



VIETNAM ASSOCIATION OF ENGLISH
LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH



CAN THO UNIVERSITY



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING,
NATIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROJECT

Holistic Personas and Reflective Concepts for TESOL

An Action Research Collective-Case Study in Vietnam



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SUMMARY

- Holistic Personas – a fictional character with five dimensions (factual, personality, intelligence, knowledge and cognitive process).
- Holistic Personas – used to develop lesson plans.
- Learning activities are grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory.
- Students wrote in English every day, outside classrooms, for a period of nine weeks.
- Our findings: Holistic Personas are effective to scaffold reflective learning and to motivate students.
- Qualitative action research: collective-case study of 65 first-year students and 87 second-year students in Vietnam between 2018 and 2025.



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THEORIES – HOLISTIC PERSONAS

- Personas, fictional representations of real users of products, are widely used by educators in developing a lesson plan for teaching students.
- Holistic Personas, a fictional character with five dimensions, present users of a learning application and can be exemplars for TESOL.
- Students in regional areas of Vietnam have limited or no opportunity to interact with English-speaking people.
- Our solution: Holistic Personas are used as exemplars to scaffold reflective learning and to motivate students to learn to write English at deep level of learning.
- Students have an opportunity to gain experience from the exemplars (Hendry et al., 2012) by reading sample writings and by answering questions about the text that they read.
- The rationale behind using exemplars in learning activities is to demonstrate to the students “both what teachers expected, and how to structure and write a good assignment.” (Hendry et al., 2012, p. 150).



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THEORIES – REFLECTIVE LEARNING

- Reflection: Strategy to unearth tacit knowledge, to examine the issues from multiple perspectives, to self-challenge and to open educators and learners to new insights and meta-cognitive self-review (Cowan, 2014).
- Teaching reflection: facilitates learners' awareness of their knowledge, enhances confidence, assists learning (Suzuki, 2019; Zessoules & Gardner, 1991).
- Reflection can be taught to students of English as a Second Language (ESL) as an individual activity such as reading or writing (Nourdad & Asghari, 2017; Apsari, 2018).
- Reflective writing helps students to gain new insight in their thinking and learning (Leshem & Trafford, 2006).



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THEORIES – LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Ground learning activities in Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory.
- Design of learning activities cover the Nation & Yamamoto (2012)'s four strands of a balanced language course
 - 1- meaning-focused input: learning from watching, listening and reading;
 - 2- meaning-focused output: learning through speaking and writing;
 - 3- language-focused learning: learning language features such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical constructions;
 - 4- fluency development: learning to make the best use of what is already known: fluency practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012).
- Incorporate four types of learning activities: experience activities, shared activities, guided activities and independent activities (Nation & Macalister, 2019).



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THEORIES – ACTION RESEARCH

Action research stages (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 588):

- 1- DIAGNOSING - identifying a problem: 2018 and 2019 cohort one and cohort two.
Observations: students – low levels of English proficiency: Memorised phrases and sentences,
Could not hold a conversation, Did not answer questions.
- 2- ACTION PLANNING - alternative actions: 2021 – 2025 cohorts three to nine.
Teach simple sentences vs Introduce reflective concept while teaching them English.
- 3- ACTION TAKING - a course of action : 2021 – 2025 cohorts three to nine.
Provide learning resources to introduce reflective concept while teaching English.
Online courses to first-year and second-year students since 2021.
- 4- EVALUATING stage - evaluating the effectiveness of an action.
Monitoring the students' actions, examining contents of their posts, videos and opinions.
- 5- SPECIFYING LEARNING – identifying the findings.



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TEACHING METHOD

- Our method to teach English:
 - introducing reflective concept to students;
 - Scaffold students to reflect on their previous assignment and improve;
 - Use persona as a teaching tool for learning and discussion;
 - Reinforce written Persona text with oral presentation from a native English speaker;
 - Make reflection an important component of study;
 - Six assignments and daily activities.
- In the following slides we present:
The case studies of 9 cohorts, from 2018 to 2025.



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DATAE – INTRO 2021-2025

- DATAE-Intro courses from 2021 to 2025 were delivered through Moodle.
- We used Moodle as an online learning technology platform because Moodle was widely available, free and easy to use.
- We created a private Facebook group for communication purposes because every student had a mobile phone and a Facebook account.
- Students received notification daily for new activities of the day.
(We noticed that students would check their Facebook regularly.)
- DATAE-Intro Course started in 2018.



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PARTICIPATING STUDENTS (DATAE-INTRO)

Cohort	Year	Study Year	University	No of Students	Cumulative
1	2018	Second	Quang Nam	40	40
2	2019	Second	Quang Nam	40	80
3	2021	First	Quang Nam	13	93
4	2022	First	Quang Nam	12	105
5	2023	First	Quang Nam	14	119
6	2024	First	Quang Nam & Da Nang	18	137
7	2025	First	Quang Nam	8	145
8	2025	Second	Quang Nam	5	150
9	2025	Second	Da Nang	2	152

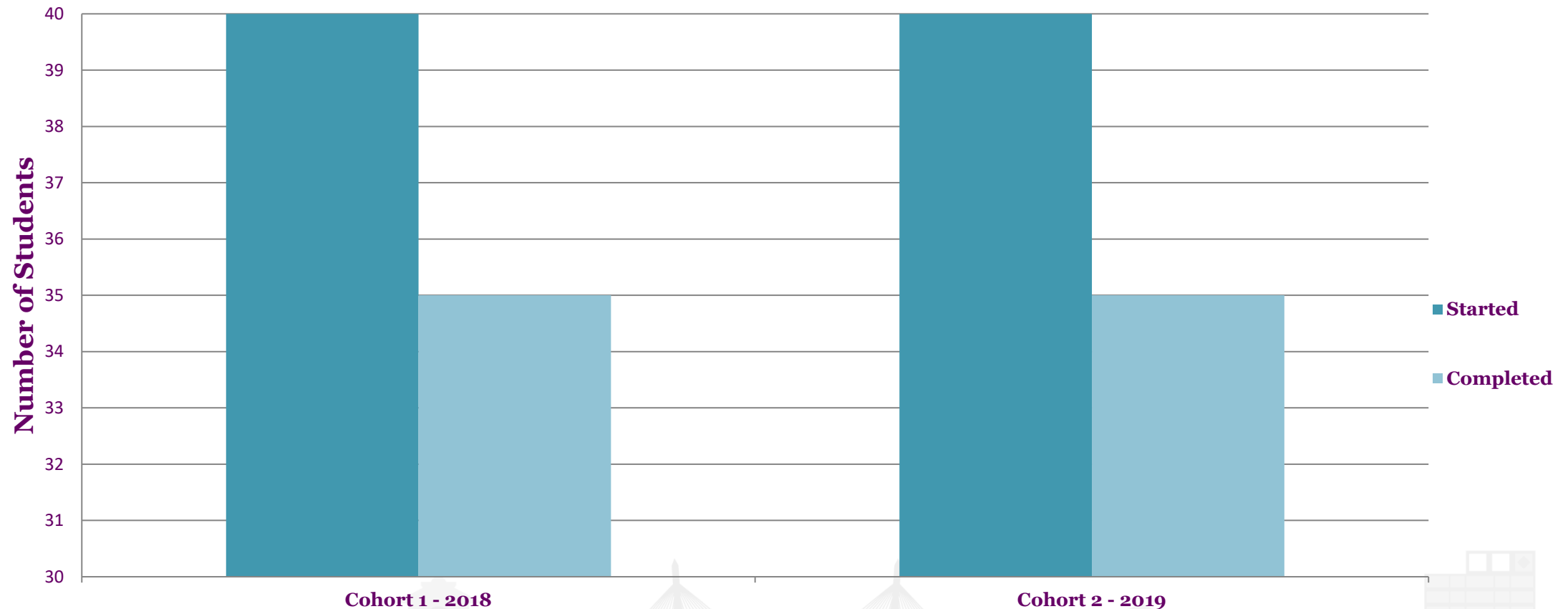
All students were aged above 18 years old. They were mainly from rural areas of Vietnam. All gave consent for research purposes and publication of papers. They were free to participate in the study as extra-curricular activities without gaining any credit from their university course.



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DATAE – INTRO 2018-2019

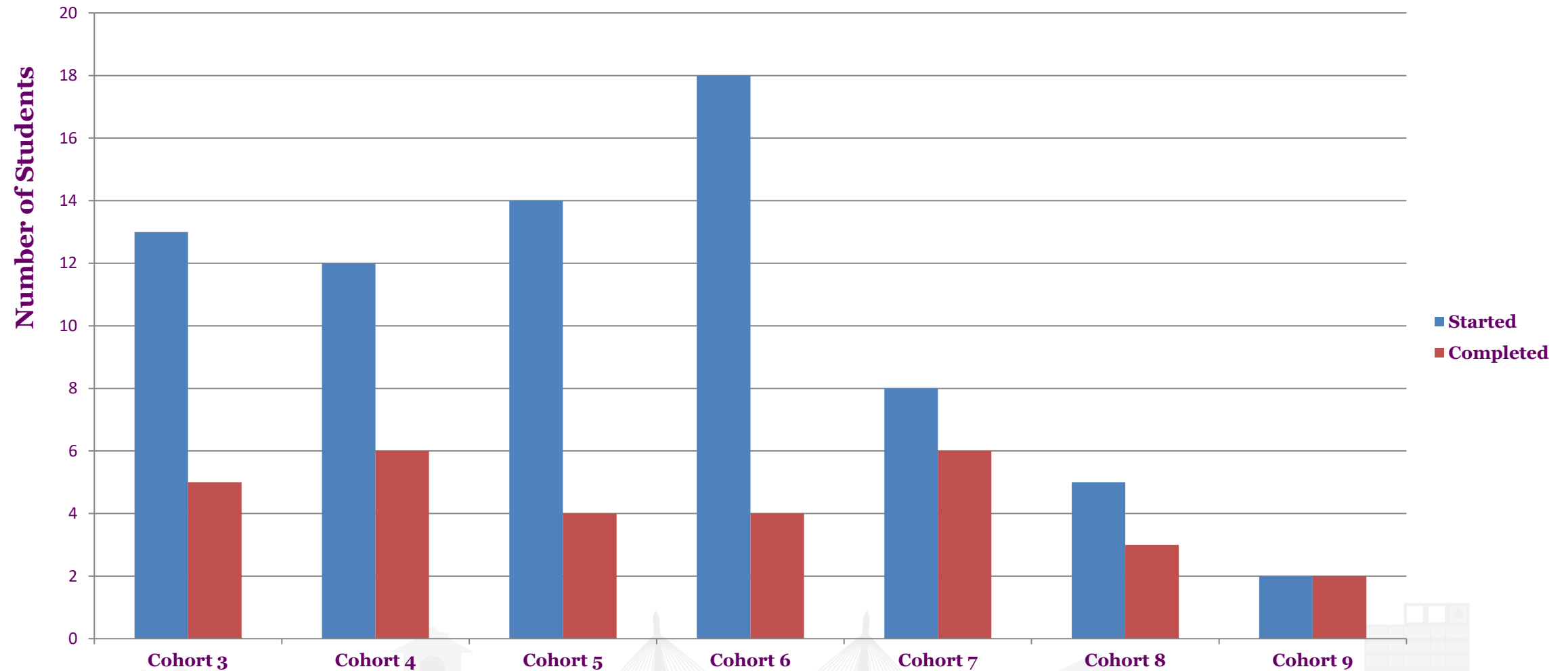
- DATAE-Intro Course started in 2018 was delivered through Facebook.
- DATAE-Intro Course in 2019 was delivered through Facebook and Moodle.



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DATAE – INTRO 2021-2025

Students Completed the Course between 2021-2025

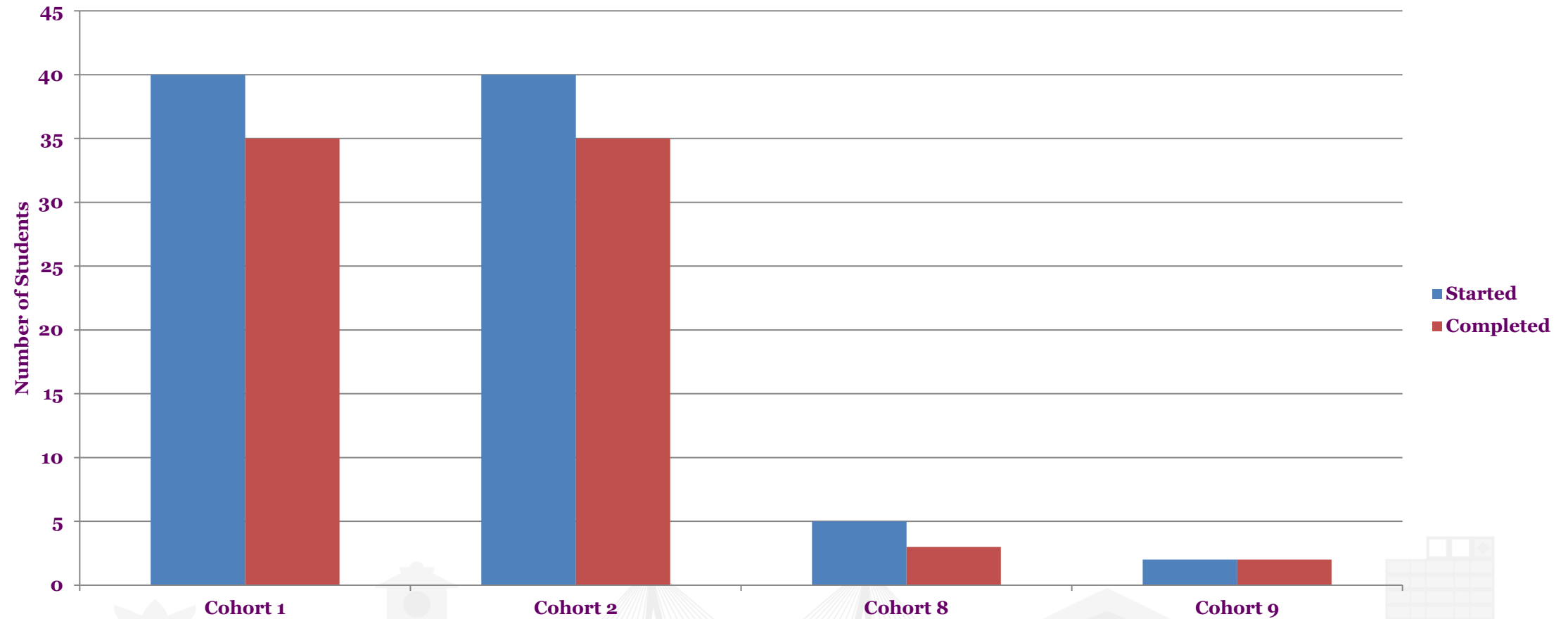


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PARTICIPATING SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS

Cohorts of second-year students: 75 second-year students completed the course

Cohorts of Second-Year Students

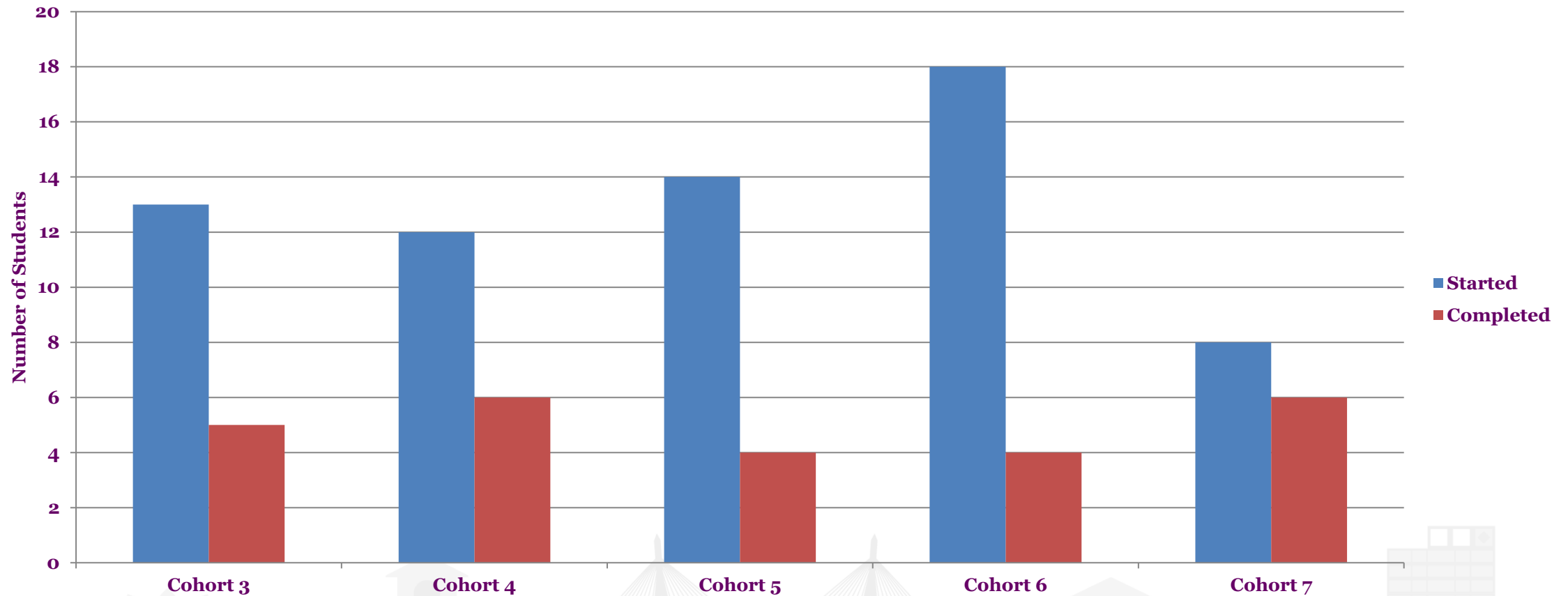


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PARTICIPATING STUDENTS: FIRST-YEAR

Cohorts of first-year students: 25 first-year students completed the course

Cohorts of First-Year Students



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HOLISTIC PERSONA MINH

Minh is a third-year Arts student at a small university in central Vietnam. Her parents live in a village, so she stays in the university dormitory. She has a part time job as a tutor.

Minh tutors for two hours and studies for at least 3 hours every day. She visits the university library. ...

Minh uses mobile phone for communication, similar to the people in her region. She uses applications such as Facebook and YouTube on her mobile phone.

Minh plans her time and utilises her resources thoughtfully. She often downloads documents, videos and other materials and study them later.

...



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HOLISTIC PERSONA MINH – 2

Minh often volunteers for a number of activities in her class as well as in her university. She enjoys conversing with her friends or making new acquaintances. Minh accepts requests for help from her friends or makes new appointments only if her schedule permits.

Minh is fluent in her native language and has learnt basics of the English language. In speaking her native language, Minh has to detect tones. Hence her ears are tuned, and she can recognise sounds in words. However, she has difficulty speaking in English as she cannot pronounce English words.

Every day Minh watches YouTube and listens to English songs for half an hour to improve her pronunciations.

...

Minh wishes to learn English so that she can work in a foreign company that pays well.



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS

LESSON 1 QUESTIONS: SHARED AND GUIDED ACTIVITIES

- Post at least three sentences to describe what you have learnt about Minh
- Answer the following two questions:

Q1- Are your personal traits similar to Minh?

Q2- Do you like the traits of Minh?

- If you have encountered new words or phrases in the sample writing, you can also post those words and their meanings here.



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS

LESSON 5 QUESTIONS: EXPERIENCE & INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES

Video presentation of the personas: Read by a native English speaker

Students answered the following questions:

Q1a - Do you think Minh represents a real person? (Yes/No)

Q1b - In your own words write at least 5 sentences to describe someone you know who is similar to Minh.

Q2a - Do you empathise with Minh? (Yes/No)

Q2b - Please explain why do you empathise (or not empathise) with Minh.

Q3a - Do you emotionally resonate with Minh?

Q3b - Please explain why do you emotionally resonate (or not resonate) with Minh.



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HOLISTIC PERSONA HENRIK

Henrik is a student studying towards his degree at a research intensive university. Henrik's parents who live in a suburb of Sydney, far away from the University, ...

At the insistence of his parents, Henrik moved out and lives closer to the University.

During his schooling, Henrik had difficulty understanding his subjects but he made enough effort and passed. Henrik is doing IT studies as he found out through his friends that it would provide him with good employment opportunities.

Henrik makes a reasonable effort with his studies. He attends lab and classroom regularly. He does not often take notes but collects all the material that the lecturers and tutors provide. He reads them later.

...

He reads documents and visits local forums to learn new knowledge but he does not participate in the forum activities.



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HOLISTIC PERSONA HENRIK – 2

Henrik rarely accepts requests for help from his friends or appointments for new activities as he is reluctant to change his routine.

...

Henrik receives scholarship funding, tertiary assistance and some allowance from his parents. He also works casually whenever he needs extra money.

...

Whenever Henrik needs to borrows money, it is from a bank for a fixed period. Later when he is working, he saves money and aims to make the loan and the interest repayments when they are due. He does not pay enough attention to the due date and is often late in paying off the loan, and so is often penalised with additional interest.

...



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ANALYSIS OF HOLISTIC PERSONA HENRIK

Below is our analysis of our sample writing:

- The article has just over 400 words. It is easy to read. Most sentences are short to medium lengths.
- The article consists of three paragraphs.
- The first paragraph is the shortest paragraph. It introduces a student, named Henrik. It tells about his family background and where he studies.
- The second paragraph is the longest paragraph. It tells about the course which Henrik studies and the reasons why he has chosen to study that course. It explains Henrik's attitudes towards his studies, the frequency of attending lab and class, and the methods which he uses to learn new knowledge and new software application. It also tells about Henrik's personality, social activities, details of his interactions with his friends and his financial goals.
- The third paragraph is the most informative paragraph about Henrik's financial situation. It covers in details how Henrik manages his finance and his needs.



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS – MINH

LESSON 1 ANSWERS: SHARED AND GUIDED ACTIVITIES

A first-year student in cohort 2022 posted:

“After reading i can learn many things about Minh. Minh's day is full of energy . She is a smart person to manage her life schedule. It's hard to be that kind of person like Minh because persistence of body must be maintained.

1) i have some personal traits with Minh. I'm not quite as positive and dynamic as Minh but I always try to be someone who is always enthusiastic about learning as Minh.

2) i like the personal traits of Minh very much . She may be not successful after graduate but at least she never treated herself badly and she 'll never regret for that time. She spend time to improve herself. Contribute to society activities. I admire Minh's lifestyle.”



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS – MINH

LESSON 1 ANSWERS: SHARED AND GUIDED ACTIVITIES

Another first-year student in cohort 2022 posted:

“I will set up a time to study and try harder, participate in social activities.

I and Minh similar:

- does not have her own computer. Sometimes she uses the computer at the university to do her studies.
- often downloads documents, videos and other materials to study them later.

She enjoys conversing with her friends and making new acquaintances, accepts requests for help from her friends but makes new appointments only if her schedule permits.

Minh is an active person, participates in class activities and is a hard worker, a good student, knows how to work hard.”



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS – MINH

LESSON 1 ANSWERS: SHARED AND GUIDED ACTIVITIES

A first-year student in cohort 2025 posted:

“I have learned that Minh is a third-year Arts student at a small university in central Vietnam. She lives with her parents and has a part time job as a tutor. Minh is a hardworking and disciplined student. She prepares well for her studies, takes notes, and actively participates in discussions. She is socially active, volunteers often, and balances her time effectively. She also practices English daily to improve her pronunciation and hopes to work for a foreign company in the future.

My personal traits are similar Minh’s because I am also hardworking and disciplined in my studies. Like Minh, I prepare well, take notes, and review lessons regularly. However, I don't practice English with tourists like she does.

I like Minh’s traits because she is determined and dedicated to her goals. She manages her time wisely and puts in great effort to improve herself. Her hardworking nature is inspiring.”



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS – MINH

LESSON 1 ANSWERS: SHARED AND GUIDED ACTIVITIES

Another first-year student in cohort 2025 posted:

“Minh is a diligent student who has studied Arts at a small university. To make money, she works as a tutor for two hours every day. She stays in the university dormitory instead of living in a rent house like most students in Viet Nam. She is also an energetic person who often volunteers for a number of activities in her class as well as in her university and enjoys conversing with her friends.

Some of my personal traits are similar to Minh. Like him, I attend all my classes regularly, pay attention to lecturers and tutors and occasionally participate in the class discussions to make sure that I could understand the lessons correctly. When I learn a new lesson, I often search for lots of information, and videos on YouTube to gain some new things that are not taught in school. Additionally, I always make my notes so that I can go over them quickly as I have exams.

I really like Minh's traits, especially the way he learns at the university. It is great for me to imitate his method of learning. With that method, we could gain a large amount of knowledge and make us love our lessons more. When we study something intensively, we would discover lots of fascinating things that we have never learnt before. His friendliness is also a good trait and it will be a great advantage for his future career.”



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HOLISTIC PERSONA – HENRIK

LESSON 2 QUESTIONS: EXPERIENCE & GUIDED ACTIVITIES

Your tasks today are:

- Watch the following video about Henrik and take notes.
- (Link to Persona Henrik read by Margaret Eldridge)
- Read a sample of our writing about Henrik and note new words and phrases.
- Read our analysis of our sample writing and take notes.
- After reading and watching the video, click on the 'Add a new discussion topic' button below.
- In the message box, in your own words, post at least three sentences to describe what you have learnt about Henrik and answer the following questions:
 - Q1 - Have you encountered new words? (Yes/No)
 - Q2 - What are the new words?
 - Q3- Post at least one sentence for each of those new words to describe someone. The person whom you describe can be you or your friend.



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS – HENRIK

LESSON 2 ANSWERS: EXPERIENCE & GUIDED ACTIVITIES

A first-year student in cohort 2025 posted:

“Henrik is a hard-working student who is studying IT. Although he had difficulty understanding his subjects, he made enough effort and passed. Henrik has a specific financial goal: buying his own flat. To earn money, he works casually, but his heavier study workload makes it hard for him to continue working casually. He is trying to find a solution for his finances.

Q1. Yes, I have

Q2. New words:

- insistence
- interest
- casually
- workload

Q3. At my insistence, my friend has to change her bad habits.

To save money for my financial goal, I put the money in a savings account where it will earn interest.

Besides studying in school, she works casually to earn money to pay her expenses.

I find that my study workload increases each term.”



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HOLISTIC PERSONAS

LESSON 5 ANSWERS: EXPERIENCE & INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES

A first-year student in cohort 2022 posted:

Q1b “Minh is the ideal type that I always try to be as good as Minh. I have a few social acquaintances like Minh. They are a very interesting type of person, learning to progress, learning energy, they succeed. No difficulty shakes perseverance with people like Minh, so she always deserves to succeed.”

Q2b “As a student, the desire to learn and progress is an indispensable part. Minh deserves to be an excellent student because she does everything perfectly.”

Q3b “I've always wanted to be someone like Minh so I have some progressive personalities like her. I believe that I will be able to become a person like Minh if I myself try every day.”

Another first-year student in cohort 2022 posted:

Q1b “I have a friend who is quite similar to Minh. Her name is Hoa and she was my best friend in high school. Hoa is smart and talented. She is always active in studying, enthusiastic with friends. Flowers are very diligent and meticulous. She likes to participate in social activities.”

Q2b “I really admire and like Minh's personality.”

Q3b “I like an energetic person like Minh.”



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REFLECTION ON HOLISTIC PERSONAS LEARNING ACTIVITIES

A first-year student in cohort 2025 posted:

‘In Lesson Five, I learned a great deal of new knowledge. Firstly, I learned the meaning of the word "evaluate" as well as "represent", "emphathise" and "resonate". Then, I had tasks to evaluate some people's traits in the samples you provided, which helped me apply the new vocabulary. Besides, I also watched Margaret Eldridge's videos so that I could know the proper pronunciation, accent, tone in spoken English.’

Another student in cohort 2025 posted:

‘What I learned in Lesson Five was that the teachers guided me to learn the meaning and usage of the words "Evaluate", "represent", "empathize and resonate" through social media. Secondly, I learned a lot of new words as well as practiced evaluating the characters: Minh, Thuy, Kim, Henrik through the sample essays provided by the teachers. Thirdly, I learned by listening to Margaret Eldridge's videos and comparing them with my reading to see what I could do and what I couldn't do. To help myself improve.’



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PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Holistic Personas are effective exemplars

- to scaffold reflective learning and motivate students
- to learn English at deep level of learning.

We used Holistic Personas, to represent Vietnamese students and Australian students, to teach:

- English words and phrases about personalities;
- English words and phrases about study process and study habits;
- To write about themselves and their peers;
- To listen to videos read by a native-English speaker.
- To analyse the text.

We integrated Reflective Learning and Holistic Personas into learning activities to teach students:

- To reflect on what they read;
- To reflect on what they listen;
- To reflect on their writing about their own and their peers' personalities;
- To reflect on their own and their peers' study habits;
- To learn new English words at a high level of cognitive processes.



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Thank You

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APPENDIX: HOLISTIC PERSONA MINH

Minh is a third-year Arts student at a small university in central Vietnam. Her parents live in a village, so she stays in the university dormitory. She has a part time job as a tutor.

Minh tutors for two hours and studies for at least 3 hours every day. She visits the university library. The library has a limited number of modern equipment such as computers. Minh does not have her own computer. Sometimes she uses the computer at the university to do her studies. However, she finds that the Wi-Fi bandwidth is limited, and the connection is unreliable.

Minh uses mobile phone for communication, similar to the people in her region. She uses applications such as Facebook and YouTube on her mobile phone. Minh plans her time and utilises her resources thoughtfully. She often downloads documents, videos and other materials and study them later.



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APPENDIX: HOLISTIC PERSONA MINH – 2

Minh excels in her studies as she prepares well and reads widely. She attends all her classes regularly, pays attention to lecturers and tutors and occasionally participates in the class discussions. She makes her own notes. She recalls and reflects on the material which she has been taught trying to understand the terminologies as well as the contents of the subject matters. She often reviews any lesson given and learns how to rewrite them. She is interested to gain advanced knowledge. Whenever there are new lessons to learn, Minh searches for information, reads the documents and forums, and watches short videos. She makes herself familiar with the subject matter before the class. She often reads blogs and long posts, asks questions and participates in the online discussions. She rarely gets distracted by the online social activities.

Minh often volunteers for a number of activities in her class as well as in her university. She enjoys conversing with her friends or making new acquaintances. Minh accepts requests for help from her friends or makes new appointments only if her schedule permits.



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APPENDIX: HOLISTIC PERSONA MINH – 3

Minh is fluent in her native language and has learnt basics of the English language. In speaking her native language, Minh has to detect tones. Hence her ears are tuned, and she can recognise sounds in words. However, she has difficulty speaking in English as she cannot pronounce English words.

Every day Minh watches YouTube and listens to English songs for half an hour to improve her pronunciations. During weekends she travels to the nearby historic town, Hoi An, in order to practice her English by speaking with the tourists. She finds that this option is expensive, time consuming and has limited success.

Minh wishes to learn English so that she can work in a foreign company that pays well.



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APPENDIX: HOLISTIC PERSONA

Holistic Persona is a persona with Five Dimensions:

- Personality (McCrae and Costa; Goldberg: Five factor of personality – openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism)
- Intelligent Dimension (Gardener: Linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intra personal)
- Knowledge (Bloom; Anderson and Krathwohl: Factual, Conceptual, Procedural, Metacognitive knowledge)
- Cognitive process (Bloom; Anderson and Krathwohl: Remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, create)
- Factual (Humanistic and puzzling attributes)



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