

COMMUNICATIVENESS OF ACTIVITIES IN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS AMID CURRICULUM REFORM IN VIETNAM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 09/10/2024 Revised: 10/02/2025 Published: 11/02/2025	This study investigated the degree of communicativeness in activities conducted in primary English classes, along with the factors influencing their communicative nature. Nine teachers from eight primary schools in a Mekong Delta province, representing urban, semi-rural, and rural settings, participated in the study. Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were employed, with Littlewood's (2004) communicative continuum serving as the framework for analyzing activities across 27 video-recorded lessons and corresponding field notes. The findings indicated that most activities exhibited low levels of communicativeness, with urban teachers implementing more communicative activities than their semi-rural and rural counterparts. Teachers across all settings identified exam pressures, large class sizes, varying student proficiency levels, and limited time for communicative practice as major barriers. The study highlights the need to increase teachers and curriculum developers' awareness of communicative approaches and recommends professional development initiatives to address these challenges in primary English classrooms.
KEYWORDS	
Communicativeness of activities	
Factors affecting the communicativeness	
Primary English classes	
Curriculum reform	
Mekong Delta	

TÍNH GIAO TIẾP CỦA HOẠT ĐỘNG TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH Ở CẤP TIỂU HỌC GIỮA BỐI CẢNH CẢI CÁCH CHƯƠNG TRÌNH GIÁO DỤC PHỔ THÔNG TẠI VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 09/10/2024 Ngày hoàn thiện: 10/02/2025 Ngày đăng: 11/02/2025	Nghiên cứu này khảo sát mức độ giao tiếp của các hoạt động trong lớp học tiếng Anh tiểu học và các yếu tố ảnh hưởng. Chín giáo viên từ tám trường ở một tỉnh Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, đại diện cho các khu vực đô thị, bán nông thôn và nông thôn, đã tham gia. Quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc được thực hiện, với thang đo giao tiếp của Littlewood (2004) làm khung phân tích cho 27 bài học. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết các hoạt động có mức giao tiếp thấp, giáo viên ở đô thị thực hiện nhiều hoạt động giao tiếp hơn so với khu vực bán nông thôn và nông thôn. Các yếu tố như áp lực thi cử, sĩ số đông, trình độ không đồng đều, và thời gian dành cho thực hành giao tiếp hạn chế được xem là rào cản. Nghiên cứu kêu gọi nâng cao nhận thức và phát triển chuyên môn cho giáo viên và người phát triển chương trình giảng dạy nhằm khắc phục các thách thức trong giảng dạy giao tiếp trong lớp học tiếng Anh tiểu học.
TỪ KHÓA	
Tính giao tiếp của hoạt động	
Yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến tính giao tiếp	
Lớp học tiếng Anh tiểu học	
Cải tiến chương trình	
Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long	

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1. Introduction

Communicative language pedagogies, such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been promoted in curriculum reforms in many Asia-Pacific countries [1] - [3], including Vietnam [4]. Central to these communicative approaches are communicative activities and tasks which have become increasingly prevalent in textbooks and English classes. Following the curriculum reform in Vietnam, a series of locally published textbooks has been employed to realize this curriculum. These textbooks are claimed to include more communicative and task-like activities than the earlier ones [4]. In line with these reforms, a series of locally developed textbooks has been introduced, designed to foster communicative competence. These textbooks are claimed to include more communicative tasks and activities compared to earlier editions [5]. These communicative activities are mainly included in the production stage, following the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model that underpins the structure of the textbook lessons [4].

Investigations into curriculum reforms have attempted to investigate the extent to which teachers' teaching practices reflect CLT and TBLT through the analysis of the communicativeness of their teaching practices [6] - [8]. In a series of studies in Hong Kong, drawing on the communicative continuum in [9] to assess the degree of communicativeness of activities in primary English classes, Deng and Carless [6] found that most activities had a low level of communicativeness, despite claims of increased communicative content in the materials. In Vietnam, also drawing on the framework in [9], Dao and Newton [8] found that while textbooks for university students included more communicative tasks, their communicative value was diminished during classroom implementation. Teachers replaced the communicative and task-like textbook activities with teacher-centered, explicit grammar explanations and drill practice, indicating a low level of communicativeness.

Several studies on the implementation of CLT/TBLT curriculum reforms have revealed three main constraining factors hindering the implementation of the curriculum innovation, thus limiting the degree of communicativeness of the activities in English classes [1], [6], [8], [10], [11]. These factors include teachers' understanding of CLT, class sizes, and language proficiency of learners. Notably, Deng and Carless [6] found that teachers often favored less communicative activities because they perceived them as better suited for exam preparation, easier for students to complete, and more manageable in terms of classroom control and discipline.

Despite these insights, little research has investigated the degree of communicativeness of activities implemented in English as a foreign language (EFL) primary classrooms following the curriculum reform in Vietnam. Building on the work of Deng and Carless [6], this study aims to address this gap by examining the communicativeness of activities in primary English classes and identifying the factors influencing their communicativeness. Drawing on the framework of communicative continuum in [2], [9], this qualitative study seeks to provide in-depth insights into the implementation of a new primary English curriculum reform in a particular context of the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam.

The study seeks to address two following research questions:

1. How communicative are the activities implemented in EFL primary classes?
2. What factors affect the level of communicativeness identified?

2. Methods

2.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted at eight public primary schools in a Mekong Delta province in Southern Vietnam. The schools represented three locations, commonly found in Vietnam (urban, semi-rural, and rural). These schools had implemented the new primary English curriculum since 2013. All schools implemented a textbook series approved by the Ministry of Education and

Training (MOET), namely Global Success published by Vietnam Publisher in collaboration with Macmillan. This textbook series had been revised after a period of trialing and republished in 2022. By the time of the study, only the revised versions of the textbooks for Grades 3 and 4 were available for implementation.

Participants were nine teachers from eight primary schools. The teachers represented a diversity of gender, teaching experience, school location, and teaching grade (see Table 1 for the teachers' profile). They all hold a bachelor's degree in English language teaching, and their proficiency was reported to be at the B2 level of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Their age and teaching experience ranged from 31 to 42 and 10 to 19 years, respectively. To ensure anonymity, they are referred to as T1 through T9.

Table 1. Profiles of teacher participants

Teachers	Age (Years)	Gender	Experiences (Years)	School location	Teaching grade
T1	34	F	11	Urban	3
T2	42	F	19	Urban	3
T3	35	F	13	Urban	4
T4	31	F	10	Semi-rural	3
T5	34	M	13	Semi-rural	3
T6	31	F	10	Semi-rural	4
T7	31	M	10	Rural	4
T8	34	F	13	Rural	4
T9	34	M	13	Rural	4

Note. T = Teacher; F = Female; M = Male

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Classroom observation

Each teacher was observed for three lessons of their choice. A total of 27 lessons were observed and video-audio recorded. The observed lessons are skill-integrated, but with a predominant focus on a particular skill or language feature. Among them, 14 lessons were centered on speaking, 9 on listening, and 4 on pronunciation. Despite this focus, all lessons were observed to follow a similar procedure of 1) reviewing previously learned vocabulary, 2) engaging children in interactive, game-based activities to practice the vocabulary and stimulate interest in the presentation stage, 3) eliciting the picture (s) to lead to the main practice activities in the practice stage, 4) facilitating interactive activities for skill and language practice, and/or 5) implementing game-based activities for freer language practice in the production stage.

The first and second researchers took notes during each observed class using an adaptation of the T-COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) observation scheme, originally developed by [12]. This adaptation added a "communicativeness" component to the original COLT framework, based on [2], [9] (see Appendix A). The observation scheme was completed after each class by referring to the video recordings. The researchers also took unstructured field notes during the observation. These notes provided additional context and insights into the classroom environment, teacher-student interactions, and student engagement levels. The field notes enriched the data collected from video recordings and helped identify patterns related to the communicativeness of activities.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Each teacher was invited to a follow-up, semi-structured interview after the completion of the observations. These interviews were conducted after an initial analysis of the observation data and aimed to explore the teachers' reasoning behind their instructional choices, their evaluation of the communicativeness of the activities, and the factors influencing their decisions (see Appendix B).

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with each lasting approximately 35-40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the teachers.

2.3. Data coding and analysis

The study adopted [9] continuum of communicativeness of activities as an analytical framework (see Figure 1). According to [2], Level 1 in this continuum places the strongest emphasis on form. Activities at this level include decontextualized grammar exercises, substitution drills, and awareness-raising tasks. Level 2 features ask-and-answer exercises where the response is already known, maintaining a limited communicative degree. Moving further along the continuum, the degree of communicativeness increases. At Level 3, the language used conveys meanings that are not previously known to everyone, introducing some unpredictability through information gap activities or personalized questions. Level 4 grants some autonomy to use the language more freely to express intended meanings, typically through structured role-plays and simple problem-solving tasks. Finally, Level 5 involves unpredictable meanings and greater creativity, featuring activities like open-ended role-plays, complex problem-solving, and discussions.

Focus on forms		←	→	Focus on communication	
1. Non-communicative learning	2. Pre-communicative language practice		3. Communicative language practice	4. Structured communication	5. Authentic communication
Focus on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean.	Practice language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others.		Practice pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information.	Use language to communicate in situations that elicit pre-learned language, but with some unpredictability.	Use language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable.

Figure 1. Continuum of communicativeness of activities [9, p. 322]

The first and second authors independently coded 9 lessons (30% of the data) based on the completed observation sheets and unstructured field notes. Inter-coder reliability was calculated for coding the communicativeness of the activities using percentage agreement. The result shows satisfactory reliability (89%). Consensus on all remaining items was achieved through discussion between the raters.

All interview data were firstly transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese, only quotes used in this paper were translated into English. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis [13]. The transcripts were read and re-read for a thorough understanding. The first researcher started with the first transcript, which was then cross-checked with the second one. After that the coding process continued with the remaining eight transcripts.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Communicative level of activities in English classes

Analysis of 27 observed lessons reveals that all teachers, regardless of their school locations, follow an overall presentation-practice-production (PPP) framework for lesson implementation. While the lessons are skill-integrated, they emphasize specific skills and follow a similar procedural structure, albeit with varying degrees. Following the analytical procedure by [6], the results from the observational data are presented in Table 2. A total of 162 activities were observed across the lessons. Of these, 49.4% were classified as non-communicative, 43.8% involved pre-communicative language practice, and only 6.8% reached a communicative level.

Further analysis of the results revealed certain differences across the three school locations. As shown in Table 3, there were slight variations in the number of activities implemented at each location. Urban teachers conducted the highest number of activities overall, as well as more pre-

communicative and communicative activities compared to their semi-rural and rural counterparts. In contrast, rural teachers had the highest proportion of non-communicative activities, while both semi-rural and rural teachers conducted similarly low numbers of communicative activities.

Table 2. Teachers' classroom activities

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice	Communicative language practice
Drilling (48 activities) 1. Teacher-led drills reviewing vocabulary items and structures through games. 2. Dialogue practice (i.e., listen and repeat after the teacher and between groups) 3. Listen and repeat teachers' words or phrases one by one.	Ask-and-answer practice (22 activities) 1. Ask and answer based on the pictures provided. Practice activities (with some information gap) (22 activities) 2. Listen and tick/number/choose a correct answer 3. Look and complete sentences	Meaningful practice (11 activities) 1. Guessing games 2. Personalised questioning and answering in groups/pairs
Explanation (32 activities) 1. Explain meaning and use of the target structure 2. Explain and check answers to textbook activities 3. Instruct explicitly how to pronounce certain sounds.	Practice games (27 activities) 1. Games involving students in asking and answering by choosing certain pictures of people, things, animals in the textbooks or shown on the screen (e.g., Passing the ball game, Lucky number game...) 2. Chant or sing with actions.	
80 activities (49.4%)	71 activities (43.8%)	11 activities (6.8%)

Table 3. Variations across the school settings

Communicative level	School setting			Total
	Urban	Semi-rural	Rural	
Level 1 (non-communicative)	25	24	31	80
Level 2 (pre-communicative)	28	24	19	71
Level 3 (communicative)	5	3	3	11
Total	58	51	53	162

Notably, the analysis of the observational data reveals that the dominant mode of interaction in the observed classes is between the teacher and students, either individually or as a whole class. This suggests a tendency toward teacher-centered instruction, with minimal or no peer-to-peer interaction among learners.

3.1.2. Factors affecting the level of communicativeness of activities

Results from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations identified four key inter-related factors influencing the level of communicativeness in the activities across the 27 observed lessons. These factors are outlined below:

Pressure from exams

All teachers across the three school settings reported that pressure from exams was the primary factor. They admitted that the level of communicativeness of classroom activities remained quite low, as much of the time was spent on drilling activities to help students memorize the target vocabulary and structures in preparation for the exams. As T7 commented, "Students have to pass the exams, so I need to help them memorize the target vocabulary and structural pattern to be well-prepared for the exams."

Large class sizes

Most of the teachers (7 out of 9) reported that large class sizes limited their ability to carry out activities with a higher-level of communicativeness. They often struggled to implement pair and

group work due to challenges with noise and discipline, making classroom management more difficult. Managing these activities was particularly demanding and left them exhausted, reducing their energy for subsequent classes. As T1 commented, *"It is very hard to manage a large class of around 40 students for pair or group work activities. I had to choose more teacher-led activities so that I could control them and save my energy for the next classes."*

Low and mixed-proficiency level of the students

Teachers from semi-rural and rural schools expressed concerns about their students' low language proficiency, which made it hard for them to engage these students in pre- and communicative activities. While acknowledging that many students were advanced, urban teachers highlighted the challenge of mixed-ability classes. They noted that weaker students struggled to keep up and often felt demotivated to participate in interactive activities, discouraging the teachers from implementing more communicative tasks. As one urban teacher, T3, explained, *"I know that many of my students are good, but some are very weak. If I carry out communicative activities, many weaker students cannot follow and lose motivation."*

Limited time for communicative practice

All teachers (except T5) commented that they had little time available in a lesson to carry out communicative activities because a considerable amount of time was needed for drilling practice activities. They expressed a concern that their students would not be able to ask and answer each other in the less controlled activities if they were not sufficiently engaged in repetitive practice of the target vocabulary and structures. Therefore, they often resorted to less communicative, game-like, teacher-led activities, involving only a few students. As T8 commented, *"I cannot skip or minimize the time for repetitive practice because, without this drill, it is very hard for students to participate in freer practice activities. Consequently, there is less time left for communicative activities."*

Interestingly, three teachers (one rural, two semi-rural), while acknowledging that they allocated considerable time for repetitive practice activities, expressed concerns about their effectiveness. They recognized that these activities were not only time-consuming but also boring and lacking in communicative value. Despite this awareness, they felt compelled to adhere to the prescribed procedure due to the factors previously mentioned.

3.2. Discussion

This study first examined the communicative level of activities implemented in primary English classes across three school settings (urban, semi-rural, and rural) in a Mekong Delta province in Vietnam, amid curriculum reform. Using Littlewood's communicative continuum framework, the analysis of 27 observed lessons from nine teachers across the three school locations revealed that the majority of activities fell into non-communicative or pre-communicative categories, with only a small percentage reaching a communicative level. These findings are consistent with those of [4], [6], [8], who similarly observed low levels of communicativeness of activities implemented across primary, secondary and university EFL classes, respectively. A key finding in the present study is that teachers in urban schools implemented more pre-communicative and communicative activities than those in semi-rural and rural schools. This finding is consistent with [14], who found that urban students, with greater exposure to English, were generally better equipped to participate in communicative activities. In contrast, rural students, as also noted by [14], faced motivational challenges due to limited opportunities for English use, lack of parental support, and poorer living conditions compared to their urban peers.

The study further investigated the factors limiting the communicativeness of activities from the teachers' perspectives. A common concern among most teachers across all three school settings was the pressure to prepare students for exams and manage large class sizes, which they reported as major barriers to implementing more communicative activities. These findings are consistent with previous research by [6], indicating that exam-focused instruction forces teachers to prioritize

mechanical learning over more interactive, communicative approaches. Additionally, many teachers acknowledged the need to dedicate substantial time to repetitive practice of target language structures. They emphasized the importance of mechanical drills to ensure students could accurately produce the language in the production stage. This finding also aligns with prior studies [4], [8]. Notably, a few teachers criticized the reliance on mechanical drills during the practice stage, arguing that such activities failed to foster communicative competence in their students. This criticism reflects an emerging awareness of the limitations of mechanical drills, likely influenced by the teachers' own language learning experiences, teaching background, and recent training related to the new curriculum.

Another significant finding is that rural and semi-rural teachers perceived their students' low language proficiency as a key factor limiting the communicativeness of the activities they implemented, while urban teachers faced challenges with mixed-proficiency classes. This could be that many urban students had access to private tutoring, which elevated their language proficiency compared to their peers, a resource not readily available to students in rural areas. This finding was consistent with a previous study by [14], highlighting an inequality of access to English teaching and learning in primary schools in Vietnam and pointing to an educational gap that affects the implementation of communicative activities.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study could be used as a source of reference for in-service teacher professional development in Vietnamese EFL contexts and beyond. There is a need to raise teachers' and curriculum developers' awareness of the communicative level of the activities implemented in real primary classrooms amid a curriculum reform. Additionally, teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) training has an important role to play in helping teachers enhance their pedagogical skills to increase the communicative level of activities conducted in their classrooms. Finally, addressing barriers that limit the communicativeness of activities requires skills on the part of the teachers; they could, therefore, be solved by a CPD program designed to help teachers resolve these classroom challenges [15].

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. For example, it focused on a small group of EFL primary school teachers from eight schools. Expanding the sample size is important to ensure the results better represent a broader population of Vietnamese EFL primary teachers and can be applied to other similar EFL settings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

OBSERVATION FORM

Date: _____

Class: _____

Teacher: _____

Visit No.: _____

Number of students: _____ Page: _____

Summary of Activities

Time	Activity	Organization					Skills-focus					Communicativeness				
		T-S/C	S-S/C	Choral	Group	Individual	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Other	Non.	Pre.	Com.	Str.	Aut.

(Adapted from [6])

Note: T-S/C = Teachers to students/whole class; S-S/C = Students-students/whole class; Non. = Non-communicative learning; Pre. = Pre-communicative language practice; Com. = Communicative language practice; Str. = Structured communication; Aut. = Authentic communication.

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview

1. How do you evaluate the communicative effectiveness of the activities used in your primary English class?
2. What key factors do you think influence the communicativeness of the activities you implement in your lessons?
3. What aspects of your lesson do you believe contributed most to or hindered the communicativeness of the activities, and why?
4. Are you satisfied with the level of student participation in communicative activities? Why or why not?
5. In your view, how do your teaching methods promote the development of students' communicative competence in primary English classes?