - who were mainly reliant on partners for interactions. They did not experience a decrease in hours even when the university was closed (see 4.2.1). In fact Chau’s hours stayed the same while Mi’s



increased from 86 to 143 and to 202 in three months. A similar upward trend was found with Tu (33, 59 and 85). Their increased interactions can be explained by the fact that their main source of interactions came from their partners, which is immune from the closure of university. However, the importance of social roles *vis-à-vis* the quantity of interactions seems less important for the rest of the group (12 participants) who claimed ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ as their major social roles. Out of the 12 participants, seven did not experience considerable changes over the three months (including the last month). This means that their interactions were not affected by the shrinking availability of opportunities. Diary data (see 4.2.1) shows that there was reasonable stability amongst all 7 participants (Sang, Nga, Mai, Ly, Quynh, Thao and Chau) over the three months of data collection. This further confirms the above suggestion that participants constructed or slipped into personalised ways of gaining interactions, which seem to challenge the determinism of social roles. Habituation at the time participants were completing their diaries cannot be ruled out, but the data also suggests that the participants had routinised their lives and therefore their interaction patterns.

In contrast, the university closure does seem to have affected the rest of the group who also identified with the social roles of ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’. Five participants (Luyen, Ha, Hoa, An and Bac) experienced a decrease in the number of hours speaking English over three months (see 4.2.1). Most interestingly, this group includes those reporting both high and low levels of L2 encounters. Hoa and An - who were the most active in exploiting their social roles (as discussed in previous sections) - seem to have suffered significantly. Hoa’s interactions decreased by approximately 50% at the end of the three months, while An’s decreased by 30%. The decrease for those reporting low interactions was also dramatic. Ha’s interactions reduced by almost 50% and Bac’s by almost 90% (see 4.2.1). It is worth noting that the decrease in actual interactions over the three months was not significant (although it was perceived to be by participants themselves), which suggests a weak relationship between social roles and the quantity of interactions.

These variations in L2 interactions - in terms of quantity of interactions (see 4.2.1), the types of interlocutors (see 4.3) and the types of interactions (see 4.4) - shows that

sharing the same social roles can still produce different level of interactions. This suggests that acquiring certain social roles only is not enough to ‘impose the right to be heard’. In sum, the number of social roles reported does not unproblematically associate with either time spent speaking the L2 or the number of L2 encounters – this is not a crude numbers game. Participants reporting similar social roles also report very different L2 experiences. And finally, individual level variation remains pronounced – i.e. individual level explanations (of differing L2 experiences) may offer a better understanding than explanations adopting a social level perspective. For example, while Chau, Mi and Tu’s roles as partners made them feel ‘worthy’ to impose the ‘right to be heard’ on their boyfriend/girlfriend, Hoa and An felt confident in doing so with just their normal friends. Hoa and An had no particular explanations for their self-confidence; each remarked they had “*always been like that*” in interactions, whether interacting with Vietnamese or British people. Therefore, I suggest that individuals’ personalities/characteristics seem to play an important role in their construction of identities and accessing of interaction opportunities.

However, much variation in L2 encounters may also be attributed to individual agency. An exhaustive account of the individual characteristics likely to influence L2 interactions reported by participants in this research is beyond the remit of this thesis but includes: existing L2 skills; porosity to/interest in UK culture; motivation (to improve the L2); resourcefulness; resilience and the capacity for cultural learning – and even good luck.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Chapter 6 has discussed key observations regarding the quantity and quality of interactions. The observations were explained in light of three theories: power relations (Norton, 2000), six ‘stumbling blocks’ in intercultural communication (Barna, 1998), and the Intergroup Model (Giles and Byrne, 1982).

Social roles were found helpful in explaining the quantity of interactions. Most participants had experienced limited hours of speaking English. This was linked to their interactions on campus, which in turn is shaped by their ‘studentness’. Some participants, however, were found to have accessed greater opportunities than the rest

of the group. They had made efforts to negotiate additional social roles ('Friend' and 'Boyfriend'/Girlfriend') to tap into further layers of interactions. However, there are aspects of the patterning of interactions that cannot easily be explained just by social roles: the individual variation in interactions over time, and the individual stability in interactions regardless of the reduction in opportunities to speak English. A relationship between social interactions and social roles is observed, but not *vis-a-vis* all participants; which suggests the relationship may not be significant or deterministic and is certainly not felt equally across the researched sample.

Giles and Byrne's Intergroup model (1982) is supported by much of the data. There is clear evidence that the Vietnamese participants were spending disproportionately large amounts of time with fellow Vietnamese students and with other international students with whom they believed they shared key linguistic problems and cultural reference points. Data has also shown that Vietnamese students felt culturally distant from British people. But Giles and Byrne also acknowledge that intergroup mingling also occurs - different cultural and linguistic 'camps' are not sealed from one another. The data shows that certain Vietnamese participants were able to move in and out of these 'camps' more easily than others for various individualised reasons. Evidence that linguistic and cultural differences shaped the patterning of intergroup relations was quite strong. The Vietnamese participants alluded to a range of practical language related problems which acted as a deterrent to greater interactions with native speakers. There was also evidence of cultural stereotyping at work, with participants believing that some British people were impatient and uninterested in Asian and Vietnamese cultures, etc.

Barna (1998) claims six 'stumbling blocks' which influence the communicating patterns by affecting the extent to which individuals perceived a particular interaction to be successful and therefore influencing his or her propensity to seek out further interaction opportunities. Of Barna's six stumbling blocks, five blocks - 'language differences', 'anxiety', 'tendency to evaluate', 'language', 'assumption of similarity' and 'stereotypes' - were particularly helpful in explaining participants' interaction experiences. Focus group data, for example, suggested individuals struggled to communicate ideas, particularly complex ones, and much interaction was confined to

undemanding exchanges. There is also much evidence of individuals struggling to understand what native speakers were saying. However, Vietnamese participants felt more relaxed speaking English with other non-native speakers. Barna's stumbling block of 'anxiety' may help to explain this phenomenon: the Vietnamese reported feeling more comfortable speaking English to other non-native speakers and less embarrassed at making mistakes. In other words, they felt as if they were on a much more 'equal footing' with NNS interlocutors compared to NS interlocutors.

This idea of feeling 'equal to' links in with Norton's belief that power is central to understanding social interactions, and that L2 learners must feel/must be considered 'worthy to listen' and 'worthy to speak'. For Norton, power is related to and flows from the social roles that people occupy. Since people occupy different social roles, we would therefore expect a complex patterning of interactions but at the same time commonality where people share the same key roles. The data shows that despite sharing similar roles, people reported different interaction experiences both in terms of quantity and quality of interactions. Individual testimonies are able to provide reasons for these variations. Indeed, the most striking observation concerns the extent of individual variation coupled with an apparent routinisation of interaction over a protracted period. This suggests that the power to make oneself heard may not stem purely from social roles but rather may also be attributable to – or filtered via – individual characteristics and the specificities of individuals' lived realities.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions and Implications

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#### 7.1 The research overview

In Chapter 2 - Literature review, I discussed the current trend in SLA research that L2 learners' identities and the L2 learning process are related. In other words, the concept of identity is considered one of the 'keys' to 'unlock' the door to the understanding and explanations of the L2 learning experience. I have also explained one of the main aims of this research (see Chapter 1) is to respond to this trend in SLA research by exploring the relationship of L2 learners' identity and their language learning process by focusing on an under-researched group: Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments. This is 'opening the context of identity research' as called for by Block (2007). Unlike most research on identity and SLA - whose participants are mainly immigrants - this research focuses on young intellectuals with middle-class backgrounds, who were in a pursuit of MA degrees. The participants' backgrounds and the context of the research is thus fundamentally different from much SLA/identity-based research which is either focused on immigrants.

This research aims to explore the relationship between the identity of L2 learners and their self-perceived L2 communicative competence. Therefore, in Chapter 2, these two concepts - identity and communicative competence - were discussed and defined. For the concept of identity, much of the research is based on Norton's (2000) definition of social identity which maintains that individuals make sense of their L2 learning process in relation to social identity. SLA literature on identity is conceptually and terminologically confusing, but Norton suggests a good way to understand the concept of 'social identity' is to understand the power relations which are realised in normal social interactions. In other words, the 'fluidity' of identity - the source of much confusion - is 'captured' by understanding how 'power' is manifested in daily interactions. Here I have formulated two research questions.

1. Which types of identities are reported by Vietnamese students in UK higher education establishments? (answered in 6.2)
2. How - if at all - is identity implicated in Vietnamese students' interactions in the English language? (answered in 6.3)

The first research question attempts to establish the types of identities reported by Vietnamese participants and is partly in response to the existing confusion regarding the types of identities that exist. The second question seeks to establish which identities are relevant to L2 learning and then to understand how these identities impact on the types of interaction that L2 learners have. However, interactions may serve as a filter only, as suggested by Norton (2000), and the final target of the research is to understand how identity is implicated in participants' communicative competence.

Here, Barna's (1998) definition is helpful. According to Barna, a person who can successfully overcome six key stumbling blocks is considered to have achieved communicative competence. This is the third research question:

3. Does the possession/construction of identity affect an individual's own sense of intercultural communicative competence? If so, how? (answered in 6.6)

In order to answer these questions, a mixed method approach is adopted. The justification of the use of mixed methods is described in Chapter 3 – Methodology. The use of quantitative methods is relatively uncommon in identity-based and SLA research. A pilot study on the use of a daily diary (see 3.9) was conducted. The result showed that quantitative data from self-completed diaries can be used to answer the research questions. Therefore, the use of self-completed diaries as a quantifiable tool was adopted again in the main study. The mixed methods approach is found helpful in answering the research questions. Qualitative data from focus groups and quantitative data from the diaries can be triangulated to test the validity of data collected from each of the sources (see Chapter 6). Not only is the reliability of the data reinforced but also the 'measurement' of the two key concepts - identity and communicative competence

- was capable of being expressed, presented and analysed in both numbers and words. This also means that the relationship between identity and communicative competence can be explored from both angles. However, due to a small sample size, extensive inferences based on quantitative statistical tests were not possible. This will be discussed further (see 7.4.1) in this chapter as a limitation of this research.

## **7.2 Main conclusions**

There are six main conclusions which will be discussed in detail below.

### **7.2.1 The link between identity and social interactions**

There are both findings supporting and contesting the relationship between identity and social interactions. On the pro-side, the first piece of evidence comes from the ranking of social roles that participants felt important (see 6.4.2.1). Social roles seem to be shaped by the social settings that participants occupied. Because most interactions were taking place on one of two university campuses, the highest ranked social roles were ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ (see 4.6). The second evidence is that some types of social roles appear to help participants to ‘impose the right to be heard’ and achieve more interactions (number of hours). Students who reported the social roles of ‘Boyfriend/girlfriend’ for example reported more social interactions than those who just reported the social roles of ‘Friend/student’ (see 6.4.2.1). However, the relationship between social roles and social interactions possibly appears weak (see 6.4.2.2) because only *some* social roles were positively correlated with *some* (aspects of) social interactions.

In fact there are several findings contesting the link between identity and social interactions. The first evidence is that the variation in total hours of interactions is marked more by individual differences, not just those based on occupation/non-occupation of particular social roles: participants who reported similar social roles were reporting wildly dissimilar interaction experiences (see 6.4.2.2). In fact the most striking observation is not that individuals who share the same social roles experience roughly the same L2 communication experience (see 6.4.2.2). Therefore, it is suggested social roles alone do not yet adequately explain the patterning of participants’ behaviours or the confidence they exhibit in their endeavours to gain

opportunities to speak English. Data shows that the influence of social roles on Vietnamese student's interactions may not have applied evenly to all participants (see 6.4.2.2). The individual variation (see 4.2.2) and individual routinisation in social interactions (4.2.3) suggest that few participants constructed and/or 'fell' into highly individualised modes of accessing interactions.

### **7.2.2 Implications of power relations in social interactions**

Norton (2000) describes four ways in which power relations can be reflected in social interactions. There is evidence that Vietnamese participants experienced unequal power relations (see 6.3.2). The first concerns the 'Lion's share' of effort which L2 learners must contribute when conversing with TL speakers. The second refers to the 'Ambivalent attitudes of TL speakers'. The third way is the 'Catch 22' (where participants reported that they felt being judged whilst practicing English). There is focus group evidence confirming the presence of the manifestations of 'power', especially in interactions with NS speakers (see 5.3.2.1). This confirms Norton's (2000) central argument that power relations are central to understanding social interactions.

Nevertheless, similar to the link between social roles and social interactions, power relations were not experienced or interpreted in the same way by all participants. For each of the four ways in which 'power' is manifest in interactions there were few individuals who 'bucked' the trend and saw things differently (see 5.4.3). This possibly suggests that those individual constructed identities which might help them 'escape' the power relations. Power relations undoubtedly exist within social interactions; and power relations can help understand the majority of participant's identities in relation to their L2 communication. However, just as social roles do not absolutely determine the types of interactions everyone will have, the power relations manifested during interactions do not mean that everyone will experience and interpret the same type of interaction identically. Thus participants with the same identity report different interaction experiences and even people with the same identities in identical interactions may possibly experience and respond to these encounters differently. So in terms of understanding the types of interactions that L2



learners have and their conduct within these interactions the conclusion is that identity remains a helpful tool, however there are few exceptional cases.

### **7.2.3 The link between social roles and communicative competence**

The inter-mingling of power relations and social roles in social interactions described by Norton have been observed in my participants' social interactions. Power relations and social roles - which are assumed to influence the L2 learners' identity and also to influence how L2 learners view communication process - are supported from the data. Immigrants in Norton's (2000) research were described as being upset and angry by their limited social roles and by the loss of their social status which was due to asymmetrical power relations in social interactions. The Vietnamese participants seem to have experienced similar asymmetry of power (see 6.3.2), and limited social roles (see 4.6) and in terms of outcomes they rated their experience of speaking English rather low for most participants (see 4.5). This is interesting in that as students, participants paid to be conditioned to study in the UK, but they still faced roughly similar problems in communications as immigrants. This supports findings from Boxer's (2002) research on the communication of international students in the TL environment.

### **7.2.4 Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication and communicative competence**

Of the six stumbling blocks that Barna (1998) identifies, five stumbling blocks have been found relevant to the experiences of Vietnamese participants: language differences, assumption of similarities, tendency to evaluate, anxiety and stereotyping (see 6.4). According to Barna communicative competence is the inner capacity of a person to overcome 'stumbling blocks' in intercultural communication. This is confirmed by those participants who reported fewer difficulties in overcoming the five stumbling blocks also reporting more positive self-perceived communicative competence (see 6.6.5). However, Barna does not provide an explanation of why some participants are able to overcome the stumbling blocks more successfully than others; and does not really acknowledge that different people may interpret each stumbling block differently. Accordingly, there is evidence that participants varied in the way they perceived Barna's 'stumbling blocks': Hoa (see 5.4.3.1) provides an

example of how different people interpret and respond to setbacks differently. Also Barna was not explicit whether or not the six stumbling blocks represent an exhaustive list. Discussion in 6.6.3 shows that there is one more stumbling block ('cultural differences'), suggested by Kim (1991), is supported by the data collected while not covered in Barna's (1998) list.

### **7.2.5 Giles & Byrne (1982) Intergroup Model**

The data (see 6.5) generally supports Giles and Byrne's suggestion that socio-cultural and linguistic factors can 'bind' people together, creating culturally-based linguistic 'camps' for people to belong to. Vietnamese participants did spend a lot of time with other Vietnamese students and also reported enjoying the company of other non-native speakers with whom they shared certain important cultural reference points and L2 problems. VietSoc is an example of how such 'camps' can become formalised. However, there is obviously movement in and out of these 'camps'. Some participants found it easier than others to step out of their linguistic/cultural camp and/or invite others in, reinforcing the view that these are 'camps' not fortresses. Nevertheless, given the research context – young Vietnamese early-career professionals with sub-optimal L2 in the UK – it is surprising just how little they report feeling 'Vietnamese' or 'Asian'. Similarly, there is evidence that some participants felt and experienced 'Other' during certain encounters but, again, this is remarkably limited. VietSoc was much better organised in Leeds than in York and the Vietnamese student population in Leeds was better resourced and established too, but there was no real evidence suggesting that the York participants L2 learning and/or interaction experiences were qualitatively different to the Leeds participants.

### **7.2.6 Individual autonomy in interactions**

Findings from focus groups (5.4.3) and from the diary (4.2.2) suggest there are few participants who escaped the general trends of L2 social interactions of the whole group. Section 6.6.5 shows that several individuals seek to exercise control over their social interactions. They do this with varying degrees of success and with various objectives in mind and by adopting various strategies. 'Power', identity, the strength of socio-linguistic ties and obstacles to L2 learning are experienced differentially.

Similarly, for each key finding there can be different interpretations according to which theoretical viewpoint is being adopted. For example, the disproportionately high level of interaction with other non-native speakers (see 4.3.8) accords with all three theories. Norton would view this as a tendency to avoid interactions with native speakers which would position the Vietnamese as underdogs in an encounter defined by asymmetrical power relations. Giles and Byrne's (1982) Intergroup Model would see this as a product of the dynamism that exists between a subordinate group (Vietnamese/NNS) and a dominant group (British/NS). Finally, Barna (1998) might interpret it as evidence of participants seeking to minimise or avoid altogether the effects of one or more obstacles to communicative competence.

### **7.3 Implications and suggestions**

#### **7.3.1 Suggestions for Vietnamese students**

There are four suggestions for Vietnamese students who would like to pursue a postgraduate degree in the UK or in an English – speaking country.

##### **7.3.1.1 Native English – speaking environment is not a ‘golden opportunity’ to improve oral proficiency as many believe**

Prospective Vietnamese students to a UK university should be aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘golden opportunity’ to practice English in the UK (see 5.2.1.1). They should understand that physically being in the UK does not mean that they are automatically exposed to lots of opportunities to practice English (see 4.2.1.1). Further, even if they are this will not automatically lead to an improvement in their English proficiency or speaking skills (see 5.5). After 6 months in the UK most participants remained unhappy with the opportunities to speak English that they had. Norton (2000) describes L2 learners as ‘investors’ who have expectations commensurate with their investment. This faulty assumption caused tangible disappointment and frustration (see 5.5.4). Norton believes that if investors do not get what they expect from their investment, they will stop investing. This was not universally so – individuals respond differently to setbacks – but withdrawals from interactions were observed in the cases of Luyen, Sang and Bac (see 5.3.2.1). Even though it was not proven statistically, the focus group data suggests that participants with the highest expectations experienced the greatest level of disappointment when

those expectations were not realised e.g. Mai (see 5.5.1). Prospective Vietnamese students need to be more realistic in terms of their expected outcomes and ‘vision’ of what life in the UK will be like.

### **7.3.1.2 Vietnamese students need to be active in communication interactions**

The second implication flows from that above. Prospective Vietnamese students must have a more realistic awareness of the actual L2-practicing opportunities that exist in the UK, and should be more active in their daily communication. Ha and Ly reported insufficient support from their university to be able to socialise more (see 5.2.2.1). Mai and Luyen felt unhappy with the British peoples’ apparent lack of interest in them and they expected a more hospitable host (see 5.3.2.1). These realisations clearly affected these participants, because they were amongst those with the lowest total hours of interactions (see 4.2.1). Their passivity was therefore not helpful. Instead of looking for external support from the host (here meaning the University and the British people) Hoa and An were proactive and initiated opportunities to practice English (see 5.4.3). Therefore, it is suggested that prospective students should be prepared to be more active in their communication interactions at university or elsewhere. In addition, Vietnamese participants should more readily accept responsibility for their own communication experiences in the UK.

### **7.3.1.3 Vietnamese students should better prepared for differences**

This suggestion is based on accounts from Sang, Thao and Mai (see 5.3.2). Sang reported that he had fairly extensive prior encounters with western people and cultures (through English language training and working in Vietnam), so he did not experience any ‘cultural shocks’ as such. However, it was still not easy to accept differences (cultural, values, etc.) from interlocutors. Thao and Mai found it impossible to understand and tolerate the cultural differences which were observed in the behaviours of Western students. Therefore, prospective students should try to see things from a non-judgemental perspective whilst studying abroad. This attitude will enable them to access more interactions, and be active participants in them.

#### **7.3.1.4 Vietnamese students should ensure their English proficiency is adequate before coming to the UK**

To be accepted at a UK university, all participants must have achieved a required level of English proficiency. However, passing the IELTS or TOEFL tests does not guarantee that they will not have any problems with the English language. Variations in the British accent, the speed at which NS talk and participants' own limited vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation are two main problems that participants reported in their communication (see 5.3.1). Bac and Thao also felt that their weaker language proficiency caused them to lose several academic debates (also 5.3.1). In daily conversations, although the participants' lack of English language proficiency was a source of frustration, it was only rarely viewed as a *major* obstacle except for those who already had one or more of the problems listed in 5.3.2. In these circumstances, limited English proficiency represented an additional burden. This is interesting also because it suggests a social model of SLA, in which communicative competence is perceived not as the product of individuals' own abilities, but rather the way he/she is viewed and treated and supported in the external environment.

### **7.3.2 Suggestions for Vietnamese and British educators**

#### **7.3.2.1. Better Institutional Support**

This suggestion is based on the accounts provided by some participants in 5.2.2.2 regarding the inadequacy of their university's support in terms of creating appropriate socialising opportunities for international students. Some participants reported that many events centred around alcohol consumption and were culturally-sensitive. They were therefore considered unsuitable and uninteresting by Vietnamese students. British universities – and their student bodies - should take into account the nature of socialising events for international students. For Vietnamese educators and those who are providing services for prospective students it may be useful to provide some kind of orientation to Vietnamese students *before* they leave Vietnam so that they acquire a better understanding of British culture, customs and practice. Currently, UK universities do organise orientation courses for international students before the start of term but these events often involve considerable time and expense and so are not easily affordable to Vietnamese students. It is suggested that UK universities link up with business partners in Vietnam to organise orientation courses in Vietnam which can be more easily accessed by Vietnamese students.

### 7.3.3 Implications for research on identity

Norton (2000) and other SLA researchers describe identity as a ‘fluid’ concept which is problematic to define and classify (see 2.3.1). The research confirms that identity is a difficult concept to work with. The first problem is that it is context –sensitive which means different contexts will foreground different identities. In fact, there are no two identical contexts (Block, 2003) which means *all* research on identity is contextually different and susceptible to generating unique results that are hard to generalise. It also means it is difficult for novice researchers on identity to incorporate results from other research into their own.

Even though a limited relationship between Identity and communicative competence has been established (see 2.5), findings in this research suggest a possibly weaker relationship between identities and communicative competence than it is emphasised in the literature. Evidence for this weaker relationship is found in the individual variation in their L2 communication experience (see 5.4.3 and 6.6.5). One possible explanation for this is that unlike other research on identity, my participants were not immigrants. They were students with middle-class backgrounds. Therefore, the power relations that Norton suggests as the key factor in understanding the identity of her immigrant participants, were less relevant in Vietnamese students whose social roles were already established. Although clearly ‘better-off’ than poor immigrants facing uncertain futures, my Vietnamese participants still had to struggle and negotiate. On this, at least, my research correlates with Norton’s: learning is a site of struggle.

### 7.3.4 Implication for methodology in research on identity

In terms of methodology, mixed methods are relatively uncommon in identity/SLA research. Most research on identity is based on qualitative methods (Chapter 3-Methodology). One possible scepticism over the use of quantitative methods in identity/SLA research is how can exact numbers be used to measure the ‘fluid’ concept of identity? Communicative competence however has been quantifiably measured by Macintyre and Charos (1996). Therefore, the research is an attempt to further test the workability of quantitative methods. Without the help of quantitative methods, the research could have not reached several interesting findings relevant to SLA research. In addition, the triangulation process between qualitative and

quantitative data (see Chapter 6) can be considered an effective means of testing the validity and reliability of the data. Therefore mixed methods are recommended for other future SLA research on identity.

## **7.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

### **7.4.1 Limitations of the study**

The first limitation of the research is the small sample size (14 participants in the main study). Chapter 3 justified the choice of a small sample size in order to enable an in-depth analysis of each participant over a period of 3 months. This suits the purpose for collection of data through self-completed diaries and focus group interviews on a regular basis. However, the small sample size also means that any quantitative tests can not be generalised. Any results, however, are still relevant in terms of explaining phenomena within the actual sample (Field, 2006). Even so, the small sample size made it impossible to conduct extensive inferential statistical tests which could have revealed more about the relationships between social roles, interactions and communicative competence (see Appendices I and J). Also explained in Chapter 3 – Methodology, participants took part in the research on a voluntary basis. However, they had to be committed to keep a daily diary. In addition, they were required to attend regular focus groups over a three-month period. As a novice researcher, I was more comfortable with handling smaller sample size during a process of three months.

The second limitation of the research is that the process of recruiting Vietnamese participants was conducted through the Vietnamese societies in two different cities in North of England. Due to limited resources, the researcher could not collect data from other locations (e.g. the South of England, Scotland or Wales, for example). The two chosen locations were within reasonable travelling distance of my home. It may be possible that the researcher's own resource limitations resulted in a sample comprising of participants who were not necessarily representative of the wider Vietnamese student population in the UK.

The third limitation of the research was that it was largely conducted by one researcher – so it can not avoid personal subjectivity. However, I overcame this to my best ability by recruiting a volunteer independent Vietnamese research student to

conduct a parallel exercise after which we compared results. It is, of course, possible to argue that it would have been better to employ a professional reader/analyst in the process.

#### **7.4.2 Suggestions for further research**

Research on SLA and identity should expand to embrace more contexts, more identities, more (and different) groups of L2 learners and different TL speakers. Also there should be more comparative research in the future between Vietnamese students in different courses (undergraduate, MA and PhD) in different locations in the UK; preferably across the UK. The aim should be to capture and understand the experiences of students with different backgrounds, ages, and lengths of stay in the UK, etc. which may be interesting variables with which to measure the relationship between their identity and communicative competence. Also future research could look at Vietnamese participants (both students and immigrants) in different English speaking contexts (Australia, Canada, America) to establish the dynamism between the main groups and subordinate groups; and to explore the importance of ‘stumbling blocks’ in communication.

In terms of methodology, more time-series research adopting mixed methods with a larger sample size is suggested. This will be difficult to manage especially with qualitative data, but quantifiable data may make it possible to explore the relationship between identity and communicative competence more systematically. Methodologically it may be a good idea to divide this research into two components, each using either qualitative methods or quantitative methods, but each featuring an appropriate (stratified) random sample of participants. Findings can be compared and contrasted to see which methods yield what kind of findings and which method is most efficient in answering the research questions.

To sum up, the findings of the research suggest that identity of L2 learners can help make sense of their communicative competence, though individual perspective should be taken into account. The interplay of power relations and social roles seem as important among Vietnamese, young, intellectual, middle-class students as the working class immigrants, as discussed in the literature. It is also suggested in this



research that identity is a context sensitive concept. Therefore, I advocate Block's (2003) call for widening the context in the field of identity to develop a better understanding of this concept and the link between identity (of L2 learners) and their language learning process.

## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment letter for Pilot study (translation from Vietnamese)**

Dear Vietnamese students,

My name is Tong Tuyet Dung, a PhD student in the department of Educational Studies University of York. I would like to invite you to a focus group of 6-8 students. It will be an informal discussion about your experience as an English speaking learner in the UK. The time and place are at your convenience but I am suggesting the last week of .... (May 2008). The session is expected to last within an hour but you can leave early if you wish.

Your ideas are very valuable, please do come along.

Please reply to:

Tong Tuyet Dung (07847572875)

Email: [tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk)

The Department of Educational Studies

University of York

Thank you and look forward to hearing from you soon.

## Appendix B

### Interview schedule for pilot focus group 1

1. How do you describe your experience of practicing English speaking skills in the UK?
2. Please tell me more about it ...
3. How often do you speak English?
  - When and where?
  - With whom?
4. How much do you think such interactions help you improve your speaking skill?
5. How do you feel when you speak English with: native speakers ?  
non native speakers?
6. In which situation or with whom do you feel most comfortable/uncomfortable speaking English? Why?
7. Do you think your English speaking skills have been improved? Why (not)?
8. What are the problems (advantages)?

- END-

## Appendix C

### Guidance for Diary Completion

I would like to know:

- how long you speak English per day (in total estimation)
- who you speak it with and if they are native or non-native speakers
- the type of interactions you had
- your overall rating of each day's experience of speaking English
- if you have any comments or anything you think it is important for me to know, Please put it down in "notes" column.

Detailed guidance

#### **Column 1: How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?**

Please tick the box that best describes how many hours in total you spent speaking English on this day.

#### **Column 2: Which of the following *best* describes who you spoke English with today?**

Please tick as many boxes as apply. Against those categories that you have ticked, please indicate whether they were native English speakers (N) or non-native English speakers (NN). If you are unsure whether someone is a native speaker or not, please circle (DN) for Don't Know. Again, please circle as many as apply. Native speakers are defined as those whose first language is English.

#### **Column 3: When speaking English, which 'types' of interactions have you experienced today?**

Please tick as many boxes as apply.

- small talk: is a short, polite and trivial conversation with a stranger or relative stranger
- simple transactions and negotiations: such as when shopping or ordering food in a café and when you have an 'objective' or desired outcome.

- Complex transactions and negotiations: such as when you are debating or arguing or explaining complex matters
- Academic discussion and presentation: typically associated with university/classrooms.
- Socialising: Forming and maintaining friendships and acquaintances.
- Learning English: self - explanatory.

**Column 4: How do you rate your experience today in general?**

Please indicate whether your experience for the whole day was positive or negative or in-between. The criteria you adopt for this assessment is up to you but *may* include:

- whether you felt confident to start speaking
- whether you felt listened to
- whether your views were respected
- whether you were adequately understood
- if you had any objectives, whether these were achieved
- whether your use of the English language was helpfully or unhelpfully criticised/corrected

The above is not an exhaustive list.

Use whatever criteria you choose, and feel free to use more than one.

You may find that a single encounter was a mixture of positive and negative experiences: for example, you may have felt you were understood, but your views not treated seriously. There is no formula for determining what mixture of good and bad leads an individual encounter to be judged positive or negative.

Similarly, there is no formula for determining whether 4 ‘very positive’ individual experiences offsets two ‘negative’ experiences elsewhere to produce an overall ‘positive’ rating for the day!

**Please use your judgment in both instances – there is no right or wrong answer. I will talk to you about your answers to these questions at the monthly meeting.**

At the end of the week, you are asked to indicate which social roles you feel you have occupied. A list of roles is provided. It is not an exhaustive list. Please feel free to add additional roles. You are asked to rank them in order of those you feel you have occupied the most.

I'm not simply interested in those roles that you choose for yourself. I'm also interested in roles that you think have been imposed upon you. They might be either wanted or unwanted. The interviewer will want to explore these issues with you when you meet.

-END-

(Note: This guidance is also available in Vietnamese language to offer participants of the research)

## Appendix D

### Interview schedule for pilot focus group 2

#### A. General background:

1. Can you all please briefly introduce yourself ?

#### B. Participants' evaluation of their speaking skill:

2. How much are you happy with your current speaking skill?

Why (not)?

What are the difficulties/problems (if any)?

What are the advantages (if any)?

#### C. Participants identity:

3. In which situation/conditions you think your speaking skill were improved most?

Why do you think so?

#### D. Opportunities to practice speaking English:

4 How do you evaluate the opportunities of practicing speaking English in the UK?

How much have you taken advantage of being in the UK to practice speaking English?

#### E. Participants' views of ideal ways to improve speaking skill:

5. What advice would you give to a Vietnamese who is planning to come over here or just arrives in order to help him/her improve speaking skill?

-END-

## **Appendix E**

### **Recruitment letter for main study (translation from Vietnamese language)**

Dear Vietnamese students,

My name is Tong Tuyet Dung, a PhD student in the department of Educational Studies University of York. I would like to invite you to take part in the research about the experience of Vietnamese students in improving English speaking skill in the UK.

The study involves daily diary completion in three months. I have designed a diary template which can be completed less than 5 minutes per day. I will travel to Leeds to meet you every 4 weeks to collect diary and hold an informal group discussion. Each discussion is expected to last within 1 hour but you can leave early as you wish. Time and place of meeting will be at your convenience.

I can ensure that none informants or information provided will be identified or identifiable.

Your participation in my research is very valuable.

Please reply to:

Tong Tuyet Dung (07847572875)

Email: [tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk)

The Department of Educational Studies

University of York

Thank you and look forward to hearing from you soon.



## Appendix F

### Consent Form

I agree to participate in the research about the experience of Vietnamese student in improving their speaking skill in the UK by Tong Tuyet Dung, PhD student in the Department of Educational Studies, University of York.

I understand that I can withdraw at anytime during the process of research.

I also understand that information disclosed by myself in the diary and interviews may be used in Tong Tuyet Dung's publications and presentations deriving from the research.

I hereby renounce any claim to copyright as the author of the information.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### Diary Template for Pilot Study

**Week 1:** commencing (dd/mm/2009)

	How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?	Which of the following <b>best</b> describes who you spoke English with today?  <i>(circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers)</i>	When speaking English, which ‘types’ of interactions have you experienced today?  <i>(tick as many as apply)</i>	How do you rate your experience <b>today</b> in general?	Note
<b>MON</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>TUE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative	

	less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>WED</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive <input type="checkbox"/> positive <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative <input type="checkbox"/> negative <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>THUR</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive <input type="checkbox"/> positive <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative <input type="checkbox"/> negative <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

	<input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)		
<b>FRI</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	
<b>SAT</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

		<input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)		
<b>SUN</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less  <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours	<input type="checkbox"/> students N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff/academic N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/businesses N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authority N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N / NN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative	

Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week?	
Please rank them, putting '1' alongside the role that most applies, '2' alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Man	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent
<input type="checkbox"/> Woman	<input type="checkbox"/> Employee
<input type="checkbox"/> Student	<input type="checkbox"/> Sexual
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Young Person
<input type="checkbox"/> Mature Person	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)
<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	-----
-----	

Thank you for completing the diary

-END-

## **Appendix H**

### **Diary Template for Main Study**

#### **Diary**

Name:

Thank you very much for agreeing to keep this diary

If you have any questions, please contact me:

Tong Tuyet Dung  
[tt511@york.ac.uk](mailto:tt511@york.ac.uk) or

07847 572 875 (just send me a text, I will phone you back) or

add my yahoo messenger name: tongtuyetdung

Thanks again

Dung Tong

Week:                    commencing (                    /                    /2009)

	How long would you say you have spoken English for today, in total?	Which of the following <b>best</b> describes who you spoke English with today?  <i>(circle as many that applies: N for Native and NN for Non-native speakers)</i>	When speaking English, which 'types' of interactions have you experienced today?  <i>(tick as many as apply)</i>	How do you rate your experience of speaking English <b>today</b> in general?	Please describe here briefly the reason why you have chosen the rating scales in the column on the left
<b>M O N</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses    N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty        N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate)  -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Other (please indicate) -----	

<p><b>T U E</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<b>W E D</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines sses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Othesr (please indicate) -----	

<b>T H U R</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines sses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Others (please indicate) -----	

<p><b>F R I</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<p><b>S A T</b></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> not at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Small talk</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Academic discussions and presentations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Socialising</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Learning English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> negative</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very negative</p> <p>Others (please indicate)</p> <p>-----</p>	
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<b>S U N</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour or less <input type="checkbox"/> 3 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 5 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> 7 hours or less <input type="checkbox"/> more than 7 hours Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> students N/ NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> university staff /academic N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> shops/banks/busines ses N / NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> government/authori ty N /NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare staff N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> friends N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> strangers N NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> work colleagues N/NN/DN  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> Small talk  <input type="checkbox"/> Simple transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Complex transactions and negotiations  <input type="checkbox"/> Academic discussions and presentations  <input type="checkbox"/> Socialising  <input type="checkbox"/> Learning English  <input type="checkbox"/> Others (please indicate) -----	<input type="checkbox"/> very positive  <input type="checkbox"/> positive  <input type="checkbox"/> mixture of positive and negative  <input type="checkbox"/> neither negative or positive  <input type="checkbox"/> negative  <input type="checkbox"/> very negative  Others (please indicate) -----	

Which of the following Social Roles do you think you have adopted or have been given to you this week?

Please rank them, putting ‘1’ alongside the role that most applies, ‘2’ alongside the next and so on. Fill as many boxes as you think appropriate.

<input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese
<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature Person
<input type="checkbox"/> Sexual	<input type="checkbox"/> Employee	<input type="checkbox"/> Student
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Young Person	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate) .....		

Is there anything you think important this week to let me know, please make a note here and I will discuss with you in details when we meet.

Thank you for completing the diary

-END-

# Appendix I

## Test of correlations

This is an attempt to explore the relationship between social roles, social interactions and (self-perception of) communicative competence is presented in three sections: (1) social roles and social interactions; (2) social roles and communicative competence; (3) social interactions and communicative competence. The tables report the Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients for a range of variables and their significance. Pearson's *r* is a parametric test suitable for normally distributed data (Field, 2007). Most of the variables were normally distributed. However, the sample size is sub-optimal (14), therefore the following analysis is presented here as a 'flawed experiment'.

### 1. Understanding the links between social roles and interactions

#### 1.1 Social roles and 'types' of interlocutors

**Table 1: Correlations between social roles and interlocutors: overall results**

Interlocutors	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Students	.265	-.288	-.231	-.319	-.317	-.104	.242
	.360	.318	.427	.266	.269	.722	.404
University/academic staff	.551*	-.389	-.179	-.300	-.156	-.168	.401
	.041	.169	.541	.298	.593	.565	.155
Shops/banks/business	.550*	-.073	.295	-.319	.330	.205	.001
	.041	.805	.306	.266	.249	.481	.999
Government officials	.158	.307	.027	-.129	.368	-.143	-.230
	.588	.285	.927	.660	.196	.625	.429
Health workers	.650*	-.184	.533*	.099	.149	.406	-.280
	.012	.530	.050	.735	.611	.149	.332
Friends	.351	-.298	.166	.119	.172	.167	-.088
	.218	.300	.571	.684	.557	.568	.766
Strangers	.226	.495	-.102	-.239	.446	-.322	-.182
	.438	.072	.727	.411	.110	.261	.534
Colleagues	-.070	-.133	-.518	.580*	.015	.135	-.145
	.812	.650	.058	.030	.961	.645	.622
Native interlocutors	.377	-.166	.051	-.055	.358	.196	-.044
	.184	.571	.863	.852	.209	.502	.880
Non-native interlocutors	.693**	-.212	-.070	-.222	-.301	-.131	.057
	.006	.466	.812	.447	.296	.654	.846

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The two highest ranked social roles are 'Friend' and 'Student' (see 4.6). However, Table 1 shows that 'Friend' correlates with one type of interlocutor only: a medium positive correlation with 'Healthworkers' ( $r=.533$ ). 'Student' did not correlate with any interlocutors. In other words, the two most frequently reported social roles appear to be unrelated to whom participants spoke with. Instead, 'Female' seems to have the most (significant and positive) correlations. The overall three month coefficients show that feeling 'Female' is positively correlated with four types of interlocutors: 'University/academic staff' ( $r=.551$ ); 'Shop/bank/business staff' ( $r=.550$ ); 'Health workers' ( $r=.650$ ); 'Non-native interlocutors' ( $r=.693$ ).

'Male', 'Student', 'Vietnamese', 'Asian' did not correlate with any interlocutor types. This is surprising as they are all fixed and/or key social roles indicating participants' gender ('Male'), their reasons for being in the UK ('Student'), their ethnicity and nationality ('Vietnamese' and 'Asian').

No social roles correlated with the following types of interlocutors: 'Native interlocutors', 'Friends', 'Government officials' and 'Students'. This is interesting because daily interactions would almost certainly have exposed Vietnamese students to all of the above types of interlocutors. The results suggest that social roles were not shaping these interactions. In other words, both 'common' encounters (with 'Students', 'Friends' and 'Native interlocutors') and less common encounters ('Government Officials') evidence no relationship with social roles. This suggests that the social roles participants occupied did not influence *who* the participants spoke to and that social roles are largely independent from and insensitive to encounters – even commonplace ones. The only exception is observed in the positive correlation between social role of 'Employee' with 'Colleagues'.

## 1.2 Social roles and types of interactions

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients for social roles and six types of interactions: 'small talk'; 'simple transactions'; 'complex transactions'; 'academic discussion and presentation'; 'socializing' and 'learning English'.

**Table 2: Correlations between social roles and types of interactions in three months**

Types of interactions	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Small talks	.118	.030	.099	-.208	.265	.116	.063
	.689	.918	.735	.475	.359	.692	.832
Simple transactions	.422	.167	.222	-.360	.542*	-.055	-.026
	.133	.569	.446	.207	.045	.852	.929
Complex transaction	.312	.413	-.460	-.344	.097	-.600*	-.044
	.278	.142	.098	.228	.741	.023	.882
Academic discussions and presentation	.268	-.350	.514	-.126	.284	.577*	.113
	.355	.220	.060	.669	.324	.031	.702
Socialising	.387	-.331	.045	.181	-.406	.091	-.198
	.171	.248	.878	.535	.150	.756	.498
Learning English	-.217	0.67	-.073	-.461	-.174	-.429	.297
	.476	.828	.813	.113	.570	.143	.324

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regarding the two highest ranked social roles ('Friend' and 'Student'), 'Friend' did not correlate with any interaction types, whilst 'Student' is positively correlated with 'Academic discussion and presentation' ( $r=.577$ ) and negatively correlated with 'complex transactions' ( $r=-.600$ ). Both types of interactions can be conceived as requiring a fairly high level of engagement with the L2. One possible explanation why academic discussions/presentations correlated positively with 'Student' whilst complex transactions did so negatively may be because the topics of conversation in the 'complex transactions' category transcended purely academic matters – participants were not necessarily occupying the social role of student whilst engaging in them.

Unlike the social role of 'Vietnamese' is associated with the feeling of being 'other'. Table 2 shows that 'Vietnamese' positively correlates with 'simple transactions' ( $r=.542$ ): participants feel more Vietnamese when engaged in undemanding, day-to-day functional dialogues. It is possible that a combination of the simplistic nature of these encounters and occasional mishaps in making themselves understood acted as a reminder of the participants' status as 'other' – that they had yet achieved full membership of the TL linguistic community.



However, Vietnamese-ness did not correlate with ‘Small talk’ which, like simple transactions, may also be thought of as brief and relatively undemanding encounters. However, small talk is also relatively directionless and unlike simple transactions is not associated with the pursuit of a particular outcome (such as the purchase of a train ticket) – less is at stake and success or failure is more difficult to gauge. Under these circumstances the status of ‘other’ is less pronounced.

### 1.3 Social roles and hours of interactions

**Table 3: Correlations between Social Roles, total hours of interactions, and the range of interlocutors**

Interactions	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Total hours	.802**	-.026	-.136	-.294	-.329	-.257	-.216
	.001	.929	.643	.308	.251	.375	.459
Range of interlocutors	.467	-.043	.300	-.037	.621*	.386	.024
	.092	.883	.297	.901	.018	.173	.934

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

‘Female’ is strongly and positively correlated with the total hours of interactions. This can possibly be explained by the fact that Mi and Chau (who reported the highest number of hours of speaking English) are female. In addition, they were able to regularly access English-speaking opportunities via their boyfriends – a specific type of interaction where their ‘femaleness’ is likely to be foregrounded.

### 1.4 Social roles and range of interlocutors

Table 3 shows that the social role of ‘Vietnamese’ is positively correlated with the range of interlocutors ( $r=.621$ ): the more types of interlocutors participants interacted with (in the TL), the more Vietnamese they felt. This can be explained by the fact that the majority (60%) of interlocutors were friends and students (see 4.3). It may therefore have been a ‘luxury’ for participants to have interactions with other groups of people. Their exposure to different groups (outside university life) may have ‘reminded’ participants more about their national and ethnic origins by once more

foregrounding physical and cultural differences which may be felt less acutely in a multi-cultural university settings.

Interactions with non-Vietnamese interlocutors was not, by itself, sufficient to generate overwhelming feelings of Vietnamese-ness – if they were then given the frequency of contact with non-Vietnamese interlocutors we would expect to see Vietnamese-ness correlate highly with more types of interactions and more types of interlocutors. Different encounters foreground different social identities. However, on balance, it appears reasonable to conclude that *at an aggregated level* extensive contact with non-Vietnamese interlocutors is related to national identity and that one underlying dynamic is the concept of ‘other’.

#### 1.5. Summary of the links between social roles and interactions

The most obvious conclusion is that the two most frequently reported social roles – ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ - actually correlated with very few types of interlocutors and interactions. Does this mean that social roles have little utility in terms of explaining social interaction? Actually, it is possible to detect some logical patterning. For example, the social role of ‘Employee’ correlated with the interlocutor type ‘Colleague’; and ‘Student’ correlated with ‘Academic discussion’. These seem to support Norton’s belief that social roles help impose the ‘right to be heard’ and therefore access to more interactions. However, both these relationships make sense given their contexts – there is nothing particularly odd about feeling like a student whilst participating in classroom discussions and there is nothing odd about feeling like an employee when talking to work colleagues. Other correlations are more puzzling. For example, ‘Friend’ is positively correlated with interlocutor-type ‘Healthworkers’ and ‘Female’ with ‘University/academic staff’, ‘shop/bank staff’, ‘healthworkers’ and ‘non-native speakers’. The diary was a relatively blunt mechanism for collecting data and participants were not expected to record the identities/roles they felt/occupied during every single interaction they had. Some correlations – and that of ‘Friend’ and ‘Healthworker’ is a prime candidate - may therefore be statistical fictions. However, the correlations for ‘Female’ may be more or less rooted in reality. Females are more likely than males to attend health centers and may spend more time shopping. The key observation, however, is that social roles

appear to possess limited and ambiguous utility as a lens through which to understand interaction in the target language.

## 2. Understanding the link between social roles and self-perception of communicative competence

Social roles appear to offer only partial explanations of the types of interactions that participants accessed. But do the roles that people occupy and identities they express influence more clearly how participants *benefit* from interactions *vis-à-vis* progress in L2 learning? The variable ‘Self-perception of communicative competence’ represents participants’ own rating of their L2 speaking experiences. Participants were asked to provide a daily summative rating ranging from ‘very positive to very negative’.

**Table 4: Social roles and self-perceptions of communicative competence over three months**

Self-perception communicative competence	Social roles						
	Female	Male	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
	.450	-	-.203	-.305	.186	-.164	.284
	.106	.035	.485	.289	.323	.576	.325
		.906					

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The social role of Female has a weak correlation ( $r=.450$ ) with the self-perception of communicative competence. As mentioned in the introduction, the analysis only includes medium and strong correlations at significant level. Therefore, the weak correlation between Female and self-perception of communicative competence is not included. In general, there is no correlation between social roles and the communicative competence evaluated by the participants. This suggests that social roles seem not to have a relation with how participant felt about their experience of speaking English.

Perhaps communicative competence is instead related to who participants spoke to; the type/purpose/context of interactions; the variety (range) of interlocutors and/or the number of hours spent speaking English. Correlations tests were run for 10 categories

of interlocutors; 6 types of interactions; hours spent speaking English and range of interlocutors. Table 5 below shows significant medium and strong correlations only (those not included in the table were weak correlations).

**Table 5: Correlations between social interactions and self - perception of communicative competence over three months**

Self-perception communicative competence	Social interactions			
	Uni/academic staff	Stranger	Native speakers	Small talk
	.820**	.553*	.661*	.603*
	.000	.040	.010	.022

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows that three types of interlocutors ('university/academic staff', 'stranger' and 'native speakers') and one type of interaction ('small talk') correlate with self - perception of communicative competence ( $r=.820$ ;  $r=.533$ ;  $r=.661$ ;  $r=.603$  respectively).

The number of hours spent speaking English and exposure to a wide(r) range of interlocutors seems to be unrelated to positive or negative feelings regarding L2 competency. Many participants anticipated that studying abroad would provide them with considerable opportunities to speak English but this finding demonstrated that this was not necessarily the case. But participants also felt that increased usage of the English language would increase their proficiency. The belief that there is a relationship between speaking more of the TL and becoming better at speaking/understanding it is pervasive across most L2 acquisition theories. 'Self-perception of communicative competence' is a 'record' or impression of how participants *felt* about their performances during L2 interactions rather than an objective measure of L2 proficiency. Nevertheless, the absence of a relationship between 'hours spent speaking English' and 'Self-perception of communicative

competence' is surprising: purely *quantitative* measures of L2 engagement do not explain how participants feel about their L2 proficiency.

In terms of *who* participants spoke to, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that 'native speakers' correlated positively with self-perception of communicative competence – the ability to interact effectively with native speakers is the 'litmus test' of L2 competence and participants' L2 strengths and weaknesses are likely to be exposed and reflected upon during/after these encounters. Self-perception of communicative competence did not correlate with 'Academic discussion and presentations' but did correlate with 'University/Academic Staff'. Again, it is possible to argue that these encounters are fairly intellectually and linguistically demanding and are likely to stand out as a 'marker' of L2 proficiency. Encounters with 'Strangers' are highly likely to take the form of small talk or simple transactions, and the former correlates positively with self-perceptions of communicative competence – the more small talk engaged in, the more positive people feel about their L2 experience and vice versa. Vietnamese participants therefore appear to also attach importance to the ability to function in relatively routine, undemanding, day-to-day and informal conversations and not just in intellectually and linguistically demanding ones.

It is also worth observing that a high percentage of university/academic staff and strangers are likely to also be native speakers (see 4.3). This reinforces the view that interactions with native speakers are the litmus test. Evidence from the focus groups suggests that participants believed interactions with university/academic staff and native speakers are most likely to benefit their L2 progress, but that speaking English with non-native speakers was regarded as an inferior learning opportunity.

So *who* participants spoke English to and certain *qualitative* aspects of interactions appear to influence self-perceptions of L2 competence more than simply accruing L2 hours. In terms of L2 theory this is interesting. Focus group data appeared to support Barna (1998)'s arguments concerning 'shock' and anxiety associated with conversing with native speakers – Vietnamese participants felt much more comfortable interacting with non-native speakers with whom they believed they shared certain linguistic difficulties and cultural reference points. Statistical analysis, however, evidences a positive relationship between self-perceptions of L2 competence and NS

interactions: the more participants spoke to native speakers the more positive they felt about the L2; the less they spoke to native speakers the less positive they felt about the L2. Focus group testimonies and Barna's framework suppose a negative relationship – increased interactions with native speakers should expose the participants to higher levels of potentially debilitating stress (and vice versa). One possible explanation for this apparent dissonance is that participants continued to experience anxiety when talking to native speakers but learned to manage its impact on their L2 competence. Indeed, being able to manage any anxiety successfully would provide a further boost to participant's own evaluations of their L2 performance. Barna's framework may still be accurate but clearly 'shock' is experienced differentially and 'managed' by L2 learners.

The positive correlation between native speakers and self-perception of communicative competence appears to contradict Norton's theory of power relations regarding interactions between L2 learners and native speakers. Norton claims L2 learners experience a 'catch 22' where they both have to perform for native speakers and submit to their judgment. Also, according to Norton, native speakers acquire ambivalent attitudes towards L2 learners and may not consider them 'worthy to speak' or 'worthy to listen'. Interactions between native speakers and L2 learners will therefore develop according to asymmetrical distributions of power – L2 learners are 'underdogs', seeking resources from native speakers such as finance, friendship or understanding. Increased exposure to native speakers might therefore be expected to correlate negatively with perceptions of L2 communicative competence. Exceptions might include those interactions that do not feature strong asymmetries of power. Interactions with academic staff almost certainly feature built-in multiple asymmetries of power and cannot easily be explained. However, short, purposeless and undemanding small talk with native-speaking strangers are less likely to pivot around the concept of power.

According to Giles and Byrne (1982) one of the conditions for a subordinate group to achieve native-like language proficiency is when group-identification is weak – group members are therefore more likely to move out of their main language 'camp' and interact with native speakers. The intergroup model posits that interactions with native speakers can contribute to L2 proficiency if, *inter alia*, cultural differences are

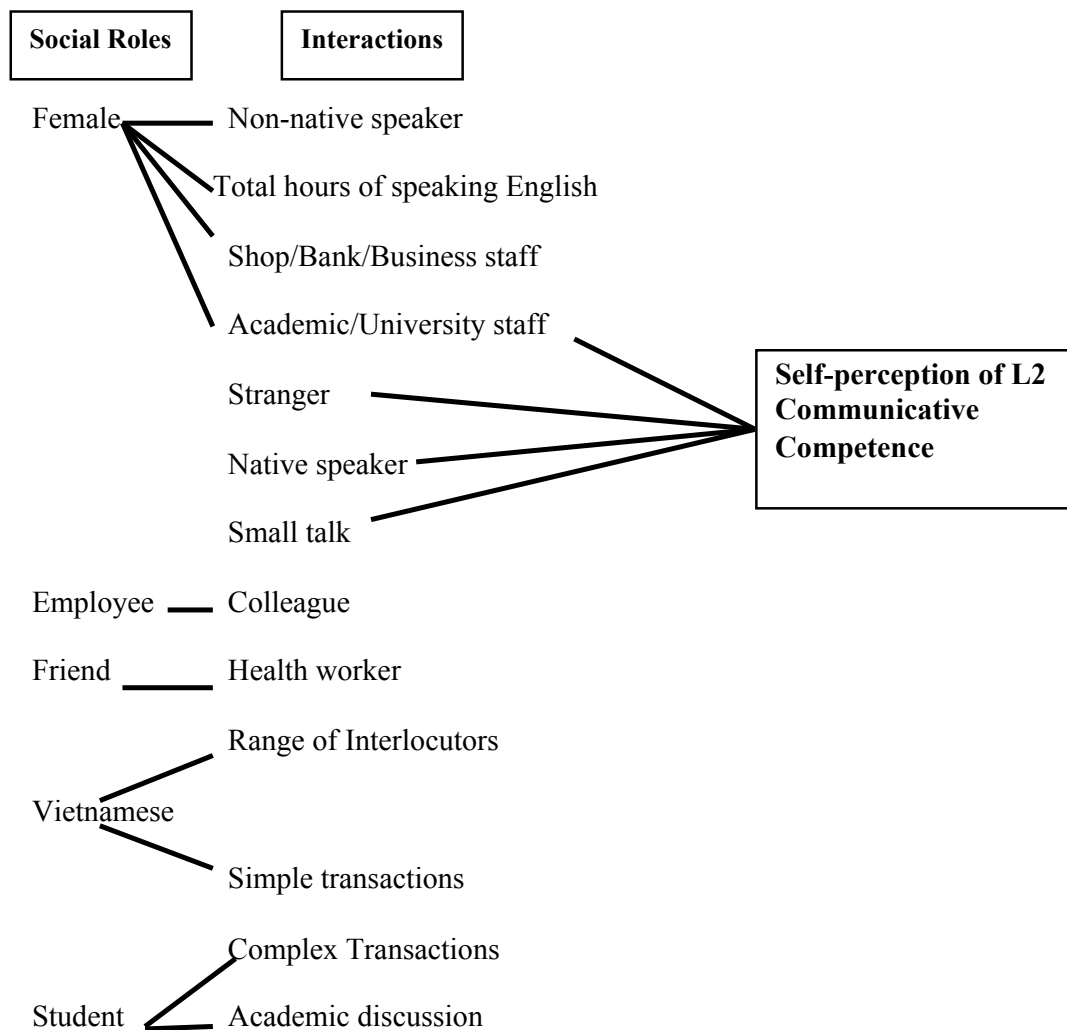
minimised thus creating spaces in which the L2 learner does not feel ‘other’. Section 2 of this appendix showed how ‘Vietnamese’ is correlated with ‘simple transactions’ (and ‘range of interlocutors’) and there is some evidence from the focus groups that suggest that Vietnamese participants regularly felt ‘other’ during interactions with native speakers. One should therefore expect to see a negative correlation between interactions with native speakers and perceptions of communicative competence. The positive correlation can be interpreted to mean that: intergroup model is faulty (‘other’ is less influential); participants are exaggerating their experience of ‘other’; ‘other’ is not a universal feature of all encounters with native speakers; or Vietnamese participants were not a typical subordinate group. It seems reasonable, however, to conclude that the importance of ‘other’ will vary according to the conduct, content and context of interactions.

### **3. Summary of relationship between social roles, social interactions and self-perception of communicative competence**

Figure 1, below, summarises all significant correlations (either medium or strong ). Out of a total of 11 social roles 5 correlate with certain dimensions/types of social interaction(s). The most influential social role is ‘Female’ (4 correlations) followed by ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Student’ (2 correlations each) and ‘Employee’ and ‘Friend’, (one correlation each).

There appears to be no *direct* relationship between any social role and self-perception of communicative competence and interaction with university/academic staff is the only social interaction that is both positively correlated with a social role (Female) *and* perceptions of communicative competence. As referred to above this may be because participants believed interactions with their supervisors/lecturers could help participants improve their speaking skill and because the nature of the encounters might constitute a litmus test. In addition focus group evidence shows that participants often felt supported in discussions with their supervisors. An, for example comments: “I met my supervisor today. He was really nice. I enjoyed his supervision”. However, there was no correlation between Male and ‘Academic staff’ - in fact, there was no correlations between Male and *any* social interaction variables (Tables 1, 2 and 3).

**Figure 1: Relationships between social roles, social interactions and L2 self-perception of communicative competence**



*\*(All correlation coefficients are positive, except the correlation between Student and Complex transaction which is negative)*

The previous section presented the correlations between social roles, social interactions and self-perception of communicative competence based on data for the entire three month case study. I want to see if particular several roles are less important *over time* in terms of influencing social interactions (hours, who, range of interlocutors, etc.). I have therefore provided a month-by-month breakdown. The data in the following tables differs slightly from that shown previously in that all correlation coefficients are shown regardless of the strength of the relationship or their



significance. This is to facilitate a temporal understanding of the importance of social roles: does their influence on certain aspects of participants' interaction experiences vary over time (and does the three-month data mask any particularly interesting relationships which might have occurred in individual months).

It is shown that the actual gender of participants is weakly and positively correlated with self-perception of communicative competence but is non-significant ('Female' was coded '2' while 'Male' was coded 1) - the positive coefficient means that female participants tend to rank their experience of speaking English more positively than males. So, both the 'feeling' of female-ness and actually being female generated roughly similar results. Table 6, below, also shows that the social role of 'Female' and female gender correlate with 'University/academic staff' ( $r=.551$  and  $r=.593$  respectively).

**Table 6: Correlations between interlocutors and Social roles (Female/Male) and Actual gender over three months**

Interlocutors	Social roles		Gender
	Female	Male	
Students	.265	-.288	.100
	.360	.318	.734
University/academic staff	.551*	-.389	.593*
	.041	.169	.025
Shops/banks/business	.550*	-.073	.154
	.041	.805	.600
Government officers	.158	.307	.021
	.588	.285	.942
Health workers	.650*	-.184	.346
	.012	.530	.226
Friends	.351	-.298	.555*
	.218	.300	.040
Strangers	.226	.495	-.019
	.438	.072	.949
Colleagues	-.070	-.133	.207
	.812	.650	.477
Native interlocutors	.377	-.166	.349
	.184	.571	.221
Non-native interlocutors	.693**	-.212	.390
	.006	.466	.168

In the focus groups Bac described how he was frustrated and distracted during conversations with his supervisor because he could not make himself understood properly and his supervisor struggled to understand Bac. Bac felt embarrassed and as a result he withdrew from the encounter. None of the females reported a similar experience (Bac's overall ranking of his L2 speaking experiences were significantly lower than the average). Therefore, although interactions with academic staff positively correlate with perceptions of communicative competence among females this is not the case for males.

Apart from 'University/academic staff', three other 'dimensions' of interactions (stranger, native speaker and small talk) are correlated with L2 competence/experience but none of these correlate with social roles. It appears that social roles are correlated only with a very limited set of social interaction 'dimensions' and that the influence of social roles does not generally feed through to contribute to self-perceptions of communicative competence. In other words, the social roles and identities that participants reported generally exercised little influence over key qualitative and quantitative measures of social interaction, and very few of these measures are related to L2 competence.

**Table 7: Correlation coefficients (and *significance* value) between Social Roles and who participants spoke English with each month and over three months.**

Interlocutor	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Student	M1	.250	-.006	-.211	-.291	-.040	.335
		.388	.984	.468	.313	.893	.242
	M2	.158	-.006	-.198	.002	.087	.469
		.590	.824	.497	.994	.766	.091
	M3	-.157	.173	-.336	-.141	.184	-.006
		.592	.555	.240	.630	.529	.984
University/ Academic staff	M1	.429	.073	-.322	-.156	-.099	.291
		.126	.804	.261	.593	.737	.452
	M2	.388	-.021	-.243	.048	.173	.396
		.171	.944	.403	.870	.554	.161
	M3	-.054	.341	-.126	.154	.388	.057
		.853	.233	.669	.599	.170	.847
Shop/bank /business	M1	.625*	.210	-.352	-.214	.055	.055
		.017	.471	.217	.462	.852	.852

	M2	.609*	.328	-.299	-.054	.219	.193
		.021	.252	.300	.855	.451	.508
	M3	.111	.199	-.158	.330	.337	.157
		.705	.494	.589	.250	.238	.592
<b>Government officers</b>	M1	.135	-.726**	.285	.371	-.557*	-.203
		.647	.003	.323	.191	.038	.486
	M2	.271	.283	-.247	-.083	.204	.061
		.348	.326	.394	.779	.485	.837
	M3	-.128	.093	-.157	.488	-.246	-.113
		.663	.753	.592	.077	.397	.700
<b>Health workers</b>	M1	.638*	.087	.017	-.212	.060	-.179
		.014	.768	.955	.466	.839	.541
	M2	-.075	.069	-.141	.165	-.129	.365
		.800	.815	.630	.572	.661	.199
	M3	-.021	.338	.575*	.212	.396	-.113
		.943	.237	.031	.467	.160	.700
<b>Friends</b>	M1	.427	.555*	.059	-.256	.371	-.106
		.128	.039	.841	.378	.192	.719
	M2	.751**	.424	-.038	.098	.513	.038
		.002	.131	.897	.740	.061	.898
	M3	.397	.134	.132	-.267	-.014	-.315
		.160	.647	.653	.355	.963	.273
<b>Strangers</b>	M1	.195	-.026	-.102	.447	-.260	.338
		.438	.931	.728	.109	.369	.238
	M2	.619*	.366	-.211	.310	.226	.155
		.018	.198	.469	.280	.436	.598
	M3	-.119	.085	-.220	.385	-.142	.052
		.685	.774	.449	.174	.629	.859
<b>Colleagues</b>	M1	.116	-.388	.334	.165	.079	-.044
		.693	.170	.244	.573	.789	.882
	M2	-.313	-.148	.735**	-.145	.136	-.128
		.275	.614	.003	.622	.644	.663
	M3	.017	-.629*	.345	-.264	.100	-.100
		.955	.016	.227	.361	.733	.735
<b>Native interlocutors</b>	M1	.527	-.058	.007	.279	.089	.318
		.053	.844	.982	.334	.763	.268
	M2	.510	.379	-.112	.094	.285	.278
		.063	.181	.702	.749	.324	.336
	M3	-.107	.131	-.143	.285	.351	.030
		.715	.656	.627	.323	.218	.919
<b>Non-native interlocutors</b>	M1	.367	.341	-.234	.514	.067	-.100
		.197	.233	.420	.060	.819	.735
	M2	.640*	.152	-.134	.001	.386	.322
		.014	.603	.648	.999	.172	.262
	M3	.460	.236	.032	-.317	-.099	-.269
		.098	.416	.912	.269	.736	.352

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 8: Correlations between Social Roles and types of interactions per each month and over three months**

Interactions	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Small talks	M1	.334	.105	.088	.032	.174	.205
		.242	.721	.767	.913	.551	.482
	M2	.296	.301	-.305	.432	.223	.495
		.305	.295	.289	.123	.443	.072
	M3	-.199	.121	-.156	.047	.077	.140
		.495	.681	.595	.873	.794	.633
Simple transactions	M1	.553*	.341	.087	.010	.161	.282
		.040	.233	.766	.972	.582	.329
	M2	.465	.131	-.482	.190	.120	.184
		.094	.654	.081	.516	.683	.530
	M3	.039	.089	-.281	.512	-.167	.131
		.894	.763	.330	.061	.568	.656
Complex transactions	M1	.256	-.265	-.160	.319	-.135	-.128
		.377	.360	.586	.226	.646	.664
	M2	.283	-.480	-.303	-.113	-.057	.171
		.327	.082	.292	.701	.846	.558
	M3	.411	-.449	-.262	.035	-.594*	-.153
		.144	.107	.366	.905	.025	.602
Academic discussion/presentations	M1	.198	.455	.046	.252	.542*	.007
		.498	.102	.876	.384	.045	.981
	M2	.364	.571*	-.059	.407	.529	.242
		.201	.033	.842	.149	.052	.405
	M3	-.083	.225	-.263	-.072	.396	.032
		.779	.438	.364	.808	.161	.914
Socialising	M1	.218	.258	-.244	.224	.162	-.119
		.455	.374	.401	.442	.581	.685
	M2	.423	.078	.266	-.243	.173	-.348
		.150	.800	.381	.424	.573	.244
	M3	.339	-.007	.233	-.564*	-.068	-.207
		.236	.982	.422	.036	.817	.478
Learning English	M1	-.479	.353	-.309	-.378	-.006	.179
		.098	.236	.304	.203	.986	.559
	M2	.120	-.150	-.266	-.356	.115	.024
		.684	.609	.358	.212	.696	.936
	M3	-.187	.014	-.107	-.204	-.499	-.077
		.522	.962	.717	.484	.609	.794

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 9: Correlations between Social Roles, total hours of interactions, range of interlocutors and their rating scores in three months.**

Interactions	Month	Social roles					
		Female	Friend	Employee	Vietnamese	Student	Asian
Total hours of interactions	M1	.631*	.060	-.063	-.091	-.122	-.312
		.016	.839	.831	.758	.678	.278
	M2	.684*	-.140	-.276	-.260	.006	-.114
		.007	.632	.340	.369	.986	.699
	M3	.829**	-.301	-.201	-.295	.367	-.235
		.000	.296	.491	.305	.197	.419
Range of interlocutors	M1	.385	.108	.074	.492	-.021	.154
		.174	.713	.802	.074	.943	.600
	M2	-.306	-.262	-.187	.461	-.610*	.498
		.288	.366	.521	.097	.021	.070
	M3	-.189	.082	.426	.197	.319	.068
		.518	.780	.129	.500	.267	.817
Overall rating of communicative competence	M1	.417	.121	-.119	.231	-.004	.312
		.138	.680	.686	.427	.989	.277
	M2	.362	-.005	-.314	.169	.097	.540*
		.203	.987	.274	.564	.742	.046
	M3	.284	-.178	-.243	.024	.059	.233
		.326	.543	.402	.936	.841	.423

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to Tables 7, 8 and 9, there is no clear pattern in the relation between social roles and interactions or communicative competence on a month-by-month basis. The importance of social roles *do* appear to vary monthly: ‘Female’, ‘Student’ and ‘Friend’ generally correlated with fewer measures of interaction over the period of the study, whereas ‘Employee’, ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Asian’ increase (albeit very modestly). Secondly, the types of interactions that social roles are correlated with also differ from one month to another. The only exception is the constant correlation between ‘Female’ and ‘Total hours of interactions’, evidencing medium and strong coefficients throughout the three months.

## **Appendix J**

### **Proposed set of variables: Value Matcher/Value Taker and Opportunity Taker/Opportunity Maker**

Similar to Appendix I, the analysis and discussion in this Appendix are as part of the 'flawed experiment'. This is another attempt to explore the data collected. It is presented here for reference as an example of directions that I have tried through out the research process.

#### **1. Values**

Kenneth (1963) defines values as a more or less stable set of criteria that serve as guidance for a person on what may be considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Hofstede (2001) defines values in a cultural context and believes cultural values inform members of a culture what is 'good' and what is 'bad', what is 'right' and 'wrong' etc. Discussions in the focus groups suggested that values did, at times, guide the way in which participants behaved and made sense of and justified events.

##### 1.1 Value Matcher versus Value Taker

Kenneth (1963) and Hofstede (2001) believe values are implicated in communicative behaviours. Such behaviours can be imagined as forming a continuum with two extremes: Value Taker and Value Matcher. Value Takers (VT) are those who readily accept other values and are more willing to adapt their own values or at least tolerant to experiencing alternatives. Value Matchers (VM) are those who hold on to their values and find it difficult to tolerate dissimilar ones and so tend to avoid.

Values are important in SLA because, according to Collier (2006:59), in order to communicate effectively in intercultural situations, participants have to be flexible and adjust their identities to establish a common ground with interlocutors:

*Intercultural competence occurs when the avowed identity matches the identity described. For example, if you avow the identity for an assertive,*

*out spoken U.S. American and your conversational partner avows himself or herself to be respectful, non-assertive Vietnamese, then each must ascribe the corresponding identity to the conversational partner. You must jointly negotiate what kind of relationship will be mutual satisfying. Some degree of adjustment and accommodation is usually necessary.*

The ‘degree of adjustment and accommodation’ that Collier (2006) refers to can crudely be measured by VM and VT. Accordingly, VMs are more conservative and VTs are more liberal in terms of compromising their values. If Collier’s suggestion is correct, VMs will be less successful than VTs in intercultural competence. In other words, VMs are less capable of communicating effectively in intercultural situations.

In order to test if Collier’s (2006) argument is right, there are a couple of steps to prepare. First, Vietnamese participants will be categorised into VM or VT based on focus group data. Then, the relationship between being a VM or VT and communicative competence will be tested by running correlations.

## 1.2 Categorising participants as Value Matchers and Value Takers

I shall explain the process of categorising participants as value matchers or value takers, based on the definitions of Value Matcher (VM) and Value Taker (VT) in section 1.1.

First of all, I followed Georger’s (2009) approach to basic content analysis. All focus group interviews (approximately 4000 words) were analysed. Participants were categorised as VM or VT on the basis of the ideas and stories they recounted. This was clearly a subjective process. In order to limit subjectivity, a fellow Vietnamese research student was employed to perform exactly the same procedure using the same pre-agreed VM/VT definitions. Any disagreement regarding categorisation would be subject to negotiation; but we both reached identical conclusions (I chose a Vietnamese research student because all focus group transcriptions were in the original Vietnamese language). A tally was kept of VM and VT evidence and an overall judgement was made regarding in which category participants were allocated.

### 1.3 Selected Examples of the Operationalisation of Values

#### Value Matchers

- Tu and Bac withdrew from interactions, especially when native speakers were involved. They did so to ‘rescue’ their ‘maleness’.
- Many female participants attended drinking events once and then decided they would never come again. They did not like the atmosphere: noisy music, loud people, etc. They believe socialising should not be controlled by alcohol. A more preferred way of socialising can be eating out or cooking at home.
- Some female participants were put-off by certain behaviours amongst fellow students, including the gesture of hugging and kissing. They think such public displays of affection should be for their boyfriends only.
- Some participants believed that communicating with non-native speakers is of no practical benefit.
- Some participants withdrew from encounters because they could not identify common cultural reference points
- Participants evidenced interest in expressing Vietnamese culture in front of a Western audience

#### Value Takers

- Sang attended evening events organised by Christian Union even though he was not interested in God. Sang is an atheist. He simply considered such events as opportunities to practice English.
- Hoa and An hardly went out drinking in Vietnam where it is not common for girls to be seen drinking in public places. However, they did not mind going out to pubs with their friends in the UK.
- Some participants organised events designed to appeal to Western students
- Participants were largely tolerant of being put into a homogenising ‘Asian’ category
- Participants expressing a willingness to learn about UK and Western culture e.g. through travel and accessing UK/Western media (e.g. television)



**Table 1: Classification of participants into Value Matcher/Value Taker**

Participants	Value matcher	Value taker	Overall
1 Nga	2	5	VT
2 Hoa	0	8	VT
3 Sang	13	2	VM
4 An	2	4	VT
5 Mai	9	0	VM
6 Tu	6	1	VM
7 Thao	10	1	VM
8 Luyen	9	0	VM
9 Quynh	5	0	VM
10 Chau	12	4	VM
11 Mi	5	0	VM
12 Bac	16	0	VM
13 Ha	1	4	VT
14 Ly	1	3	VT

#### 1.4 Correlations of Value matcher and Value taker

Having been categorised as VM or VT tests of correlations with L2 perceived competence were performed.

**Table 2: Correlations of VM/VT with L2 perceived communicative competence**

		VM or VT	L2 Perceived Communicative Competence
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	1	.585(*)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.014
	N	14	14
L2 Perceived Communicative Competence	Pearson Correlation	.585(*)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.014	
	N	14	14

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between whether participants were a Value Matcher (VM) or a Value Taker (VT) with their perceived L2 competence is positively correlated ( $r = .585$ ) and significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). VM is coded 1 while VT is coded 2, which means that Value Takers (VT) are associated with higher ratings of L2 competence than Value Matchers (VM).

**Table 3: Correlations of VM/VT with L2 total hours of interactions**

		VM or VT	L2 total hours of interactions
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	1	.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.517
	N	14	14
L2 total hours of interactions	Pearson Correlation	.189	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.517	
	N	14	14

The relationship between VM/VT and the total hours of speaking English is weak and *Ns* ( $r = .189$ ): being a VT or a VM does not associate with total hours of speaking English.

In summary, the statistic suggests a positive relationship between VM/VT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and no relationship between VM/VT and L2 total hours of interaction. Participants categorised as Value Takers (more flexible in accepting values dissimilar from their own) tend to rate their experience of speaking English more positively. In contrast, Value Matchers (those who hold on to their values and are less willing/or unable to accept values dissimilar from their own) are associated with lower communicative competence scores.

## 2. Opportunity

Values refer to what participants believe are the right ‘things’ to do. In contrast, opportunity refers to the availability of accessible social interactions in which L2 learners can practice the target language. Opportunity covers both the ‘available interactions’ that one is exposed to and those interactions that individuals generate for themselves. One can therefore either be an Opportunity Maker - proactively making full use of available opportunities and even creating opportunities themselves - or an Opportunity Taker - just taking advantage of whatever is provided. The ‘strongest’

level of Opportunity Taker would be the refusal or inability to access any opportunities at all.

## 2.1 Selected Examples of the Operationalisation of Opportunity

### Opportunity Makers

- Tu created opportunity by speaking in English with his Vietnamese girlfriend
- Mi prefers American accent and she was dating an American man so that she had lots of opportunities to speak English.
- Some participants organised BBQ in order to attract their British classmates to join them.

### Opportunity Takers

- Several participants attended social events organised by their university
- Some participants believed the universities should be responsible for providing more opportunity for them to socialise. They complained about the lack of such a support from the universities.

**Table 4: Classification of participants into Opportunity Taker/Opportunity Maker**

	Participants	Opportunity taker	Opportunity maker	Overall
1	Nga	3	0	OT
2	Hoa	1	6	OM
3	Sang	2	1	OT
4	An	0	2	OM
5	Mai	2	1	OT
6	Tu	0	1	OM
7	Thao	2	0	OT
8	Luyen	2	0	OT
9	Quynh	1	0	OT
10	Chau	5	1	OT
11	Mi	0	4	OM
12	Bac	2	0	OT
13	Ha	1	0	OT
14	Ly	1	0	OT

## 2.2 Correlations between Opportunity Maker/Taker and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence

Tests of correlations were run to explore the relationship between OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and L2 total hours of interactions.

**Table 5: Correlations between OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence and L2 total hours of interactions**

		L2 Total hours of Interactions	OM or OT	L2 Perceived Communicative Competence
L2 Total hours of Interactions	Pearson Correlation	1	.421	.320
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.134	.265
	N	14	14	14
OM or OT	Pearson Correlation	.421	1	.703(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.134		.003
	N	14	14	14
L2 Perceived Communicative Competence	Pearson Correlation	.320	.703(**)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.265	.003	
	N	14	14	14

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

OM is coded 2 while OT is coded 1. There is a significant ( $p=.005$ ) positive correlation coefficient ( $r=.703$ ) which suggests OMs tend to have higher ratings of communicative competence than OTs. OM/OT has a medium positive correlation with L2 Total Hours of Interaction – suggesting OMs spend more time speaking English – but the result is *Ns* ( $r=.421$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

### 3. VM/VT and OM/OT and Key Interactions

Appendix I shows that L2 perceived communicative competence correlated with just 4 interaction variables: ‘Academic/University Staff’, ‘Strangers’, ‘Native Speakers’ and ‘Small Talk’. It also shows no direct relationship between social roles and L2 perceived communicative competence among Vietnamese participants. The only

‘indirect’ relationship was the link between ‘Female’ and ‘Academic/University Staff’ which then correlated with L2 perceived communicative competence.

Tables 2 and 5 of this Appendix show that VM/VT and OM/OT are both positively correlated with L2 perceived communicative competence. To further establish whether VM/VT and OM/OT are superior to social roles in terms of understanding L2 perceived communicative competence, I will run correlation tests to between VM/VT and OM/OT with the 4 types social interactions that appear to exert most influence over L2 perceived communicative competence.

**Table 6: Correlations between OM/OT and VM/VT with key interactions**

		OM or OT	VM or VT
OM or OT	Pearson Correlation	1	.645(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.006
	N	14	14
VM or VT	Pearson Correlation	.645(**)	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.006	
	N	14	14
Academic/University Staff	Pearson Correlation	.272	.780(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.173	.001
	N	14	14
Smalltalk	Pearson Correlation	.439	.572(*)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.058	.016
	N	14	14
Native Speaker	Pearson Correlation	.433	.711(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.061	.002
	N	14	14
Stranger	Pearson Correlation	.670(**)	.419
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.004	.068
	N	14	14

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The results are mixed. OM/OT correlates positively and significantly with ‘Stranger’. The correlation coefficient for ‘Academic/University Staff’ and ‘Native Speaker’ are positive and medium but *Ns*. VM/VT however correlates strongly and positively with three out of four, all of which are significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Values appear to have more influence in terms of shaping individuals' access to these key interactions. But VM/VT and OM/OT also evidence a strong positive correlation (significant at  $p < .01$ ). Values and Opportunism may be interacting.

### 3.1 Partial correlations between VM/VT and OM/OT and L2 Perceived Communicative Competence

Field (2009) suggests that where one variable is correlated with other variables, it may be useful to run partial correlation to reveal a more accurate relationship between the variables. In this case, VM/VT is positively correlated with both OM/OT and L2 perceived communicative competence. Therefore, in order to understand the true measurement of the relationship between OM/OT and L2 perceived communicative competence, partial correlation is performed, controlling for VM/VT.

**Table 7: Partial correlations between OM/OT controlling for VM/VT**

Control Variables			OM or OT	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	VM or VT
-none-(a)	OM or OT	Correlation	1.000	.703	.645
		Significance (1-tailed)	.	.003	.006
		df	0	12	12
	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	Correlation	.703	1.000	.585
		Significance (1-tailed)	.003	.	.014
		df	12	0	12
	VM or VT	Correlation	.645	.585	1.000
		Significance (1-tailed)	.006	.014	.
		df	12	12	0
VM or VT	OM or OT	Correlation	1.000	.526	
		Significance (1-tailed)	.	.033	
		df	0	11	
	L2 perceived Communicative Competence	Correlation	.526	1.000	
		Significance (1-tailed)	.033	.	
		df	11	0	

Where VM/VT is controlled for, the partial correlation between L2 perceived communicative competence and OM/OT is .526, which is less than the correlation when VM/VT is not controlled for ( $r = .703$ ). So although still significant ( $p < .05$ ) the relationship is diminished.

$R^2$  is .27 – which means OM/OT can now account for just 27% of the variation in L2 perceived communicative competence scores. This is a truer measure of the unique effect of being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker on communicative competence.

Where OM/OT is controlled for, the partial correlation between L2 perceived communicative competence and VM/VT is .241, which is less than the correlation when OM/OT is not controlled for ( $r = .585$ ). It is also *Ns* ( $p > .05$ ).

$R^2$  is .05 – which means that VM/VT can now only account for 5.8% of the variation in L2 perceived communicative competence scores. This is true measure of the unique effect of being a Value Matcher or Value Taker on communicative competence.

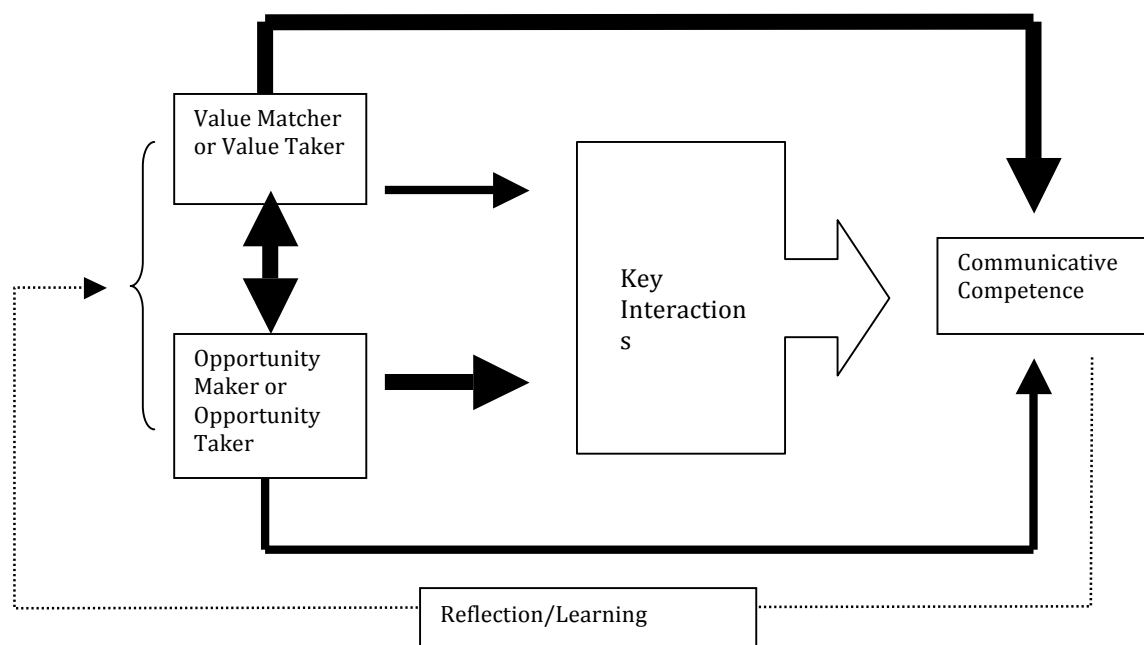
Therefore, although there is an interrelationship between L2 communicative competence/VM/VT/ OM/OT, being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker is clearly much more influential. However, OM/OT still only accounts for 27% of variation in L2 communicative competence scores.

### 3.2 Discussion

There are positive correlations between VM/VT and OM/OT with L2 perceived communicative competence. However, a similar relationship is not observed between OM/OT and VM/VT and L2 total hours of interactions. This suggests that self-perception of L2 communicative competence is influenced by the nature of interactions (quality), rather than the frequency or duration of any conversations. OM/OT and VM/VT both correlate with L2 communicative competence. This contrasts with Social Roles, none of which correlate with communicative competence. Using Opportunity and Values therefore appears to have greater utility in terms of understanding SLA in an SA context.

Opportunity and Values also correlate with those key ‘dimensions’ of interactions that are mostly associated with influencing communicative competence. Here, values initially appear more influential. We know that being an OM/OT and being a VM/VT are associated with one another – they correlate positively and strongly (see Table 7). Partial correlation suggests being an Opportunity Maker or Taker is in fact stronger in

terms of explaining communicative competence. Even so, being an OM/OT still only explains approximately 27% variation in communicative competence. A diagrammatic representation of these findings/relationships is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Summary of relationships between VM/VT, OM/OT and Communicative Competence**

The degree of the strength of a relationship is illustrated by the thickness of the lines. A line suggesting participants' ability to learn from their interactions has been added and this issue is addressed below - focus group data shows that various participants use interactions as learning opportunities and adjusted their future behaviours accordingly. However, this data has not been reported in all participants, so is denoted by a dotted line.

#### **4. Understanding the findings in the context of existing SLA theories.**

##### **4.1 Norton's (2000) theory of social identity and power relations**

The findings can be interpreted as contradicting the contribution of power relations which is central to Norton's (2000) theory. The findings suggest that individuals themselves can be responsible for the types of interactions that they have and how they make sense of them. What occurs within particular interactions *vis-à-vis* any



interplay or asymmetry of power is less important. Norton's (2000) theory of Social Identity sees social roles as an instrument with which to access resources (money, power, language, friendship, etc.). The findings presented in this Appendix instead suggest that key individual characteristics are far more deterministic in patterning individuals' interaction experiences. Further, a theory of SLA predicated on individual characteristics challenges the view that asymmetries of power manifested during and within interactions are crucial to understanding communicative competence: VM/VT and OM/OT both correlated with participants' overall ratings scores – unlike social roles, the dependent variables (OM/OT and VM/VT) did not need to be 'filtered' through specific interaction types in order for their contribution to be understood. What happens inside and during interactions may be important, but the types of interactions being experienced are also important and, crucially, so too is how individuals react to, handle and learn from their experiences.

#### 4.2 Barna's (1998) stumbling blocks

There is room in Barna's framework for individuals to perceive each block differently – some blocks may be overcome more easily by some language learners than others. Individual characteristics may therefore be important. There is nothing in my findings that contradicts this. The findings suggest that two key measures of personality – opportunism and values – may indeed help or hinder access to these key interaction dimensions that themselves relate to communicative competence; but what happens inside those interactions does not automatically determine an individual's own evaluation of his/her communicative competence. Just as L2 learners may or may not perceive something as a stumbling block, even if they do they may not necessarily be dismayed by it. Opportunity Makers report greater communicative competence. Firstly they may be more inclined to seek out, generate and select interaction opportunities. Secondly they may be more resilient to setbacks and/or better able identify positive learning outcomes, turning negative experiences into positive ones.

Turning to values, one would therefore expect Value Matchers to report higher communicative competence – these are people who pick and choose interactions that they feel comfortable with. But young Asian students newly arrived in the UK who insist on value-matching might restrict their interaction opportunities considerably

(and indeed VM/VT correlates less strongly with the key interaction variables compared to OM/OT). In fact Value Takers are more likely to evidence higher communicative competence; the willingness to subordinate one's values and to approach L2 learning context with an 'open' mind appear important.

#### 4.3 Giles & Byrne's Intergroup Model

Giles and Byrne (1982) did not specifically address opportunism but does address values. For Giles & Byrne, an individual's exposure to the TL is patterned by their culturally specific context. Therefore in a multi-cultural context individuals will tend to coalesce into linguistic and cultural 'camps'. Movements in and out of these 'camps' indicate the strength of individuals' sense of group identity. It follows that members of a linguistic/cultural community with only a weak sense of group identity will be more inclined to seek out exogenous interaction opportunities. Being an Opportunity Maker or Opportunity Taker can not un-problematically be described as a cultural characteristic (although some national stereotyping seeks to do this). Values, however, may have a cultural component in terms of circumscribing behaviours. Focus group data indicated examples of participants withdrawing from and feeling uncomfortable with certain Western customs and practices. Participants expressed disapproval, frustration and discomfort at, for example, social gatherings involving public displays of affection between relative strangers and the centrality of alcohol in social events. Indeed, being a VM/VT correlates positively with communicative competence. Of these, Value Takers – those most willing to 'suspend' their own and cultural based group affiliations - report greater satisfaction with their communicative competence.

### 5. Summary

This Appendix looks at SLA through two different lenses: opportunism and values. Basic content analysis of focus group data was conducted, identifying examples of individuals operationalizing opportunistic and value – based behaviours. Individual participants were then categorised as either Opportunity Makers or Opportunity Takers and as either a Value Matcher or Value Taker. Tests of correlation were employed to explore the relationship between these categories and communicative

competence, and with those four key interaction variables known to associate closely with communicative competence.

The result poses a challenge to Norton's theory of power relations and the privileging of social roles. First, because unlike social roles, there is a distinct and direct correlation between communicative competence and Value/Opportunity. Secondly because the findings form a plausible basis for a theory of SLA which is not overly focused on the dynamic of interactions but, rather, key characteristics that individuals themselves possess – the aptitude and ideas that individuals *bring* to their interactions and which they draw on, resource-like, to make sense of interactions. With regards to Giles and Barna's theories, the findings in this research are largely compatible. In sum then, in terms of communicative competence, very few social roles seem to feed directly into communicative competence, and hardly any correlated with those key dimensions of interactions that appeared to influence communicative competence most. The overall conclusion is that social roles exercise limited influence in terms of shaping patterns of interaction. Early on, diary data analysis alerted us to prominent *individualised* differences in patterns of interaction, and this suggested it might be fruitful to explore SLA from a less 'social' and more 'personal' perspective.

Two key dimensions of analysis were selected – opportunism and values. Both variables appear to offer considerably more utility than social roles in understanding communicative competence. Even so, considerable variance in communicative competence remains unaccounted for. I tentatively propose that the 'direction of travel' for further analysis and greater understanding is clear – a comprehensive model of second language acquisition must be focused on the individual and must account for both a wider range of individual characteristics/aptitudes/skills (e.g. cognitive ability; motivation; current L2 proficiency; extraversion/introversion) and pay closer attention to variations in individuals' 'lived realities' – the daily routines and fine detail of peoples' lives (e.g. good fortune/misfortune; studying; working; socialising) that shape the quality and quantity of interactions which individuals must make sense of.

## Appendix K

### Problems in SLA context categorisation

This Appendix provides a more detailed discussion regarding the problems in defining SA contexts in SLA research. It is hoped to support the main discussion in the Literature Review – Chapter 2, without distracting the readers if it was included in the main body of discussion.

#### 1. Problematising definitions of contexts

In the above definition, Gass and Selinker (2001) refer to two contexts, which have been the focus of much SLA research: classroom and ‘natural’ situations. However, researchers have classified SLA contexts into four ‘scenarios’ (Figure 1) which have been summarised by Block (2003) as; foreign language, self-instructed foreign language, second language and naturalistic language learning.

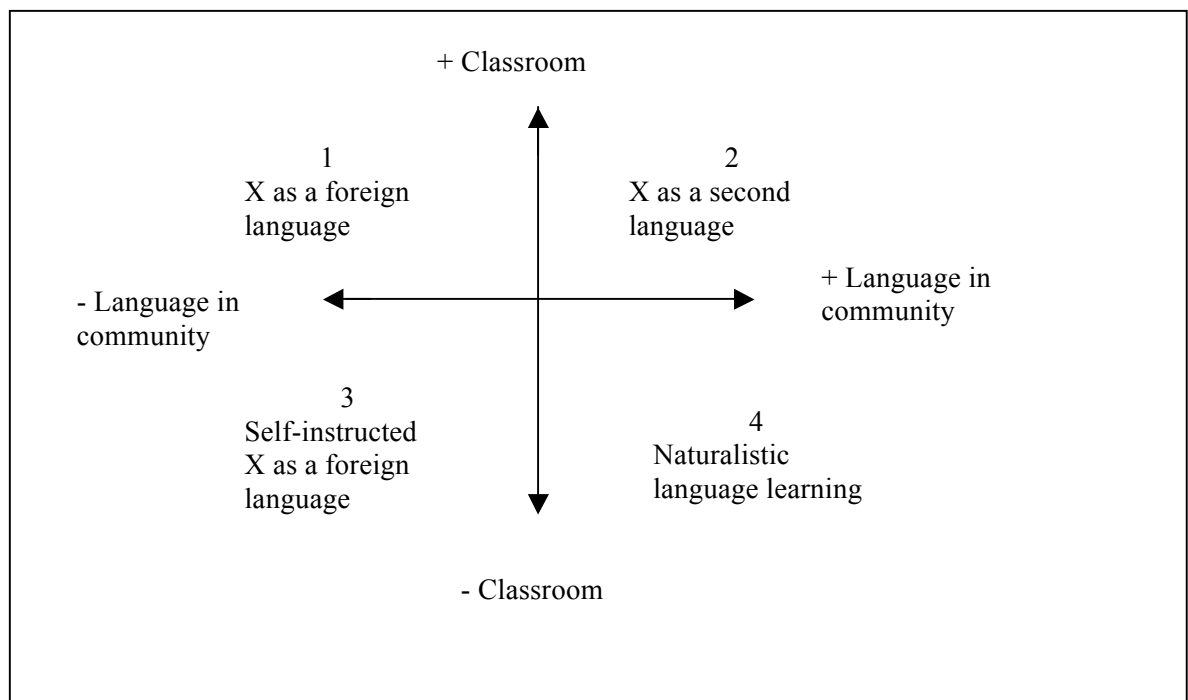


Figure 1: ‘Second’ context scenarios (Block, 2003:34)

The above figure shows that SLA researchers have extended the contexts from two (Gass and Selinker, 2001) to four (Block, 2003); from two distinguished contexts of classroom and natural situation to four contexts combining both natural and classroom contexts. Figure 1 shows that the four contexts in fact are different ‘recipes’ of the same two ingredients (classroom and natural situation) of varying proportions. However, I find current attempts at ‘isolating’ and distinguishing between contexts in SLA research problematic (also see Freed, 1995). In fact, I argue that the current views and definitions of SLA contexts have not yet covered the true context that Vietnamese students in the UK (in my research) experience.

First of all, it might be helpful to review definitions of SLA contexts (Figure 1). Block (2003:51) defines the naturalistic context as one:

*that involves no formal instruction and the learning of a language spoken in the surrounding community. In this case, the learner makes her/his way through a variety of interactions necessary to day-to-day life and must rely on her/his background knowledge, learning strategies and intuitions to get by*

According to Block (2003), the concept of naturalistic context is often neglected in mainstream SLA research. Freed (1995) attributes this to the fact that it is usually referred to as “immersion in the native speech community” in the second language context to help draw a distinction between foreign and second contexts (which both have formal language instructions whereas the naturalistic context does not, see Figure 2).

As illustrated in Figure 2 on the following page, the second language context refers to a combination of “classroom instructions and immersion in the native speech community” (Freed, 1995:5). It contrasts with the foreign context, which is limited to instructions in the classroom, situated where the target language is not shared by the local community. The “immersion”, or “out-of-class contact” (Freed, 1995) or “outside-the-classroom” activity (Block, 2003) is therefore an additional component for learners in the second context. The second language context is considered ‘ideal’ because it is considered to expose learners to numerous inputs and in a natural setting.

It contrasts sharply with the foreign language context, where learners are ‘deprived’ of social contacts with the TL community.

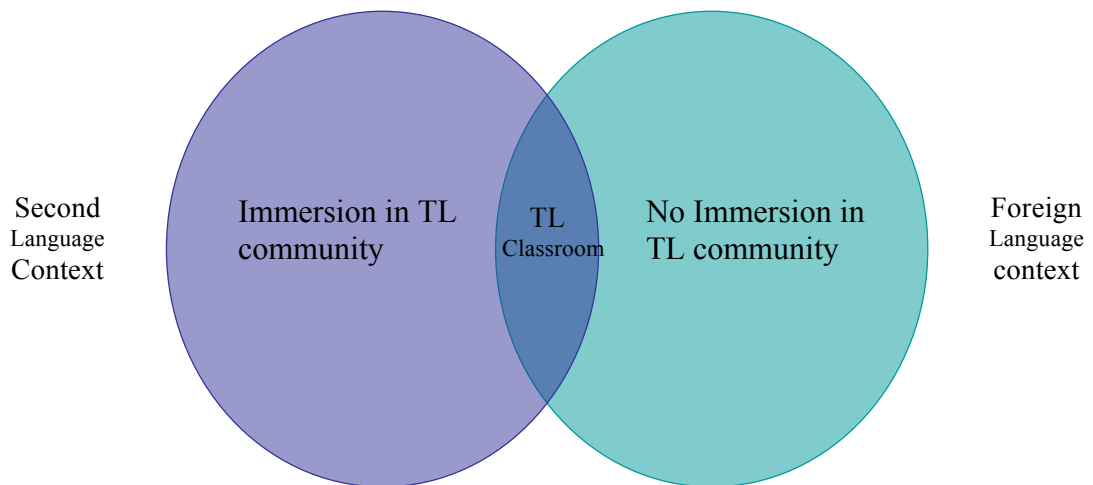


Figure 2: Comparison of Second and Foreign Language Contexts

As discussed above, SLA contexts can be expanded from two to four, yet they still fail to reflect the ‘real’ context of L2 learners. The following example will illustrate the point. A learner who has finished a period of time learning English in Vietnam may then travel to the UK to study another subject rather than the English language (e.g. MA of Business Management). According to the classic definition of the four contexts (Figure 1), she can be considered as moving from foreign language context (English classes in Vietnam) to a naturalistic context (immersed in an English speaking community in the UK albeit with no formal L2 instruction). The problem here is that once an individual learning context is categorised into foreign or second context, the learning opportunities are assumed in a “predictable manner” (Block, 2003:34).

In this regard, the Vietnamese student is assumed to have significantly less interactions with native speakers in the foreign context (English classes in Vietnam) compared to the second context when he/she resides in the UK. As a result, the next assumption is that she can be conditioned to improve her English proficiency once residing in the UK. However, if in fact the person socialises with native English speakers in Vietnam her interactions may be of a higher quality and quantity than those experienced by her UK-based counterparts who may socialise more with fellow Vietnamese (in the L1) and other international students (in L2). In this case, out-of-

class contacts in a foreign context *may* provide more inputs to the student's learning process than the second context – or at least the difference is not as great as may be imagined. The aforementioned is illustrative only, but serves as an example to demonstrate that it is not easy to assert that any one context has clear and “predictable” characteristics. Boundaries have, however, been drawn between classroom and naturalistic contexts and between foreign and second contexts. These are mainly focused on the site where the language learning process takes place. Such lines are drawn, however, without taking into account the mobility of the learner.

In the case of the Vietnamese student above, if she returns to Vietnam and continues to socialise with native English speakers and attends an English course how should we classify her experiences? It is not second language context, because it takes place in Vietnam where Vietnamese is spoken by the community. But neither is it purely foreign context, because it involves extensive extra-classroom contact with native speakers. Therefore definitions of context should be sensitive to the quality and quantity of opportunities that the learner is exposed to *vis-à-vis* the target language, rather than the location of the learning. Privileging location is too crude. A more nuanced understanding of the naturalist context in particular, and other contexts in general, needs to be factored-in when evaluating any claims of proficiency gains in study abroad programmes.

The problem with defining SLA contexts possibly results in the confusion in SLA research findings, especially claims of gains in language improvement in the second language context. The next section will deal with this issue.

## 2. Problematising research in second language context

Study abroad (SA) programmes are invaluable opportunities for students to be immersed in the target language (TL) culture, which is, in turn, assumed to lead to improvements in communicative competence (Block, 2007). There are inconsistencies - and even counter-findings - in some research into the linguistic gains associated with SA programmes. On the positive side, research has found an improvement in the oral production ability of participants in SA programmes (Brecht et al., 1993; Collentine,

2004; Freed, 1990a, 1990b; Freed et al., 2004; Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Kaplan, 1989; Lennon, 1990; Liskin-Gasparro and Urdaneta, 1995; Milleret, 1990; Polanyi, 1995; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). However, Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth (2005) cast doubt over these findings, noting that gains in communicative competence may still be sub-optimal due to individual personality traits and the specificities of particular contexts. In addition, studies that examine learners' attitude, motivation, and behaviour in the host environment - and 'link these factors directly to linguistic development - clearly show that learners do not magically become fluent speakers simply by being surrounded by the target language community (Freed 1995; Isabelli-Garcia 2006). Some inconsistencies and counter-findings may be attributable to different approaches and theoretical frameworks being used by different researchers. They can also be explained, in part, by the fact that claims are made based on different aspects of language acquisition, differing amounts of time spent abroad, and variations in the types of interactions between learners and native speakers (which is frequently not specified).

Another reason is that much research on studying abroad (Brecht et.al.1995), (Lapkin et.al. 1995), in common with many studies in SLA, does not take into account the sociolinguistic dimension, thus preventing the emergence of insights into the nature of language learning (Firth & Wagner 1997). Claims regarding language gains in SA programmes are often made based on statistically significant findings (Block, 2007). Cases involving small numbers of participants have been considered problematical and unjustifiable (Milleret, 1990). Other research (Polanyi 1995; Siegal 1995; Norton 2000; Miller and Ginsberg 1995) is purely based on 'stories from the field'.

However, I argue that one of the main problems which has largely escaped discussion is the research context itself. If a particular research is labelled as investigating learner achievement in a study abroad program, it tends to be automatically framed in a second language context, which combines practising the TL both in and out of the classroom. Freed (1995) already points out the problem of such a 'formula'. First of all, there is a lack of research on the amount of time learners actually speak the target language. Secondly, wider questions of how they actually spend their time abroad remain unanswered. Finally, learners living with host families may not necessarily speak the TL at 'home' (at least not for protracted periods, and any exchanges may be



limited to formalities and simple pleasantries and be at a 'level' determined by the host families' assessment of what is appropriate, rather than what the student needs or wants), nor with the friends they make. Again, we return to the question that the quality and quantity of interactions in the TL matter more than the location where the classroom is situated – matter more than the environment in which the learning occurs. This has led to some confusion in the findings regarding the gains of students in SA (study abroad) programmes, because the context itself is not clear.

## Abbreviations

ESL	English as Second Language
IELTS	International English Testing System
L2	Second Language
NS	Native speakers
NNS	Non-native speakers
OM/OT	Opportunity Maker/Opportunity Taker
SA	Study Abroad
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TL	Target Language
VM/VT	Value Matcher/Value Taker

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