NAVIGATING TASK SELECTION: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAMESE EFL LECTURERS IN MIXED-LEVEL CLASSES

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the strategies and challenges Vietnamese EFL lectures faced when selecting tasks for mixed-level classes at university level. Adopting an Activity Theory perspective, it reports on data collected from semi-structured interviews with eight lecturers at a Vietnamese university in the Mekong Delta. Results indicate that lecturers used different strategies when selecting tasks such as task differentiation, scaffolding, input modification, and interactional strategies in response to learner diversity. Despite these efforts, they encountered big challenges related to contextual constraints (e.g., time limitation and rigid curriculum), teacher capacity (e.g., preparation demands and fairness concerns), and student factors (e.g., low autonomy and dependence on AI tools). Accordingly, the study highlights the complexity of task selection in diverse EFL settings and calls for institutional support as well as teachers' training. It also contributes insights into inclusive task design and pedagogical decision-making in higher education.*

Keywords: *challenges, higher education, mixed-ability instruction, strategies, task selection*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, in Vietnam and around the world, mixed-ability classes pose a common issue. The fact that EFL teachers across the globe often have students with diverse levels of language proficiency in their classrooms not only complicates planning but also affects the nature of language instruction (Gustiani, 2018). Varied learner ability is a major challenge in imparting effective instruction, as it compels teachers to cater to plethora of linguistic needs while ensuring inclusion and motivation in their instruction (Tomlinson, 2014).

Task selection is a critical factor in this regard. Effective tasks need to be based on a balance between accessibility and challenge, that is all students, no matter how good or bad they are at the subject, need to be able to participate in learning (in ways that are significant) (Willis & Willis, 2013). Brown (2014) stresses that effectively designed tasks facilitate inclusivity since they encourage levels of engagement among varying proficiency ranges.

Its relevance in Vietnam is apparent by the common observation of multi-proficiency classes when it comes to EFL instruction (Harmer, 2015). Vietnamese teachers frequently encounter the challenge of creating or selecting activities that cater for learners at two ends of the proficiency continuum (Grant & Nguyen, 2017). It is required to consider not only linguistic differences but also group effect, learner's motivation and effectiveness of task for language learning. Moreover, Al-Mohammadi (2015) also emphasizes the significance of an adequate level of difficulty. The tasks should not be too easy in order to not bore advanced group and they should not be too difficult in order not to discourage lower ones (Willis & Willis, 2013).

Although the necessity of task selection for working in hetero-geneous classrooms is widely recognized, it seems that empirical

studies on teachers' "doing" are not common. Although the literature on this practice (e.g., Gustiani, 2018; Harmer, 2015) describes the general challenges of mixed-ability groups, it gives no insight into how teachers "tune" a task to make it accessible to different learners. While some researchers (e.g., Brown, 2014; Harmer, 2015) recommend task-based language learning in which tasks are tailored to learners' needs, interests and backgrounds, there is little understanding how such a proposed approach can be applied in practice in Vietnamese tertiary contexts. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by investigating the strategies and challenges Vietnamese EFL lecturers encounter in task selection for mixed-level university classrooms. The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. What strategies do Vietnamese EFL lecturers use when selecting tasks for mixed-level classes?

ii. What are Vietnamese EFL lecturers' perceptions of the challenges involved in task selection for mixed-level classes?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Task Selection and Strategies for Task Selection in EFL Classes

Task selection is the decision making process by which teachers select instructional tasks that support learning goals, cater for different proficiency levels, and target curricular goals. In EFL learning situation, it means when measuring the quality, it is concerned primarily with the appropriateness of tasks to the basic skills of the language, the engagement of the learners, and how it fits to the cultural and institutional context (Ellis, 2003).

In mixed-level classes, the choice of a task is very important. To do this, teachers need to control task accessibility and difficulty, to make sure all students can participate meaningfully (Nunan, 2004). This is where the complexity of tasks, cognitive load and differentiation all needs careful thought.

Furthermore, in mixed level classes, the task selection, taking into account different pupils' abilities and learning need, is much more complicated. One of the commonly employed strategies of dealing with this complexity inherent to learning materials is tiered tasks, in which tasks are tiered to different complex levels with common theme or instructional objective. For example, less proficient learners can carry out simplified or limited vocabulary building activities, with more advanced learners being engaged in more analytical or communicative tasks such as debates or presentations (Tomlinson, 2014). Another common one is scaffolding (i.e., teachers provide structured supports). It is believed that scaffolding can be reduced as learners become more proficient and independent (Wood et al., 1976).

Various models of grouping including flexible grouping are often used to facilitate differentiated instruction. Teachers can assign students to small groups based on ability, interest, or groupings can be random to develop collaborative learning and peer support. This approach exposes students to different perspectives and fosters inclusive participation (Kingore, 2004; Tomlinson, 2014). Another approach is task-based differentiation, in which the work given to students is designed to play to their individual strengths or address their noted weaknesses, while still keeping an eye on clear learning goals. For example, one group could focus on pronunciation, and another, on writing - if these are the same topic area (Slavin, 2014).

Designing tasks that simulate real-life situations such as role-plays, problem-solving scenarios, or interactive simulations also enhances relevance and

learner engagement. These authentic tasks encourage students to use language meaningfully and relate their classroom learning to practical contexts (Nunan, 2004). Alongside these strategies, formative assessment plays a critical role in informing task selection. Continuous monitoring of student progress allows teachers to adjust tasks in response to learners' needs and ensure that they remain developmentally appropriate (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

2.2 Challenges in Task Selection for EFL Classes

EFL lecturers face multiple challenges in selecting tasks, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms characterized by diverse linguistic and learning needs. A primary difficulty lies in balancing the needs of learners at different proficiency levels (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Tasks must support less proficient students without demotivating more advanced ones. While differentiation is essential, it is often time-intensive and may not align with institutional requirements (Alsubaie, 2015; Afshai et al., 2019).

Maintaining an optimal level of task complexity is another challenge. Tasks that are too difficult can lead to disengagement, while overly simple tasks may fail to promote meaningful learning (Sang & Van Loi, 2023). Institutional and resource-related constraints compound these issues. Many lecturers rely on fixed textbooks that may not accommodate diverse learning needs. Additionally, large class sizes and rigid curricula limit opportunities for personalized instruction (Hien & Loan, 2018). Time limitations are also a major concern. Designing differentiated tasks requires planning and creativity, but lecturers often face heavy workloads that restrict preparation time (Willis & Willis, 2013).

Cultural factors further complicate task selection. Vietnamese classrooms often adhere to traditional norms that favor teacher-centered instruction. These norms may conflict with communicative and task-based approaches, requiring teachers to invest additional effort in contextual adaptation (Sang & Van Loi, 2023). Moreover, learner motivation and autonomy can be inconsistent. Engaging students through relevant and authentic tasks is crucial, but not always easy to achieve (Alwy, 2025). Promoting self-regulated learning is particularly challenging when students are unfamiliar with independent or exploratory approaches (Willis & Willis, 2013).

2.3 Cultural and Contextual Influences on Task Selection

Cultural and contextual factors play a critical role in shaping task selection in EFL instruction. As Ellis (2003) notes, effective tasks must reflect both learner proficiency and the specific realities of the teaching environment. In Vietnam, for instance, teaching practices are deeply influenced by cultural expectations. Educators often view language teaching as closely linked to moral and cultural education. As Hoa and Vien (2018) observe, this can result in an emphasis on surface-level cultural themes, potentially limiting deeper intercultural learning. Additionally, traditional teacher-centered norms may hinder the adoption of more interactive or student-led task approaches.

Contextual constraints also limit instructional flexibility. Vietnamese universities often prioritize exam preparation and standardized assessments, leading lecturers to select tasks that align with testing requirements rather than communicative goals (Cao, 2018). This focus restricts the use of authentic, student-centered activities.

Pedagogical frameworks further influence task selection. While approaches like Task-Based Language Teaching encourage authentic language use, implementation in

Vietnamese contexts is hindered by rigid curricula, limited resources, and entrenched teaching habits (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

2.4 Research Methods

2.4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how Vietnamese EFL lecturers navigate task selection in mixed-level classes. A qualitative approach is preferred for this study as it allows for an in depth examination of lecturers' beliefs, decision making and teaching (Patton, 2002). Unlike methods utilizing quantitative measures, which limit themselves to measurable variables, qualitative research attempts to represent the context and interpretive features of the practices involved in teaching, and thus provides a richer conception of what actually goes on in classrooms.

2.4.2 Research Participants

The study involved eight EFL lecturers from a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, all of whom had experience teaching English in mixed-level university classes. Participants were selected purposively based on their relevant teaching backgrounds and familiarity with task selection and adaptation for learners with diverse proficiency levels. All had current or prior experience in such settings and agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews.

The sample included seven female and one male lecturer, representing variation in age, teaching experience, academic background, and areas of specialization within English language teaching. While some had extensive experience managing heterogeneous classrooms, others were relatively new to task adaptation in mixed-level contexts. This diversity aligned with Creswell's (2013) recommendation for capturing a wide range of perspectives to enhance the depth and richness of qualitative data.

2.4.3 Research Instrument

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore how Vietnamese EFL lecturers selected tasks for mixed-level classes and the challenges they faced. This method allowed for consistency across key themes while offering participants flexibility to elaborate on their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for examining complex pedagogical practices, balancing structure with the adaptability needed to probe deeper into participants' responses (Galletta, 2013; Kallio et al., 2016).

The interview protocol covered two main areas: lecturers' task selection strategies and the challenges encountered in implementation. It consisted of two sections including background information (age, gender, teaching experience, qualifications) and a core section on classroom practices in mixed-level settings. Open-ended questions and follow-up prompts encouraged detailed responses while maintaining a consistent structure (Mason, 2004).

Interview questions were informed by Skehan's (1998) task framework, focusing on linguistic complexity, cognitive demand, and communicative stress. This theoretical grounding supported a focused investigation of how lecturers navigate task design in diverse classrooms. The approach yielded rich insights into the strategies and constraints shaping task selection in Vietnamese EFL contexts.

2.4.4 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

To ensure clarity and validity of interview protocol, it was validated through a two-step process. An experienced EFL lecturer read through the questions initially, followed by a pilot interview with a lecturer outside the main sample of participants. Minor revisions were made in response to feedback to enhance clarity and flow. It

is important to mention that for its pilot, this study used the Vietnamese to allow fuller expression of pedagogical ideas, a language choice maintained for the main interviews to ensure participant comfort and depth of response (Creswell, 2012; Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004).

Of the 15 lecturers invited, eight agreed to participate. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and held either online or in person. Each session lasted about 60 minutes, was conducted in Vietnamese, and followed ethical procedures, including signed consent and confidentiality assurances. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The protocol included background questions and core items on task selection strategies and challenges, with open-ended prompts and follow-ups to elicit detailed responses.

As for data analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in lecturers' responses, offering insight into their strategies and the challenges of task selection in mixed-level classrooms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the six-phase process including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting, the data were organized into main themes and subthemes capturing instructional practices and obstacles.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Strategies Vietnamese EFL Lecturers Used for Task Selection in Mixed-Level Classes

3.1.1 Task Adaptation

Task adaptation emerged as a core strategy used by all participants (n = 8) to manage the varied proficiency levels in their classrooms. Lecturers reported modifying tasks in terms of difficulty, format, and content through three main approaches including tiered tasks, task-based differentiation, and authentic task design.

Tiered tasks allowed students to engage with the same topic at varying levels of complexity. Participant L2 explained: "For shopping topics, I ask lower-level students simple ingredient questions, while higher-level students plan a party menu and assign tasks, requiring them to use more complex language and structures." L8 similarly noted: "I adjust exercises to fit the students' levels [...] simplifying for lower-level learners and making them more challenging for those with higher proficiency." Several lecturers structured tasks based on Bloom's Taxonomy. L1, for instance, explained: "If tasks are too easy, they're ineffective. But if they're too hard, they can overwhelm students. I structure tasks using Bloom's Taxonomy, starting with recognition, then explanation, and eventually application in real-life contexts." L6 shared a similar approach: "I begin by ensuring students understand the core concepts. Then I move to application and analysis-level exercises. I design activities in stages, starting with comprehension, followed by application, and progressing to analysis." These accounts align with the concept of tiered task design, which involves preparing parallel tasks at different complexity levels while maintaining a shared learning objective (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007; Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014).

Task-based differentiation was also widely reported. L2 noted: "Many students struggle with listening, so I adapt tasks, starting with speaker identification, then using multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank exercises, analyzing grammar, and finishing with a new passage using the same structures." L4 emphasized the need to consider learners' academic background, stating that: "I take into account whether students are in their first, second, third, or fourth year, especially in classes that mix year levels. Their learning styles, personalities, and proficiency levels vary by

age and experience." These practices align with Subban (2006) and Tomlinson (2001), who argue that differentiated instruction provides equitable access while addressing learner diversity.

Authentic tasks were another prevalent strategy. L3 explained: "I often assign higher-level students roles as peer teachers or assistants. They explain content, present key points, and support others, helping them reinforce their own learning while assisting classmates." L5 described a writing activity: "I assign a job application task where students write cover letters. After self-correcting errors, another group acts as recruiters, reviewing, giving feedback, and deciding whether to 'hire' the applicant." Such tasks mirror real-world contexts, encouraging meaningful use of language and peer collaboration (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Richards, 2006; Willis, 1996).

It is obvious that these approaches reflect an adaptive pedagogy where tasks are aligned to both learner needs and communicative objectives. Authentic, tiered, and differentiated tasks help foster motivation and ensure meaningful participation across proficiency levels (Cameron, 2001; Kramsch, 1993; Nunan, 2004).

3.1.2 Scaffolding

The findings show that all participants employed scaffolding to help students complete tasks effectively. It should be mentioned that six forms were identified including content, procedural, questioning, linguistic, visual, and modeling.

Content scaffolding involved sequencing material from simple to complex. To illustrate, L4 stated: "I believe the information should begin with the most basic and easy-to-understand points, and then gradually become more complex." L7 added: "I organize topics to suit the learners. We start with familiar themes like 'Family' or 'Jobs' at the B1 level, and only later move to more abstract topics such as 'The Environment'."

Procedural scaffolding supported students by breaking tasks into steps. L4 explained: "I usually guide students step by step, especially with difficult lessons. I divide them into smaller parts so students don't feel overwhelmed." L2 elaborated: "Instead of starting with multiple-choice questions right away, I scaffold the task. First, students listen to identify who is speaking. Then they do a fill-in-the-blank activity, and only later move on to answering comprehension questions."

The findings show that scaffolded questioning allowed adjustment of cognitive demand. L1 shared: "For lower-level students, I use simple questions like: 'Imagine you are traveling home, what problems might you encounter before, during, and after the trip?' They can use real-life experiences and basic sentence structures to respond." L7 explained: "In discussions or quick assessments, I follow Bloom's Taxonomy, starting with 'What, When, Where' questions before moving to 'How' and 'Why'. This gradual increase in difficulty helps students reach the learning goal."

Furthermore, linguistic scaffolding included sentence starters and simplified language. L2 explained: "I use the scaffolding method by giving students pre-made sentence structures for speaking practice." L8 added: "For students with lower proficiency, I simplify complex questions and provide basic sentence patterns. Once they master those, I introduce more advanced structures."

Regarding visual scaffolding, it involved mind maps, videos, and diagrams. L8, for instance, said: "When students struggle with new words, I use context, pictures, videos, or multimedia tools to help them

visualize and remember better." In a similar vein, L1 shared: "I guide students to create mind maps to help them organize and recall information. For projects, I use diagrams to show the steps. In speaking tasks, the mind map might include suggested ideas to support practice."

The lecturers also believed that modeling clarified expectations. L3 noted: "Students may go off track without clear expectations, so I provide model tasks, either from past students, my own demonstrations, or by having stronger students present first to guide their peers."

From these perspectives, these findings align with Vygotsky's (1978) who emphasize the value of scaffolding in bridging gaps in language proficiency (Gibbons, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Walqui, 2006). Scaffolding enables learners to work within their zone of proximal development, the space between what they can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate guidance. Through tailored support, such as step-by-step instruction, strategic questioning, and modeling, teachers help students gradually develop the competence to complete tasks autonomously. This process fosters not only linguistic development but also cognitive and metacognitive growth, as learners are encouraged to engage with increasingly complex language structures and tasks over time. In this way, scaffolding serves both as a bridge to immediate task success and a foundation for long-term language proficiency and learner independence.

From these perspectives, this study resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) stressing the importance of scaffolding to bridge language gaps (Gibbons, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Walqui, 2006). Scaffolding allows individuals to operate within their zone of proximal development, which is the gap between what they can do

with help and what they can do on their own. By providing support (e.g., in the form of scaffolding, which is step-by-step instruction and strategic questioning and modelling), teachers support students in building the competence to do a task independently over time. This supports not only the linguistic but the cognitive, and metacognitive development of the learner as he or she is guided to interact with more and more complex language forms and tasks as they go along. In this respect, scaffolding acts as both a bridge to successful task performance and as a building block to long-term language acquisition and learner autonomy.

3.1.3 Spaced Repetition and Vocabulary Recycling

The findings show that five participants reported using spaced repetition and vocabulary recycling to enhance long-term retention. For instance, L1 stated: "I frequently repeat important vocabulary so that students can remember it better and use it more confidently." Similarly, L8 added: "For students who struggle, I emphasize key words and repeat them multiple times to strengthen their memory."

Lecturers also reintroduced vocabulary in new contexts. L1 explained: "Even when moving on to a new topic, I still revisit difficult words from earlier lessons, using them in different ways. This gives students another chance to process and remember them." L4 shared: "I might introduce one synonym for a word today, and another the next day. That way, students connect different forms of the word and develop a richer vocabulary."

These strategies are consistent with cognitive research on memory consolidation via multiple exposure, which suggests that learning is strengthened when learners revisit material over spaced intervals (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2000; Tharp &

Gallimore, 1988). Repeated exposure to words in various tasks promotes the formation of form-meaning relationships and retention in vocabulary learning. Reusing vocabulary in various contexts also prompts students to process the words deeply, leading to a deeper understanding of meaning, to noticing collocates and to productive use of words in authentic communication. Such instruction advances receptive and productive dimensions of vocabulary and enhances subsequent language development (Ellis, 2003; Kang, 2016; Webb, 2007).

3.1.4 Communication Strategies, Interactional Support, and Input Modification

Most lecturers (n = 7 out of 8) used a combination of communication strategies, interactional scaffolding, and input modification to ensure clarity and engagement in mixed-level classes.

It is reported that communication strategies included simplification and L1 use. L1 noted: "If a textbook uses unfamiliar terms, like 'gist' instead of 'main idea', I replace it with simpler vocabulary so students can understand." L5 added: "To make sure students understand terms like 'task fulfilment', I'll explain the concept in Vietnamese. Once they grasp the meaning, they can apply it in practice even without long English explanations." L8 stated: "In mixed-level classes, I use paraphrasing, negotiation of meaning, and give clear examples so that even lower-level students can follow and contribute."

Moreover, interactional scaffolding was common. L3 shared: "After giving instructions, I often ask a student to restate the main task requirements in their own words." L5 described: "Sometimes my instructions are long. If I sense confusion, I ask stronger students to explain them again, then turn to weaker students and ask, 'So, what exactly are we supposed to do?'"

Comprehensible input was another key concern. For instance, L1 noted: "When I give instructions, I make sure 70 to 80% of the students can understand the main points." L7 emphasized: "The key is not to use complex language. Instructions need to be clear so learners know exactly what is expected of them." Contextual input supported meaning. L1 explained: "I might give examples or show a video that uses the target vocabulary in a specific situation to help students understand how it works." L4 added: "If a reading passage about whales confuses students, I'll show them a video. Once they see real images, the text becomes easier to understand."

These approaches are also in accordance with the sociocultural theory and the input hypothesis (Gibbons, 2002; Krashen, 1982; Sweller et al., 2019), emphasizing the role of interaction, scaffolding and comprehensible input for language learning. From a sociocultural stand point, peer support, clarification checks and modelling all contribute to a collaborative learning environment in which knowledge is constructed interpsychologically based on interaction. Meanwhile, Krashen's input hypothesis highlights the need for language input that is slightly above the learners' current level but still understandable. The use of simplified language, visual aids, and contextual examples helps make this input accessible, especially in mixed-level classrooms. Together, these strategies enhance student engagement, reduce cognitive overload, and ensure that instructional content remains within reach for learners with diverse language proficiencies.

3.2. Vietnamese EFL Lecturers' Perceptions of Challenges in Task Selection for Mixed-Level Classes

3.2.1 Contextual Challenges

Vietnamese EFL lecturers reported several contextual challenges, notably time constraints, curriculum rigidity, and student proficiency gaps. Time limitations often hindered scaffolding and step-by-step instruction. As L4 explained, "According to the curriculum, students must write an essay in one class, but scaffolding each step takes too long, leaving no time for actual writing before the session ends." Similarly, curriculum constraints restricted lecturers' ability to adapt textbook-based tasks, even when the content failed to engage students. L3 noted, "I can't change topics because the syllabus requires sticking to textbook themes, which often makes tasks boring for students." She added, "Students engage more in topics like Festivals, Fashion, or Food, but show less interest in themes like the environment or books which I can't change due to syllabus constraints." L4 shared a similar concern: "There are some tasks based on textbook topics that students don't like. They even say so directly, but they still have to complete them because they are part of the required content."

Varying proficiency levels posed further difficulties. L1 remarked, "High-level students handle tasks well, but lower-level ones struggle. I can't always simplify or skip steps, as doing so repeatedly would hinder their progress." L4 echoed this, stating, "The curriculum sets clear outcomes, but mixed proficiency levels make it hard to group students evenly and ensure effective discussion of the same task."

These challenges reflect broader contradictions in the educational system, as interpreted through Engeström's (2014) Activity Theory. The alignment between the subject (teacher), tools (tasks), rules (curriculum), and object (learning outcomes) is often disrupted. Time constraints, for instance, conflict with the pedagogical need for scaffolded instruction (Hammond, 2001), while rigid curricula inhibit responsive task design tailored to student interest or proficiency (Graves, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). The findings affirm prior studies highlighting the tension between mandated curricula and the autonomy needed for effective differentiation in EFL classrooms (Borg, 2006; Graves, 2008).

The challenge of addressing varying student proficiency levels is consistent with findings by Nation and Macalister (2010) and Tomlinson (2014), who note that tasks that are too advanced for some and too simplistic for others undermine engagement. While tiered tasks or differentiated instruction offer theoretical solutions, their practical implementation is hindered by institutional factors such as time constraints, insufficient training, and uniform assessment practices (Nation & Macalister, 2010; Ur, 1996). Uniform curricular expectations can also create unrealistic demands across proficiency levels (Black & Wiliam, 1998), contributing to inequity in instructional outcomes (Engeström, 2014; Fullan, 2007).

These contextual constraints highlight the need for systemic change. Flexibility in curriculum design, time allocation for differentiated instruction, and institutional recognition of learner diversity are crucial if EFL lecturers are to implement inclusive and effective task selection strategies (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2017).

3.2.2 Teacher-related Challenges

Lecturers also reported teacher-related challenges, including difficulties in evaluating materials, time-intensive preparation, complexities of differentiation, uncertainty in assessing task difficulty, fairness in grading, and generational gaps in content relevance.

L1 highlighted the difficulty of evaluating online materials, stating that: "The challenge is to verify, evaluate, and analyze online materials to ensure they align with teaching goals. I have to consider how content affects

students' understanding and whether it suits their proficiency levels." L4 shared similar concerns: "The internet offers more resources, but not all of them are reliable or official. I'm not really confident in my ability to evaluate them properly."

Time constraints further complicated material selection and task design. L1 said, "I can't always create tasks myself, and evaluating available materials thoroughly takes time. It's better to use reliable sources, but finding them can be time-consuming." L3 added, "Designing effective tasks that meet instructional goals takes a lot of time and effort, from selecting materials to creating activities."

Differentiating within a single class was particularly demanding. L3 explained: "Having students at different levels in one class means I need to prepare various activities for different groups. It's not just about differentiating across classes but within the same classroom, which requires designing multiple exercises." Although many lecturers employed Bloom's Taxonomy, applying it in practice was complex. L4 noted: "I use Bloom's Taxonomy to classify activities, but sometimes what I see as recognition-level might feel like an application task to students. Likewise, something I view as application might require extra analysis from them."

Fairness in grading tiered tasks was another concern. L4 remarked: "Tiered tasks raise fairness concerns. I mean advanced students feel burdened with more work and question the benefits, making me doubt if my grading is truly fair."

Finally, the generational gap between lecturers and students made authentic task selection more difficult. L4 stated: "There's a generational gap. Gen Z students pick up trends instantly, while I might take a month to catch on. This makes it hard to include topics that truly engage them."

These findings underscore the cognitive and emotional demands placed on teachers. Lack of confidence in evaluating digital resources highlights the need for professional development in digital literacy and pedagogical content knowledge (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). Task preparation, particularly when aiming for differentiated instruction, is time-consuming and often unsustainable under current workloads (Levy, 2008; Subban, 2006).

The practical difficulty of differentiation within a single classroom reflects findings by Tobin and Tippett (2014), who note that task variation requires instructional agility and collaboration. Without institutional support, this burden falls disproportionately on individual teachers (Kingore, 2004).

Lecturers' struggles with aligning task difficulty to learners' cognitive levels further support Vygotsky's (1978) argument that instruction must align with learners' zones of proximal development. Misjudging task difficulty can undermine learning by either overwhelming or underchallenging students (Brookhart, 2013).

Concerns around fairness in tiered tasks reflect a well-documented tension in differentiated instruction, balancing equity with perception of effort and reward (Brighton et al., 2005). Finally, generational disconnects in content selection affirm the need for ongoing engagement with learners' cultural and digital contexts to ensure authentic task relevance (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011; Herrington et al., 2003).

3.2.3 Learner-related Challenges

Learner-related challenges included motivation, autonomy, engagement, and academic integrity. Motivation varied across proficiency levels. L3 observed: "The learning attitude of high-achieving

students is sometimes not as positive as that of weaker students. It can be difficult to gain their attention and encourage them to participate in classroom tasks." L4 added: "Weaker students tend to feel insecure, unmotivated, and have little self-confidence. Even with encouragement from me or their peers, progress is hard unless they put in effort themselves. Some students remain passive or even want to give up."

Lack of autonomy was another key issue. L1 noted: "Higher-level students can usually search for information themselves, but lower-level students often don't even know how to begin." Fatigue and disengagement were also widespread. To illustrate, L4 explained: "Students often come to class tired and prefer quick, easy tasks. Even high-level students finish fast and favor efficient, straightforward activities." Sharing the same view, L2 said: "Some students simply refuse to do anything. Even with group support and sentence patterns to follow, some respond by saying, 'I don't know anything.'"

Academic integrity was a growing concern, especially in relation to AI-generated responses. L2 stated: "Many students use ChatGPT for writing. I can usually tell by reading their work. They also rely on AI for speaking, which means they don't actually practice. Then during exams, they don't know what to say or write." L5 added: "When students complete writing tasks, it's hard to know if they're doing the work themselves or relying on AI. That makes it difficult to judge whether my task selection is really effective."

These challenges complicate the implementation of pedagogical strategies. While task-based differentiation and authentic task design are intended to motivate learners, their success depends on learners' readiness to engage. High-achieving students may resist participation when tasks appear unchallenging, while low-achieving students may withdraw due to fear of failure (Tomlinson, 2014; Reeve, 2012).

Learner autonomy, essential for differentiated instruction, was notably lacking among lower-level students. This reinforces findings by Little (1991) and Teng (2021), who argue that autonomy must be cultivated through structured guidance. Disengagement and fatigue limit the effectiveness of cognitively demanding strategies, such as interactional scaffolding and input modification, which rely on active learner participation (Sweller, 1988; Akanpaadgi et al., 2023).

The issue of academic integrity, particularly the use of AI tools, presents a contemporary challenge. While AI may support language learning, overreliance undermines the authenticity of student performance. These concerns align with recent literature (Kasneci et al., 2023), which highlights ethical concerns and instructional challenges posed by AI-assisted outputs.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study revealed that the Vietnamese EFL lecturers have applied a wide range of strategies to deal with mixed-level classrooms such as task adaptation (tiered tasks, differentiation, authentic tasks), scaffolding (content, procedural, linguistic, visual, modeling), communication strategies, spaced repetition, vocabulary recycling, and input modification. These are ways of scanning we employ as educators in the service of diverse student cohorts, to support inclusive learning.

However, the implementation of these strategies was hindered by certain challenges including contextual constraints, time limitations, rigid curriculums, and diverse proficiency levels. Additionally, teacher-related challenges were found which comprised low skills in differentiation, time-consuming preparations, fairness issues and challenges to find authentic

content. Student-related obstacles included low motivation, limited autonomy, fatigue, and reliance on AI tools.

The findings underscore the need for greater institutional support (e.g., flexible curricula, targeted training, and professional development) to help lecturers implement effective, differentiated instruction. Promoting student responsibility and digital literacy is also key to ensuring task effectiveness and academic integrity.

This study was limited to one university in the Mekong Delta and relied solely on lecturer interviews. Future research should include more diverse contexts, integrate classroom observations and student input, and explore the long-term impact of specific strategies like scaffolding and tiered tasks.

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Note

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CHIẾN LƯỢC SỬ DỤNG VÀ THÁCH THỨC GẶP PHẢI TRONG VIỆC LỰA CHỌN CÁC HOẠT ĐỘNG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN TRONG LỚP HỌC ĐA TRÌNH ĐỘ BẬC ĐẠI HỌC

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Tóm tắt: *Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu các chiến lược được áp dụng và những thách thức mà giảng viên tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam gặp phải khi lựa chọn các hoạt động giảng dạy trong các lớp học bậc đại học có sự chênh lệch về trình độ ngôn ngữ. Dưới góc tiếp cận của Thuyết Hoạt Động, nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính, thu thập dữ liệu thông qua phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với tám giảng viên tại một trường đại học ở khu vực Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long. Kết quả cho thấy giảng viên đã triển khai nhiều chiến lược khác nhau trong quá trình lựa chọn hoạt động, bao gồm: phân hóa nhiệm vụ, hỗ trợ học tập có điều chỉnh, điều chỉnh ngữ liệu đầu vào, và áp dụng các chiến lược tương tác nhằm đáp ứng sự đa dạng của người học. Tuy nhiên, họ vẫn gặp phải nhiều thách thức đáng kể liên quan đến điều kiện bối cảnh, năng lực chuyên môn của giảng viên, cũng như yếu tố người học. Nghiên cứu cho thấy tính phức tạp trong việc lựa chọn hoạt động giảng dạy trong các lớp học không đồng trình độ, đồng thời nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc tăng cường hỗ trợ thể chế và bồi dưỡng chuyên môn cho giảng viên nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả thực hành sư phạm trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học.*

Từ khóa: *chiến lược, lớp học tiếng Anh đa trình độ, lựa chọn hoạt động, thách thức*

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