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SCAFFOLDING FOR MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS: A SOLUTION FOR STUDENTS FROM MULTICULTURAL BACKGROUNDS IN OVERSIZED CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Having an opportunity to practise speaking English effectively is the target of every English language learner. However, due to the large size classes in Vietnam, the chances for meaningful interactions in English have been limited. With oversized classes that having students from different cultural background, assisting them in producing the target language becomes more challenging. Although the importance of improving communicative language ability for students from diverse backgrounds is clear, it has been under-researched. Therefore, this qualitative study explored that aspect. This project found that lecturers employed different instructional scaffolding strategies in the 12 classes observed to assist students' learning in the classroom. However, the data did not show that the lecturers could relate the terms of scaffolding to what they were doing. Instead, the study revealed that they just did what they felt necessary to do to assist their students.

Key words: scaffolding, meaningful interactions, oversized classes, diverse backgrounds

I. Introduction

Big size classes have always been challenges for teachers (Kewaza, & Welch, 2013; Akbari, 2015; Kara, Ayaz, & Dündar, 2017; Küçükler, & Kodal, 2019). Many researchers have reported that a crowded class is one of main barriers for having effective speaking opportunities (Fassinger, 1996; Trees & Jackson, 2007; Obenland, Munson, & Hutchinson, 2013; King, 2013). Therefore, oversized classes with students from multicultural backgrounds bring even more challenges for teachers (Chrisp, 2019; Du Plessis, 2019; Dahlstrom-Hakki, Asbell-Clarke, & Rowe, 2019; Goedhart, Blignaut-van, Westrhenen, Moser, & Zweekhorst, 2019; Ticheloven, Blom, Leseman, & McMonagle, 2019; Csillik, 2019). However, researches explored strategies to assist students from diverse backgrounds in oversized classes remain limited. This paper is going to report an effective strategy to facilitate students' meaningful interactions in that context, using scaffolding.

II. Literature review

1. The definitions of scaffolding: The term 'scaffolding' was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). It is a supportive strategy that can be applied between a teacher and a student or between a strong and a weak student (Bruner, 1978). Scaffolding is a temporary support structure

to assist learners to develop new understandings, concepts and abilities so that they can complete similar tasks independently (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Scaffolding draws principally on Vygotsky's social theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1976). In this social theory of learning, Vygotsky argues that learning occurs when individuals have interactions together. In this process, knowledge is shared and understandings are constructed within cultural settings. Vygotsky argued that the most effective learning occurs within what he called 'the zone of proximal development', that is, in 'the gaps between what learners can do unaided and what they are able to accomplish with help from a more experienced peer or adult' (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005:8). The support from the more experienced person prepares learners to be able to complete similar tasks independently later in a similar context. This approach has more recently been referred to as scaffolding. In addition, Vygotsky's social of theory of learning also highlights the concept of mediation, i.e. the use of a tool to complete some action. From this perspective, scaffolding can be understood as the mediation of teaching.

From the above outline of the theory, it is clear that scaffolding refers to a temporary support that enables students to complete tasks and develop knowledge that they would not be able to do by themselves. Because the assistance is temporary, teachers' support is gradually reduced to help learners become increasingly independent, with the goal of being able to complete the task alone. However, when applied to classroom interaction, an analytical question arises: How do we distinguish scaffolding from teachers' providing general help in the classroom?

2. Effective scaffolding

Mercer (1994) proposes several criteria to distinguish scaffolding from other general teaching activities. First, scaffolding is being provided if the learners cannot succeed without the teachers' support. Second, scaffolding is operating if teachers expect the students to develop independence in the task. Third, in scaffolding teachers aim for specific skills or concepts. Four, in scaffolding there must be evidence of learners achieving a specific task at hand. Lastly, there must be proof that students are able to move on and solve the tasks independently. For example, when a student cannot spell a word, the teacher can help by providing the correct spelling or the teacher can scaffold by encouraging students to think about the sounds of words, and how the sounds could be represented (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005).

Six main types of instructional scaffolding have been proposed: modelling, bridging, contextualisation, building schema, representing text and developing metacognition (Walqui, 2008). While modelling scaffolding provides clear instances for students to imitate, bridging scaffolding builds new concepts for students based on their previous knowledge. Contextualising scaffolding makes the language accessible and engaging for students, whereas schema building connects students' prior experiences to new concepts. Representing text scaffolding enables students to transform text from one genre to another. Metacognition scaffolding refers to the ways learners manage their thinking.

In order to provide effective scaffolding for students, Hammond and Gibbons (2005) believe that teachers must have a clear focus on tasks at both macro and micro levels. They must have a good understanding of the overall curriculum (macro level), and the requirements of tasks that will enable students to achieve the relevant goals (micro level). In addition, teachers must have a good understanding of their students' language ability in order to provide timely support for each activity. Therefore, effective scaffolding involves planning ways to build a bridge between the overall goals of the program and the extensions of students' knowledge through interactions conducted by sequences of tasks. Scaffolding must show a clear relationship between the sequential tasks and the goals of the curriculum.

3. Meaningful interactions

During the processes of scaffolding, recasting the students' wording to contribute to the classroom discourse impacts on the students' quality of interaction. Therefore, teachers' use of language is a decisive factor in students' interaction. In addition, many researchers have found that the most

common interaction type in the classroom is the three-part exchange consisting of initiation, response and feedback (IRF) (van Lier, 2001). What teachers do in the third move of the exchange has been shown to impact on students' contributions to the discourse. If teachers just give comments in the third move, they will close the conversation, and thus students do not have further opportunities to speak. However, if teachers ask questions in the feedback move, they can open up opportunities for students to 'reflect aloud on their thinking and understanding' (Hammond & Gibbon, 2005:23). This raises the question as to what questions teachers should ask to provide effective scaffolding, particularly for rich interaction.

Research on questions has shown that 60 per cent of questions target students' recall of facts, 20 per cent require students to think, and 20 percent are used to manage the classroom (Gall, Dunning, & Weathersby, 1971, cited in Blosser, 2000). The analysis of lecturers' questions in this study followed the framework developed by Sander (1966) because it was compatible with the analysis of the cognitive complexity of task sequencing. Sander's framework divided questions into seven categories from the lowest cognitive complexity to the highest: (i) memory (recall); (ii) translation (changing information into different symbolic form or language); (iii) interpretation (seeing a relationship); (iv) application (solving a lifelike problem by drawing on generalisations and skills); (v) analysis (solving a problem from conscious knowledge of the parts and forms of thinking); (vi) synthesis (solving a problem requiring original creative thinking); (vii) evaluation (making judgements according to standards) (Blosser, 2000). By using these ranges of questions, it was argued that teachers could open up more opportunities for students to speak in the classroom.

III. Research context and research methods

This study belongs to a broader project which highlighted a number of important issues around the ways in which teachers in Asia interpret the implementation of the communicative approach to teaching English in Vietnam and what forces impact on the teachers' and students' behaviours in the foreign language learning context. This project addresses these issues by pursuing the following four research questions, but the content in this paper responded to this research question: "How are the interpretations of communicative language teaching manifested in classroom practices?".

The participants in this study were student teachers and lecturers of English at a teacher training college in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Among 60 student teachers, 41 student teachers (68%) were between 21 and 25 years old, and 19 (32%) were over 25. For ethnicity, 37 (62%) were Kinh (Vietnamese); 19 (32%) were Khmer (Cambodian), and 4 (7%) were Hoa (Chinese). A total of 53 (88%) were female and only 7 (12%) were male.

The data in this study was conducted through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The photos in this paper were primary data of the study.

IV. Findings

As noted in the framework above, six types of instructional scaffolding have been proposed. Three of these were identified in the observational data for this project. These were: bridging, schema building, and modelling. The significance of schema building was to make students talk while lecturers eliciting new concepts instead of just listening to the lecturers and taking notes. With bridging scaffolding, lecturers activate students' prior knowledge through interactions or attracting students' attention and interest before moving to the next parts. By using modelling scaffolding, lecturers helped students to have opportunities to communicate with the whole class as well as to act as lecturers, given that the program is intended for language teacher education.

1. Bridging scaffolding

The use of bridging scaffolding as a scaffolding strategy was significant as a way to avoid students' passively listening to lecturers' explanations of new concepts. Instead, through the lecturers' talk, the students were able to engage in conversations by using their L2 to link their knowledge to the new concepts. The analysis of the observational data showed that bridging was found in seven of the 12 observed classes. All this scaffolding was achieved through the use of pictures

and video clips that drew on students' general knowledge and prepared them for a novel topic that students had not previously encountered. The following four examples demonstrate this bridging scaffolding.

Example 1:

The first example occurred in a Pronunciation class. The main content of the lesson was the features of the vowel sounds /ə:/and /ɔ:/and how to produce them. In order to encourage students to use their L2, to lead into the new lesson the lecturer used a combination pictures and video clips. The following data were from the language transcriptions and notes in the observations.

The lecturer showed a photo of a parrot on the screen, and elicited students:

Lecturer: Look at this photo class, what is this?

(Some students said in chorus): Parrot, teacher.

Lecturer: Yes, it looks like a parrot, but 'parrot' isn't the word I'm looking for. Can you think of another word?

Class: A bird, teacher.

Lecturer: Yes, exactly. That's good.

The lecturer agreed with students' answer and then displayed on the screen the phonemic transcription of 'bird' /bəːd/. (See figure 1) Then, she showed a photo of a horse on the screen, and continued to converse with the students:

Lecturer: How about this class? What is it?

Class: It's a horse.

Lecturer: Yes, a horse. That's right.

The lecturer again showed the phonemic transcription of 'horse' on the screen, /hɔːs/. She continued to speak to students:

Lecturer: Okay, in those two words, bird and horse, can you recognize any vowel sounds there?

Class: Yes, teacher.

Lecturer: Who can tell me what the vowel sounds are in these two words? Tram, please.

Tram: Teacher, /ə:/and /ɔ:/.

Lecturer: Is it correct, class?

Class: Yes.

Following this interaction, the lecturer then showed the title of the lesson 'vowel sounds' on the screen to introduce the main content of the lesson. To let students hear the exact pronunciation of each vowel sound, the lecturer asked students to watch a clip, listen and repeat the sounds. In the clip, there were two small screens of a woman who pronounced the sound which could be seen from two positions of her face: opposite and one side. See figure 2. Students watched her mouth to observe the facial movement, the tongue position of the sound, and repeated the sounds after her. The lecturer then showed explanations of sound features on the screen.

Figure 1. The introduction of vowels

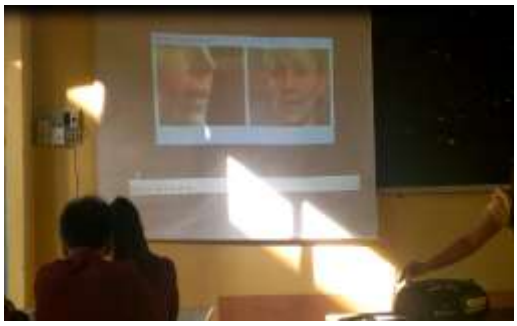

Figure 2. A video of sound production

From the data above, it can be seen that the lecturer bridged the lesson for students by activating what students already knew. She began by using two pictures to elicit students' recognition of the words in the pictures. After that, she showed the phonemic

transcriptions on the screen and requested students to identify the vowel sounds. She then used a video clip of how those two vowel sounds were produced to observe and repeat the sounds to feel the mechanism of those sounds. Finally, she showed the wordings of the main content, explanations of sound features, on the screen. Students were led to the main content gradually through various steps: looking at the pictures, identifying the words representing those pictures, observing the phonemic transcriptions, pointing out the target sounds in the lesson, watching the video clip to observe how the sound were produced, repeating the sounds, and seeing the full explanations of sound features on the screen. The most important aspect of this process was that it was achieved through interactions in the L2 between the lecturer and students, not just by looking at the slide of sound features and note down.

Example 2:

The second example was taken in the British Culture class on the topic of 'The Monarchy'. To prepare students to access a long text about the roles of the members of the Royal family, the lecturer started the topic with a picture of the little Prince, George.

> The lecturer showed a picture of a little boy on the screen.
>
> Lecturer: Now, I have a picture of a little boy. Can you recognise him?
>
> Class: Yes, a baby…
>
> Lecturer: (laughs loudly) Yes, a little boy, but anything special about him? Anyone?
>
> Class: Handsome … Cute …
>
> Lecturer: Okay, handsome, cute, what else? He's very famous in the UK …
>
> Class: Ah…he's a prince … a prince …
>
> Lecturer: Yes, what's his name?
>
> Class: George
>
> Lecturer: Who's his mother?
>
> Class: Kate
>
> Lecturer: Yes, very good. Kate and George are some of the members of the British Royal family. Now I'd like you to watch the video clip, take notes of who else are members of the royal family, their relationships, roles, then exchange information with the person next to you. Understand?

The textbook content was five pages long in a small font. Its content was also difficult, as the lecturer explained in an interview. Therefore, to reduce the gap between the text and the students' understanding, the data above show the strategy the lecturer used to prepare students for a new and difficult topic. She knew that students at this college usually read newspapers and were therefore familiar with news about Kate's wedding and her son, George, as such information was often reported in Vietnamese daily newspapers. Therefore, the lecturer chose to begin the lesson with the picture of the little boy to activate the students' general knowledge with familiar information about the Royal family before guiding them to the more detailed political information in the texts. By engaging the students in a conversation, the lecturer gradually signaled to the students that they were going to explore in more detail the royal family in terms of their roles in the government rather than just their names and positions. This was helpful in giving students opportunities to interact, but it also helped give them an overview of what they were going to cover in the lesson.

Example 3:

The third example used pictures to express new vocabulary that related to unfamiliar concepts. The following example was recorded in a Listening class when the lecturer used pictures to build a schema for students since the lesson dealt with different types of diseases.

The lecturer used a few pictures to express vocabulary … She reviewed some words that students had studied by showing three pictures, one by one, and asked students to tell her the words: 'flu', 'bad breath', 'back pain'. For the new words asthma, autism and allergy, she showed pictures while eliciting:

Lecturer: Look at this picture class. What can you see here? (1)

Class: A man … he is carrying something. (2)

Lecturer: Yes. He's holding an inhaler, to help him breathe. Look at his face. How does he feel? (3)

Class: Very uncomfortable … Painful … (4)

Lecturer: That's right. This man is having asthma, asthma. This sickness makes him feel difficult to breath, like this (pretending having difficulty in breathing), so he takes an inhaler to breath. You know what it means? (5)

Class: Hen suyễn. (6)

Lecturer: Exactly. Very good. Write it down. Okay, repeat: asthma … asthma. (7)

Lecturer: Now the next picture. Tell me what you see. (8)

Class: A child in a dark room … many children playing out of the window. (9)

Lecturer: Right. This little boy stays in his room, a dark room, looking at other boys playing football from his window. He doesn't want to meet people, doesn't want to talk to people, wants to be alone, wants to avoid light … He's having autism, autism …What does autism mean class? (10)

The monitor: Tự kỷ. (11)

Lecturer: Well done, monitor. Write down the meaning class. Now repeat after me, autism … autism. (12)

Lecturer: Okay, the last picture. What can you see? (13)

Class: A woman looks at herself in the mirror … her face and hands appear something.

Lecturer: Yes, her face and hands have many spots. Look at her face, how does she feel?

Class: Shocked … scared. (14)

Lecturer: Yes, she may be shocked or very uncomfortable, right? Look at the thought bubble here, what is she thinking? (15)

Class: She remembers what she eats … beef, seafood. (16)

Lecturer: Yes, she thinks the food she had like beef and seafood makes her body getting many spots. She's having allergy, allergy. So allergy is …? (17)

Class: Dị ứng… (18)

Lecturer: Very good, clear and easy for you right? Okay, repeat, allergy ... allergy. (19)

The data above show that the lecturer used pictures to scaffold students with new concepts of different diseases. She made the students engage in conversation instead of passively listening to her by eliciting the content (3, 15, 17), expressing the situations (3, 5, 10, 14,19), and checking students' guesses about meanings (5, 10, 19). She scaffolded students by introducing words in clear contexts: symptoms of sickness, patients' feelings, the causes and remedies for sickness. This scaffolding is closely connected to sequencing given the way the lecturer ordered the ideas she elicited. A combination of schema building and idea sequencing led to students' success in talking about the pictures and helped them guess accurately. With the details the lecturer provided, students were able to link to information they might have read in Vietnamese. The result was that students guessed correctly in Vietnamese.

In short, it can be seen that the three concepts in the examples above (understanding of the mechanism of vowels, the roles of the royal family, uncommon illnesses) were unfamiliar to students in their L2. However, through bridging scaffolding, the lecturers enabled the students to use their L2 to elicit their general knowledge and to link it to the new concepts.

2. Schema building

The second type of instructional scaffolding found in observations in this study was the building of schema for students to enable them use the L2 to link their experiences or reality to new concepts. This scaffolding was achieved through pictures, discussion questions, video clips and sometimes PowerPoint language games. Pictures to build

schema were used in four classes. Example 4 was observed in a Reading skills class where the lecturer built a schema on the topic of 'Health and Food'.

Example 4

In a Reading class, the lecturer showed a picture of a fat boy with some snacks watching TV on the sofa.

Lecturer: Now, look at this picture. What can you see in this picture, class?

Whole class: A big boy…Sofa…TV… Snacks…

Lecturer: Good. How's the boy?

Class: Fat…

Lecturer: Okay, very big, huh? Why is he big like this do you think?

Student: Eating junk food and watching TV together…

Lecturer: Yes, may be. So, do you think he's having a healthy life?

Class: No….

Lecturer: Okay, we'll have the answer in the new lesson today, Health and Food …

Example 4 shows that the lecturer used a picture to build a schema for students, facilitating conversations around the students' experiences and understanding of eating junk food, watching TV, lack of exercise and the causes and effects of those habits. Using this scaffolding, the lecturer not only encouraged the students' interest in the topics, but also created opportunities for students to interact as well as to link to the new topics.

In the next step in the lesson in example 4, in order to build schema between the text and reality such as students' perspectives on healthy daily meals, the lecturer raised the discussion question:

Now, in two minutes, speak to the person next to you what type of meals in the text is healthy to you. Why and why not?

This question created an opportunity for students to communicate with one another by linking what they perceived from the text and sharing their attitudes towards it. This type of scaffolding was believed to be the most meaningful communication by the students as students revealed in the focus groups. All of students reported that they would love to share feelings and thoughts about the topics they studied.

Finally, to extend the content of the text and a broader view, the lecturer used a video clip for another free discussion.

The lecturer played a video clip (a piece of news on TV) taken from a hidden camera, about some kinds of food which were produced in dirty conditions, and from ruined ingredients. (See figure 3) Students discussed in groups why people did such business, how harmful it was, and how to solve the problem…

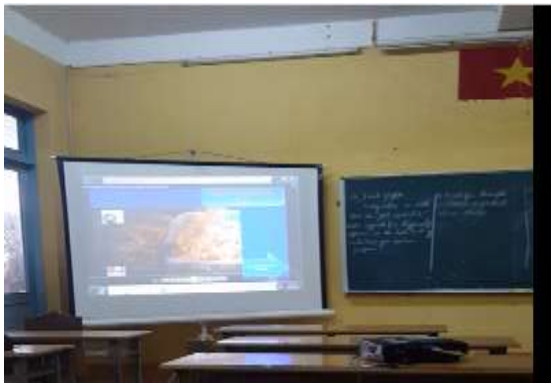

Figure 3. The video clip in the Reading class

(The clip shows rotten meat for making sausages stored in a dirty basket)

The video clip used in the lesson showed how some of the food people consume every day is actually produced. The video linked the content of the text by expanding the topic from daily meals to food production and food safety. The clip also raised the concern that people should be careful in choosing food. The clip created opportunities for students to communicate with each other to reflect their thinking on the issue in their L2. The use of the video clip showed two dimensions of scaffolding: using texts as a tool of mediation and scaffolding connecting macro and micro levels. Using the video clip to raise concerns about food production and food safety enabled students to recall key ideas from the textbook content of this lesson and to compare, contrast and reflect on what they saw in the video clip. In other words, the textbook was the mediation

tool for discussions. In addition, as the key topic of the lesson was food, a compulsory lesson in the curriculum, the expansion of ideas in the video clips for discussion both served the curriculum as well as expanded students' knowledge to related issues.

3. Modelling

The third type of instructional scaffolding that emerged from the observational and focus group data for this project was modelling. The significance of modelling was that it helped students to use their L2 to deliver a lesson and to interact in response to questions from their peers. This modelling aimed to help students practice the skills of presenting and communicating, necessary skills for student teachers. The data in the focus groups revealed that this model scaffolding was implicit: the lecturers did not directly draw attention to the features of the model. Modelling happened in two subjects: Methodology and British Culture. Students were grouped by four or five to prepare the task for one week. As they were expected to act like lecturers, they followed the model of the lecturers' presentations that they had observed in most of their classes: using PowerPoint and including pictures or videos in their slides. However, in the focus groups, students revealed that the lecturer did not directly tell them to follow her model, but as the presentation would be graded, they chose to observe what the lecturer had done and to follow or adapt it in order to get good grades. In these classes, the lecturers were only observers and advisers, giving feedback before ending the classes.

Figure 4: Students' presentations

In photo 4, students presented in groups. The four members in the group divided up the sections for presentation. Therefore, when one member was speaking, the others were waiting at the lecturer's desk.

Figure 5: A question from their classmates

Figure 5 shows how, after each presentation, students asked the presenters questions about the content of the presentation or expressed their views about the content.

Similarly, in the Methodology class, the lecturer requested representatives of each group to present in front of the class on their understanding of communicative language teaching. In the focus groups, students revealed that this task was prepared within a week. The observations showed that students acted as teachers in interacting with their peers after the presentations.

Example 5:

Student E (finished her presentation): Do you have any questions for me?

Student F: In your presentation, you said that this approach focused on developing students' four skills. Can you give some examples of activities that train reading and writing skills please?

Student E: Teachers can let students do pair work and group work and …

Student F: But what exactly do they do in pair work or group work?

Student E: For example, teachers can ask students to write a letter. Before they write, they'll discuss what ideas to write, and then use those ideas to their writing.

Student G: How about reading?

Student E: Teachers can let students play a game to brainstorm to make a list of words in a topic. It makes the text easier to read.

Figure 6. A student's presentation

In example 5, we see that when the student answered her classmates' questions, she interacted with her peers and, like her lecturers, she knew how to use language to explain issues related to content knowledge and teaching method. However, this activity demonstrated that students had confidence in using English to give instant responses to their classmates. This implicit model served two purposes: it encouraged students to communicate with their peers in English, and it gave them the opportunity to practice using language confidently to provide clear answers about content knowledge when acting as a teacher.

V. Discussions

The findings in this study showed that the lecturers had their own approaches when structuring the supplementary materials for communicative purposes. All the materials were designed within a scaffolding framework. Their design recognised that scaffolding of various types (including bridging, schema building, decontextualizing or modelling) was meaningful for students at the college because the students were from diverse language backgrounds. As a result, scaffolding assisting in building the necessary steps for all the students to complete tasks through which they could develop their speaking skills. The important role of scaffolding in teaching and learning in this study is aligned with many studies (Korhonen, Ruhalahti, Veermans, 2019; Zheng, Li, Zhang, & Sun, 2019; Wu, Hu, & Wang, 2019; Shin, Kim, & Song 2020). This was consistent with the view that language acquisition is developed through social interactions where communicative activities occur and through linguistic assistance (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Kayi-Ayda, 2013; Könings, van Zundert, & van Merriënboer, 2019; MacLeod & van der Veen, 2020).

In applying scaffolding, the lecturers' strategies were found to have two important implications. First, they used various types of questions to facilitate conversations, especially using questions to create more opportunities for students to speak in the Initiation – Response – Feedback sequence. The useful effect of questions in this sequence echoes the findings of several other studies (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Hellermann, 2005; Waring, 2009; Jones, 2019). The lecturers' use of questions achieved three of six previously described functions of teacher talk: creating, prompting and dialoguing (Forman, 2012). However, while previous studies explored scaffolding for small group work (van de Pol, Mercer, & Volman, 2019), online learning (Brauer, Korhonen, & Siklander, 2019; Glazewski, & Hmelo-Silver, 2019), English literacy (Park, Xu, Collins, Farkas, & Warschauer, 2019), and assignments (Vanderhyde, 2019), the study at this teacher training college focused on scaffolding for big classes with students from multicultural backgrounds. Yet, all of the studies highlighted the importance of meaningful interactions in the classrooms with the aid of scaffolding (Kim & Lim, 2019). Finally, the most interesting finding in this study is that lecturers in this college did not recognise that their strategies were scaffolding. Instead, they just felt that they needed to do such strategies for their students' communicative competence. In other words, the majority of scaffolding strategies derived from tacit rather than explicit knowledge (Eraut, 2000).

VI. Conclusions

In summary, this paper has presented the instructional scaffolding used by lecturers at a teacher training college in the South of Vietnam to support students from diverse backgrounds in different activities. The study has a significant contribution in improving the quality of students' interactions in a big class, providing speaking opportunities for them. The limitation of this study was the small population of the participants. Broader research context should be explored in the future, especially with the focus on students from the multicultural backgrounds who attend in the same classrooms. This aspect is extremely essential in Vietnamese context where classes are relatively

crowed, and students can come from different regions of Vietnam.

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