Developing linguistic competence for 6th grade students in Vietnam

Ha Thi Trinh[1], My-Tra Thi Nguyen[2*], Ha-Xuan Thi Pham[3], Chi-Linh Vu[4]
[1]Department of Applied Linguistics, Institute of Linguistics, Vietnam; trinhhavnnh@gmail.com (H. T. T.).
[2]Faculty of Journalism and Communication, Thai Nguyen of Science, Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam; myntt@tnus.edu.vn (M-T. T. N.).
[3]English Faculty, Thuongmai University, Vietnam; phamxuanha@tmu.edu.vn (H-X. T. P.).
[4]Division of Vietnamese Studies, Thang Long University, Vietnam; chivuling18@gmail.com (C-L. V.).

Abstract: Developing linguistic competence for junior level students in Vietnam is an emerging issue that needs attention. This paper applies interdisciplinary research methods which are a combination of linguistics and educational sciences. The combination of the questionnaire survey method and class observation is used to evaluate students' language competencies, especially, speaking and listening. The analytical method is used to analyze linguistic skills that are necessary to be created for students during this stage. Developing linguistic competence is considered the most effective means to grow thinking capacity. The scope of this paper is aimed at sixth grade students specifically surveying their linguistic competence thereby providing an overview of the language development stage for juniors at the secondary school level in Vietnam in general and in Ha Dong district, Hanoi in particular. We conducted a case study by collecting data at two secondary schools in Hanoi city (implementation period of two months: December 2021 and February 2022). According to these factual survey results, we can primarily suggest concrete measures to develop linguistic competence for 6th-grade students in Vietnam. This will also be an information source for reference in completing the Literature textbook series edited according to the new "General Education Program in Literature (2018)" in Vietnam which is in the early stages of being put into use.

1. Introduction

The need for policy changes and educational renovation becomes inevitable in the context of Vietnam's deep and intensive world economy. When Vietnam's Comprehensive "General Education Program in Literature (2018)" has been completed in developing and compiling textbooks, learning and researching students' language capacity is of great importance in both theory and practice.

This research aims to answer two questions:

(1) What is the current level of language competence of 6th grade students in Vietnam?
(2) What solutions can be proposed to develop the language competence of 6th grade students in Vietnam?

The significance of the research is to get a general picture of the stage of language development for students at the beginning of secondary school in Vietnam in general and students in some secondary schools in Ha Dong district, Hanoi city in particular. The research will clarify the development of the language ability of this group of students, thereby identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the student's language ability. This paper initially offers some solutions to form and develop language capacity for 6th grade students contributing to improving language capacity for students in the early stages of school in Vietnam. This will also be an information source for reference in completing the

Literature textbook series edited according to the new "General Education Program in Literature (2018)" in Vietnam which is in the early stages of being put into use.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Theory of Language Ability

Language competency can be understood as the ability to use a certain language well and effectively. Studies on language ability have been mentioned by many researchers worldwide since the mid-19th century. The first author to draw attention to the structural model of language ability was Noam Chomsky with the publication of the 2nd edition of the books "*Syntactic Structure*" [1] and "*Aspects of Syntactic Theory*" [2].

It is worth noting that when referring to the concept of "linguistic ability", researchers often refer to the concepts of "linguistic ability" and "linguistics" of Chomsky [2]. In "*Aspects of Syntactic Theory*", Chomsky [2] distinguished between linguistic competence which is the linguistic knowledge of speakers and listeners in an ideal monolingual environment and poetics inhuman speech produced at any time in specific and influenced situations by a multitude of different factors. In his criticism of the basic principles of structural linguistics, Chomsky [2] shows that language is not a hierarchical structure with linear relationships between phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses and sentences but a network of generative transformation processes. However, it is too concerned with abstract syntax and viewing language from the perspective of a cognitive psychological mechanism. Chomsky's theory hardly pays attention to the aspect of language as a communication tool in social interactions. Chomsky's views concentrated on creativity and uniqueness. From his viewpoint, he concluded that linguistic competence is not only mastery of grammatical structures but also proficiency in communication.

Halliday in Herman, et al. [3] found that the development of language competence is the ability to master three basic language functions which he called "meta-functions" of which the "ideational function" expresses content helps determine the speaker's way of seeing things, "interpersonal function" establishes and maintains relationships, defines social groups, identifies and strengthens personal characteristics and the "textual function" helps create a link between the language itself and the characteristics of the situation in which it is used, helping the speaker (or writer) construct paragraphs of discourse appropriate to the situation and at the same time assume that any linguistic unit is the actualization of the above three functions [4].

In the field of language proficiency testing and assessment, The research of Bachman [5] in "*Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*," introduced a communicative language ability model that he argued extended previous models because it "describes the processes by which language components interact with each other and with the context of language use with the purpose of providing an orientation for the development and use of language proficiency tests. The model of "communicative language ability" that Bachman introduced includes three large parts: linguistic ability, strategic ability and psychophysiological mechanisms. According to him, linguistic competence includes a set of specific knowledge components used in communication through language. Strategic competence is a term used to refer to the intellectual ability to apply components of linguistic competence to the use of communicative language in context. Therefore, strategic competence provides a means to relate linguistic competence to the characteristics of the situational context of language use and the language user's knowledge structure (sociocultural knowledge and knowledge about the real world). According to Bachman [5] previous language competency models have distinguished skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) from parts of knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and spelling) but not shown how these skills and knowledge components are related.

In 1996, the above model published by Bachman and Palmer [6] was adapted when trying to describe linguistic ability in language use. They proposed a model of language use that described the interaction between components: personal characteristics, language ability, subject knowledge and emotional filters of which the key component is language ability. Language includes linguistic knowledge and strategic competencies.

When attempting to build a language competency model as a content basis for program design, Celce-Murcia, et al. [7] found that not many studies have really paid attention to detailing the components of this competency model. Some other studies have also tried to list the content that should be included in a communicative language teaching program but the detailed presentation of that content is of great value and influence in the field of language teaching but is not done systematically and about any comprehensive and clearly defined structural competency model. Therefore, Celce-Murcia, et al. [7] built a model of communication competency consisting of five components: discourse capacity, language capacity, socio-cultural capacity, action capacity and strategic capacity. Celce-Murcia, et al. [7] used "linguistic ability" instead of grammatical ability to indicate the lexical and phonological system. Grammatical ability is not limited to morphology and syntax. The important contribution of Celce-Murcia, et al. [7] aims to specifically point out the interaction between components of communication competence.

Celce-Murcia [8] found that the 1995 model had gaps and proposed a more advanced and specific model based on the results of synthesizing and specifying previous studies to explore the role of communicative competence in language teaching. The new model includes six component competencies including:

- Socio-cultural capacity.
- Discourse capacity.
- Language capability.
- Formula capacity.
- Interactive capacity.
- Strategic capacity.

The concept of "language ability", "communication ability" or "communicative language ability" is constantly being changed and supplemented. The development of this concept is largely due to the narrowing of the concept of linguistic competence by separating its subcomponents into other competencies. Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence holds that all social factors are outside the linguistic field, the sociolinguistic field in the concept of "communicative competence" initially includes all aspects that language competence does not cover. This concept is emphasized by Celce Murcia by separating action capacities Celce-Murcia, et al. [7] and renaming sociolinguistic competence as Celce-Murcia sociocultural competence [8]. Along with the narrowing of the concept of sociolinguistic competence, the number of components in the competence model also increases reflecting the development of the theoretical system of linguistic competence.

Numerous studies have been made on how to improve language skills. These studies determine the effect of reading and critical thinking techniques on students' reading comprehension skills. Trio, et al. [9] introduced reading techniques such as directed reading, thinking activity and previewing questions, reading, reflecting, reciting and reviewing. Other authors such as Gloria, et al. [10] and Adriandica and Rohiman [11] emphasised on Learner-Centered Methods (LCM) as an innovative teaching method to help students at all levels develop language competence.

Researchers have understood, divided and named language competence in different ways at different times with different approaches. However, most researchers agreed that language competence includes both knowledge of language and the ability to use language in a communicative context despite changes in names or methods of dividing elements. Identifying, defining and describing knowledge is quite easy but describing and evaluating usability is very difficult because the ability to use language is also related to various applications of cognitive processes and emotional factors.

This research mentioned above has mostly gone into aspects of language competence. However, most of the research came from the perspective of pedagogy. Research on developing language capacity from the aspect of teaching and learning in schools always receives attention from countries worldwide especially those with progressive and developed education. This is clearly shown through the

framework program which is then applied to the compilation of textbooks especially textbooks for teaching the mother tongue.

To meet the goal of developing language capacity, American language textbooks focus on developing language skills and forming the ability to use language independently and confidently. Contents in textbooks include both informational text and literary text, helping students have comprehensive knowledge and find it convenient to read any text in life. The book also supports teachers and students on the level of knowledge and skills to achieve in each unit through self-testing at the beginning of each unit and the end of each lesson (writing, speaking, listening and presentation skills).

In Russia, like other core subjects, Russian primary language textbooks aim to develop general abilities and language abilities, including four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, Russian primary language textbooks also pay attention to developing students' cognitive abilities (memory, attention, thinking etc.).

In France, with its viewpoint and program aimed at developing language competence, French textbooks also clearly demonstrate that spirit. Besides aiming to develop general competencies (autonomy and creativity, acquiring social and civic competencies, mastering common techniques of information and communication technology), the subject of French also focuses on developing the subject's specific abilities which are mastering the "mother tongue" and developing language abilities: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Textbooks not only focus on content but also guide methods and ways of learning to help students learn on their own.

2.2. Characteristics and Language Abilities of Sixth Grade Students in Vietnam

In the sixth grade, students have just moved from elementary to middle school along with significant changes in the physiological and psychological body and mind. This is the age when there are leaps forward both physically and mentally, so there is a clear difference. They like to assert themselves, want to be independent in all activities and are also easily emotional with sudden feelings of happiness and then sadness. Children are easily agitated because they are not mature enough to control their own emotions. Therefore, they need the companionship of family, teachers and friends.

Regarding the language ability of sixth grade students in Ha Dong district, Hanoi city in particular, and middle school students in Vietnam in general, it is an issue of special concern in the literature subject in "General Education Program in Literature (2018)". Linguistic competency is one of two specific competencies of the literature subject. Linguistic competence is defined as the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings clearly and coherently through words as well as facial expressions, postures and gestures. This research only discusses students' language abilities through studying literature within the scope of this study. Following Vietnamese subject at the elementary level, literature in middle school is considered a key subject that can help students develop language ability. Students' language capacity includes the following three requirements:

- The ability to master the Vietnamese language requires students to have a certain source of vocabulary, understand and feel the richness of Vietnamese and grasp the rules of word form, grammar and spelling.
- The ability to use Vietnamese for communication requires students to know how to use Vietnamese fluently in different situations and contexts to communicate with different audiences. This competency helps students develop in all forms: reading, writing, speaking and listening helps students use Vietnamese accurately, coherently, effectively and creatively for different purposes in many diverse contexts.
- The ability to use language to create documents is a very important ability for students in high schools. This capacity is understood as the ability to organize and construct a document according to specifications and to present and express one's thoughts, feelings and understanding on a certain issue in a convincing way.

3. Research Methodology

This survey was conducted at two Secondary Schools in Ha Dong district, Hanoi city, namely, Le Loi Secondary School and Le Hong Phong Secondary School.

The purpose of the survey is to describe, analyze, evaluate and give comments on the current situation of teaching literature to sixth grade students from the perspective of language competency development. These are reliable practical bases to propose measures to improve the effectiveness of literature teaching for sixth grade students and particularly sixth grade students in some secondary schools in Ha Dong District, Hanoi when studying the literature textbook compiled according to the new comprehensive general education program [12].

The specific content of the survey is as follows: The survey was conducted on the current status of sixth grade students' language abilities when studying literature textbooks compiled according to the 2018 General Education Program on specific competencies: reading ability, writing capacity, speaking capacity and listening capacity (through a competency assessment test). The linguistic abilities of sixth grade students are used as an indicator of the effectiveness of literature teaching methods being applied by teachers to middle school students in general.

Questionnaires are used to evaluate students' language abilities in the following four competencies: reading competency, writing competency, speaking and listening competency. In addition, classroom observation is also applied to evaluate speaking and listening abilities to collect more objective results because speaking and listening abilities are two specific abilities.

Both middle schools chose to study literature textbooks in the "Kite" series of Pedagogical University Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City as the teaching and learning material.

The survey was conducted during weeks 14 and 15 of the 2021 - 2022 school years.

The following survey methods are used:

Poll investigation:

 Design and use a survey of sixth grade students' language abilities.

 Survey tool for students: To assess the language ability of sixth grade students, periodic tests to assess capacity must be consistent with knowledge and skills standards and capacity development orientations, including the following: Questions and exercises are designed according to cognitive levels from easy to difficult and from low to high.

Level 1: Recognize and repeat learned knowledge and skills.

Level 2: Understand the knowledge and skills learned; present and explain knowledge according to personal understanding.

Level 3: Know how to apply learned knowledge and skills to solve familiar or similar problems that arises in study and life.

Level 4: Apply learned knowledge and skills to solve new problems or give reasonable responses in study and life in a flexible way.

The periodic test evaluates language ability mainly based on the results of students answering surveys (focusing on reading comprehension and writing skills) and through lesson observation (mainly focusing on reading, speaking and listening skills).

Regarding assessment methods, quantitative assessment is applied to assess reading comprehension and writing capacity (direct scoring through survey forms). In addition, qualitative assessment through the lesson observation process is also used to evaluate speaking and listening abilities.

4. Findings And Discussion

4.1. Current Status of Reading Comprehension and Writing Ability of Sixth Grade Students

The most important issue is to innovate in the way of designing questions that relate to the requirements for assessing language ability. The assessment requirement of the 2018 Literature Program stated that periodic assessment is usually done through tests or written exams. Exams and tests may have essay writing (one or more sentences) tasks. Test designers can combine objective tests and essays to assess reading comprehension and ask test-takers to write an essay on a certain topic

according to each type of text learned in the program. In evaluating learning outcomes at the end of the school year and at the end of the school level, it is necessary to innovate assessment methods. Use and exploit language materials to ensure the ability to evaluate students' abilities and overcome the situation of passive perception which means students only memorize lessons or copy existing documents. Avoid reusing learned corpus texts to accurately assess the ability to read, understand, analyze and appreciate literary works of learners" (General Education Program in Literature, 2018) in Vietnam.

Periodic assessment mainly focuses on reading comprehension and writing abilities. Thus, the literature test needs to have two parts:

- Part 1 assesses reading comprehension ability.
- Part 2 evaluates writing ability.

Depending on the duration of time to complete the test, the proportion of reading comprehension questions and writing sections is divided accordingly. The contents and requirements of the test are as follows:

- Reading comprehension requirements can be given in the form of multiple choices with an appropriate length, of the same genre and type of text learned. The number of multiple-choice questions depends on the units to be tested, the content and form of the text, the requirements for applying Vietnamese knowledge, etc.
- As for writing requirements, depending on the time taken, there can be 1 or 2 questions in the form of paragraphs or short essays. The writing task is based on the specific curriculum for sixth grade. The content and topic can be tied to the problem raised in the text that has been read or an independent problem. The format is open-ended to encourage students' own opinions and creativity. It is required to extract new material and unlearned excerpts to measure students' real abilities in receiving, analyzing, commenting on and appreciating literature particularly with literary discussion. Open-ended questions or issues should be encouraged to arise to test the students' abilities to apply a variety of knowledge and skills. Test-takers must know how to compare, relate, contrast and especially be able to apply it to new situations and new vocabulary. If the questions just go around the given texts and works students have learned in textbooks like the traditional way of setting questions, the situation of memorizing available documents and copying sample texts passively will never end.

The survey is conducted to describe, analyze, evaluate and give comments on the current status of teaching reading comprehension and writing to sixth grade students from the perspective of capacity development. These are reliable practical bases to propose measures to improve the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension and writing for sixth grade students in general and sixth grade students in some secondary schools in Ha Dong district, Hanoi city in particular.

Subjects, Locations, Time and Content of the Survey

We surveyed 368 6th grade students at two secondary schools in Ha Dong district, Hanoi city. The survey was specifically conducted as follows:

Le Loi Secondary School: 5 classes, 178 students.

Le Hong Secondary School: 5 classes, 190 students.

Both middle schools chose to study literature textbooks in the "Kite" series of Pedagogical University Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City as compulsory textbooks.

The survey was conducted during week 15 of the 2021 - 2022 school years.

Survey Method

Investigation through check sheets:

Design and use questionnaires to survey students' reading comprehension and writing skills and survey teachers directly teaching sixth grade.

Survey tool for students: To evaluate the reading comprehension and writing ability of sixth grade students, periodic assessment tests must be consistent with knowledge standards, skills and capacity development orientations, including questions and exercises designed according to the following cognitive levels:

Level 1: Recognize and repeat learned knowledge and skills.

Level 2: Understand the knowledge and skills learned; present and explain knowledge according to personal understanding.

Level 3: Know how to apply learned knowledge and skills to solve familiar and similar problems in study and life and at a higher level to solve new problems or give reasonable feedback in learning and in factual situations flexibly.

Survey Content

The survey is conducted on the following issues:

(a) Ability to read and understand text (material taken from outside the textbook students are studying).

(b) Ability to write documents.

The researchers learn through tests of reading comprehension and writing skills. The periodic test evaluates these two language skills based on the results of students answering questions related to explicit content, expressing feelings and relating to themselves at a simple level such as feelings about characters or stories given, and lessons learned from the text.

To survey the reading comprehension ability of students in preparation for the end of term 1 of grade 6, the researchers designed a survey suitable to the learning content of grade 6 students up to week 14 with questions related to explicit content, expressing feelings and relating to oneself at a simple level such as feelings about characters or stories, lessons learned from text, etc.

The evaluation of students' reading comprehension skills is at three cognitive levels: awareness, understanding and application (low and high applications).

Table 1 shows the survey results for the reading comprehension ability of grade 6 students. We used the above survey content to design the exam according to two main contents: reading comprehension and writing. We evaluate the reading comprehension skills of 6th grade students according to 3 cognitive levels: awareness, understanding, and application. The results obtained are as follows:

Tables 2 and 3 present the test results of six-grade students at Le Loi and Le Hong Phong secondary schools. After giving 6th grade students of 2 Le Loi Middle School and Le Hong Phong Middle School, Ha Dong District, Hanoi City a test on reading comprehension and writing ability, the researcher marked the test and obtained the results shown specifically in Tables 2 and 3. The results obtained have been arranged into 3 levels: Level 1, level 2 and level 3. At each level, we continue to divide it into three levels: Good, pass and unsatisfactory.

Table 1.
Survey results of students' reading comprehension skills and abilities.

Level topic	Awareness	Understanding	Application	Total
I/ Reading comprehension: Memoir text	Identify the type and features of the type. Aware of the authenticity of the memoir. Identify the pronoun representing the narrator. Explain polysemic words.	Understand the content of the excerpt. Understand the mood and emotions expressed. Analyze the effect of first-person narration.	Make sentences with polysemic words and explain the meaning.	
Number of sentences: Score: Ratio:	4.0 2.5 25%	3.5 2.5 25%	0.5 1.0 10%	8 6.0 60%
I. Writing: Write a paragraph expressing your feelings about the six-eight poem.			Write a paragraph expressing your feelings about a folk song on the theme of family emotion. Write sentences with predicates as phrases.	
Number of sentences: Score: Ratio:			1 4.0 40%	1 4.0 40%
Total number of sentences Total score Ratio:	4.0 2.5 25%	3.5 2.5 25%	1.5 5.0 50%	9 10.0 100%

Table 2.

Results of reading comprehension and writing ability tests of sixth grade students at Le Loi Secondary School, Ha Dong district, Hanoi city.

Level 1				Level 2				Level 3			
E	**G**	**A**	**BA**	**E**	**G**	**A**	**BA**	**E**	**G**	**A**	**BA**
140 (78.7%)	30 (17%)	8 (4.3%)		105 (59%)	68 (38.2%)	5 (2.8%)		66 (37%)	92 (52%)	15 (8.4%)	5 (2.6%)
Total: 178 students (100%)											

Note: E: Excellent (Students achieving 8 points or more); G: Good (Students scoring from 6.5 points to < 8 points); A: Average (Students achieving from 5 points to < 6.5 points); BA: Below average (Student achieving < 5 points).

Table 3.

Results of the reading comprehension and writing ability test of sixth grade students at Le Hong Phong Secondary School, Ha Dong District, Hanoi City.

Level 1				Level 2				Level 3			
E	**G**	**A**	**BA**	**E**	**G**	**A**	**BA**	**E**	**G**	**A**	**BA**
88 (46.4%)	76 (40%)	20 (10.5%)	6 (3.1%)	80 (42%)	74 (39%)	28 (14.7%)	8 (4.3%)	48 (25.3%)	90 (47.4%)	32 (16.8%)	20 (10.5%)
Total: 190 students (100%)											

Comment

Looking at the results table above, it can be seen that students of Le Loi Secondary School and students of Le Hong Phong Secondary School have a fairly equal correlation in reading comprehension and writing ability at level 1, level 2 because most questions at these two levels mainly stood at the level of awareness and understanding.

At level 3, there is a certain degree of difference, most clearly shown in the good level and the unsatisfactory level. Correlating at all three levels, good scores are also concentrated in levels 1 and 2 and good scores in level 3 have a lower percentage because this question focuses on high application. Specifically:

- At the excellent score level, students from Le Loi Secondary School accounted for 37% while students from Le Hong Phong Secondary School only achieved 25.3%.
- At the below average score level, Le Loi middle school students only account for 2.6% while Le Hong Phong middle school students account for 10.5%.

The explanation for this discrepancy in results is that the quality of input students at Le Loi Secondary School is higher than that at Le Hong Phong Secondary School leading to different capacities in these two student groups.

In addition, students also lost a lot of points on the question of writing a reflective paragraph. This is a genre that children have not learned and practiced much in elementary school, so when faced with this type of problem, they are often confused even though teachers have taught them how to handle it. Furthermore, most students lost points in the question of integrating Vietnamese knowledge contained in the passage. The exam often requires writing a paragraph and using Vietnamese knowledge and after completing the paragraph, students must underline and annotate the content including the answers of the questions but most students forget this requirement.

Another important reason comes from Vietnamese knowledge appearing scattered in the survey questions. The new textbook enhances the system of Vietnamese practice exercises but has a slight reduction in theoretical contents, so students do not have a deep understanding and time to practice before applying the exercise system. This is completely different from the literature textbooks of the previous period. In the previous period, textbooks reserved detailed Vietnamese-presented language lessons, going from theory to practice. In other words, in the past, textbooks presented each unit of Vietnamese knowledge in a series of stages: first, go through an illustrative example section, then form concepts for students, and lastly, go to the practice section. The new literature textbooks mostly reduce the theory part to go straight into practice, integrate teaching theory and exercises after each text or embed them in the text itself.

One of the types of reading comprehension exercises is word-meaning exercises. This type of exercise requires students to determine the meaning of words, recognize the meaning of sentences, recognize the meaning of paragraphs and articles, initially perform interpretation tasks and initially know how to generalize and infer ideas to draw out the meaning of units in the text. Therefore, students' logical thinking is shaped and developed. The group of word interpretation exercises meets both the content and format reading comprehension requirements of the new Literature General Education Program. In students' experience and background knowledge, there are familiar words about things, actions and properties. that have explicit meanings. However, there is a limitation in the communication environment and the ability to remember beside the purpose of reading comprehension, explaining the meaning of words is also a way to widen students' vocabulary. Determining the meaning of words is especially important for understanding the text. Students will have the basis to grasp the meaning of sentences in the text, and thereby, understand the main content of the lesson by understanding the meaning of words. To comprehend the meaning of words in the text, there are the following interpretation methods: visualization, definition, context, synonyms and antonyms.

In addition, one of the most applicable types of questions is explaining polysemous words in a specific context. This type of problem also makes many students confused leading to incorrect answers or a lack of meaning.

For example, explain the meaning of the polysemous word in the following sentence:

"My father woke up early, arranged pens, rulers and books in a small leather briefcase (a luxury product at that time), then dressed neatly, rented a cart with iron wheels (no rubber wheels yet) to take me to school at the **foot** *of Yen Phu dike, two kilometers from my house, took me to say hello to teacher Ha Ngoc Chu and entrusted me to him."*

In the above sentence, in what sense is the word "*foot*" understood? The word "*foot*" is a polysemous word. Please make a sentence with the word "*foot*" that has a different meaning from the above meaning and explain the meaning clearly.

The reading comprehension test also has text-response exercises. This group of exercises corresponds to the requirements for relating, comparing and connecting reading comprehension skills in the 2018 Literature General Education Program. This group of exercises demonstrates the students' high level of working independence the most. Response exercises show how the read text affects students, how they respond to the text in real life, etc. Integration is clearly shown in the questions. Text response exercises integrate life skills and personality education, mobilize and evoke a lot of students' experiences, knowledge and emotions in writing, speaking and listening skills in the question-answering process.

Therefore, students must combine language abilities with general skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to acquire reading comprehension and writing skills. The results obtained after the test of sixth grade students pose the following problem: Developing reading comprehension and writing capacity is a process. Capacity is developed through each cognitive step: activities, practicing skills, forming and fostering habits of reading and thinking, reading and experiencing daily as well as the process of practicing writing. This is the basis for us to propose solutions to improve reading comprehension and writing skills for sixth grade students, helping them to increasingly hone and perfect these skills.

4.2. Current Status of Speaking and Listening Abilities of Sixth Grade Students

Speaking and listening are also two skills that need to be learned and practiced along with reading and writing skills. To develop the two skills of speaking and listening, acquire information content, both the attitude and emotions when listening and speaking and knowing how to apply them in learning and daily activities. However, the time spent on learning these two skills in the program only accounts for 10% which means that there are only about 13-14 speaking and listening classes during the school year. Therefore, the speaking and listening requirements are not considerable. Complying with the regulations of the 2018 Literature Program, the Literature textbook for 6th-grade in" The Kite" series organizes speaking and listening skills training with the following requirements:

- Speaking: Tell a legend or fairy tale, a memorable experience or memory, present an opinion on an issue of concern (a historical event or a problem in life), have an appropriate attitude and speaking skills.
- Listening: Grasping the content of another person's presentation, have appropriate attitudes and listening skills.
- Speaking and listening interaction: Knowing how to participate in discussion about an issue, have appropriate attitude and communication skills.

The above contents and requirements are divided equally into 10 lessons in both semesters. Each lesson has at least 1 speaking and listening period and 2-3 lessons have 2 periods. Skill requirements are repeated but the speaking and listening content changes because it is linked to reading comprehension content. The speaking and listening section in the sixth grade literature textbook includes orientation and practice. The main orientation states requirements for content and speaking and listening methods. The practice section is mainly taking time for students to speak and listen.

The question is why is the 2018 Literature Program (6th grade) only for speaking and listening with such a small number of periods?

- Firstly, at the age of 5-6 years old, children already know how to speak and listen. During the pre-school period, children still speak and listen normally; however, if children want to know how to read and write, they have to go to school. At school, priority should be given to learning to read and write, so reading and writing skills need to be practiced more than speaking and listening.

- Second, unlike reading and especially writing, students' speaking and listening activities take place in many contexts and situations. Therefore, this skill is practiced in many situations outside of class. While reading and writing skills cannot always and everywhere be practiced, speaking and listening skills can be learned almost anytime and anywhere. There are many ways and many people who can teach students to "*learn to eat, learn to speak*". At school, speaking and listening are also practiced in different subjects as well as in group activities with different topics.

Because the number of periods prescribed for these two competencies is limited, the sixth grade literature textbook has chosen to present these two skills in the following directions:

- Distinguish between speaking, listening and interactive speaking-listening abilities. Each competency has its requirements. Moreover, these activities are often independent in different manners; sometimes they talk alone (monologue), listen and when exchanging and discussing (dialogue) with at least 2 or more people, it is interactive speaking or listening.

- To speak and listen properly, students need to pay attention to both content and techniques. Speaking content is often associated with reading comprehension and writing content for students' convenience. Repeat what they have read or written and just change written language to spoken language. Speaking and listening techniques need attention to guide students on attitudes and emotions when speaking and listening; use non-verbal means (eyes, smiles, gestures, movements etc.) and supporting devices (pictures, photos, video clips and artifacts).

  - The speaking and listening topics differ because they are connected to reading comprehension and writing content as mentioned above but speaking and listening skills are constantly developed in all 10 courses due to the 2018 Literature Program's flexible criteria for these skills.

- The number of prescribed periods is small; teachers need to focus mainly on giving students a chance to practice speaking and listening and at the same time integrate those practices into many activities in various forms, both in-class and out-of-class.

The survey is conducted to describe, analyze, evaluate and give comments on the current state of teaching speaking and listening to sixth grade students from the perspective of developing capacity through lesson observations. These are reliable practical bases to propose measures to improve the effectiveness of teaching speaking and listening for sixth grade students in general and sixth grade students in some secondary schools in Ha Dong district, Hanoi City in particular.

Subjects, Locations, Time and Content of the Survey
78 students from two sixth-grade classes at two secondary school in Ha Dong District, Hanoi City as follows:
Le Loi Secondary School : 1 class, 38 students
Le Hong Phong Secondary School: 1 class, 40 students
Both middle schools chose to use literature textbooks in the "Kite" series of Pedagogical University Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City.
The survey was conducted during week 14 of the 2021 - 2022 school year.
The following issues are addressed in the survey:
(a) Speaking capacity
(b) Listening ability

Survey Method

Survey through observed lessons: We used audio and video recording methods. This method allows both recording students' language and non-linguistic devices (gestures or postures) to help explain the meaning of linguistic acts or visual aids to support the learning process such as objects, pictures, etc.

Survey Content

Speaking and listening: Presenting opinions on an issue.

Specifically, when presenting opinions on an issue, students need to express their thoughts, comments and provide specific arguments and evidence to clarify their opinions. Here are some examples of scripts collected during the process that the teacher gave and asked students to present their opinions after removing the tape:

Problem 1: What is your opinion on the issue of environmental pollution?

Problem 2: What is your opinion about the role of family for each person?

Problem 3: What do you think about the following comment: "Going sightseeing and traveling will help us open our views and learn many things"?

Problem 4: What is your opinion about the effects of reading legends and fairy tales?

Students can choose one of the above ideas and present it according to the steps below:

- Identify the issue that needs to be presented and state their opinion on that issue.
- List the arguments and evidence students use to clarify issues and convince people.
- Prepare additional devices to support the speech, such as pictures, short videos, etc.
- Pay attention to factors when speaking: appropriate volume and speaking speed. In addition, it is necessary to harmoniously combine non-verbal elements such as gestures, facial expressions, eyes, etc. of speakers with the content being presented.

To perform this content well, students need to review the paper in the previously prepared writing section and follow these steps:

- Prepare
- Find ideas and make an outline.
- Speak and listen.
- Check and edit

Results Obtained and Comments

With 1 period (45 minutes), each class has 3 - 5 students presenting a prepared problem. Most of the students were well-prepared so they presented quite well. After the students finish presenting, their classmates will comment and supplement (interactive speaking and listening). The teacher will be the one to make comments and draw the conclusion.

Students rely on the outline they have made to present their opinions. Most of the students have mastered this process. However, some students still face difficulties with oral presentations and prefer to write and read what they have written previously. In addition, many students are not proactive in using gestures, postures and appropriate means of support. After the students finished presenting, the teacher started monitoring a discussion between the speaker and the audience about the main content and details of the presentation, asking questions and answering. This interactive speaking and listening process took place enthusiastically and effectively because most of the students had carefully prepared the lesson in advance focused on listening to their peers' presentations and responded closely. Of course, there are still some students who do not interact effectively because they are still timid and lack confidence, so they speak softly and cannot express their thoughts clearly, etc.

For students at Le Loi Secondary School, they prepared for speaking and listening skills practice in groups, combined with slide presentations, so the results were quite good. Many students are very bold and confident when expressing their opinions on a specific issue without relying on previous written

preparation. The discussion process took place effectively. Audiences listen and respond accurately to the content that the presenter still gives imprecisely and without meaning.

Students at Le Hong Phong Secondary School obtained uneven results. Some students prepared their speeches fully but others were nervous in their presentations so the audience could not hear them clearly. Some students do not know how to present the prepared outline, instead; they write it down to read. Therefore, the interaction process between speaker and listener takes place at times when it is not favorable. Classmates listen and respond sometimes incorrectly. The teacher sometimes has to "take the lead", control and even suggest the problem so that the interaction process goes smoothly.

4.3. Some Solutions to Develop the Language Skills of 6th Grade Students in Vietnam

From the research results relating to teaching literature to sixth grade students presented above, the following suggestions have been made:

(1) For management levels: Allow and encourage teachers to proactively compile more reading teaching materials appropriate to the school model in accordance with the main themes of the 2018 Literature General Education Program and use the program's requirements as a basis to evaluate students' language ability.

(2) With the work of compiling sixth grade literature textbooks according to the orientation of the new Literature General Education Program, current sixth grade literature textbooks are presented scientifically according to each lesson and each topic with a clear and reasonable structure. However, many teachers said that the contents of Vietnamese subjects are quite huge at school. If in the past, textbooks presenting each unit of Vietnamese knowledge had to go from illustrative examples followed by concept formation and then to the practice part (practice), then the new textbooks have mostly skipped the theory part to start practicing Vietnamese right away. Going straight into practice without skipping the step of forming knowledge causes difficulties for both teachers and learners. In fact, during the teaching process, teachers must be proactive in designing to teach more theory and then let students practice. If the teacher strictly follows the textbook but lacks flexibility and initiative in teaching activities, most students will not be able to start practicing immediately.

Sixth grade students are students who have just completed the elementary school program and enter middle school with many surprises, so acquiring Vietnamese knowledge is not easy. However, the contents of the textbooks do not contain theoretical aspects but the requirements for students are to practice immediately which seems to be making it difficult for them. Teachers must adapt their teaching strategies to the new programme to meet the demands of the Ministry of Education and Training which focuses on giving students more responsibility for their education. The student, the main subject, must prepare knowledge and then present it and the teacher will play a role in finalizing the problem. However, in reality, students do not have knowledge of Vietnamese, so how can teachers implement good practice for them? Can students practice their reading, writing, speaking and listening abilities to the point of proficiency and language growth if the Vietnamese subject is not planned and taught in detail and thoroughly?

Therefore, it is suggested that textbook editors pay attention to the Vietnamese subject when compiling the next textbook sets and have additional instructions in training sessions for teachers to be proactive and more flexible in teaching knowledge especially with the Vietnamese subject to form and develop language capacity for sixth grade students.

(3) With the training and fostering of teachers: The Ministry of Education and Training, Departments and Offices of Education and schools need to organize training, fostering and professional development programs for teachers in both professional knowledge and reading teaching methods for teachers to teach literature in accordance with the orientation and requirements of the new general education program. Management levels need to pay due attention to training teachers on how to set reading teaching goals, design teaching activities and evaluate student learning outcomes. Teachers play the role of teacher, organizer and administrator of literature teaching activities, so they need to pay attention to the reasonableness and appropriateness of answers, problem solving and creating

conditions and opportunities for students to show creativity and initiative in the reading process. Teaching literature is also a means of helping students develop the essential character traits and basic abilities that the General Education Programme demands.

5. Conclusion

This survey of language abilities, specifically four competencies: reading, writing, speaking and listening is being conducted to assess the current status of sixth grade literature learning among students in Ha Dong district, Hanoi City in particular and Vietnamese students in general today. Survey results are drawn from a test that evaluates students' language abilities through 4 skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Those results have been a basis for helping researchers initially propose solutions to improve language skills for sixth grade students in some middle schools in Hanoi in particular and middle school students generally nationwide. These results are just initial research and are limited to surveying the language abilities of sixth grade students. The topic opens up further research directions when the literature Program (under Vietnam's General Education Program, 2018) has been revised and is in the stage of practical application. The studies are on the compilation of textbooks for the remaining grade levels of the lower secondary level such as evaluating the current literature textbooks, evaluating the teaching and learning activities of literature at the lower secondary level, researching language development capacity for middle school students through literature textbooks in the remaining grades, etc. We hope that these issues will be addressed by further research towards a comprehensive improvement of the language abilities of students at all levels in Vietnam.

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Transparency:
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate and transparent account of the study that no vital features of the study have been omitted and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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