Getting Past the Intermediate Plateau:

Four Shifts for Future-Ready Pedagogy

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TEACHER TALKS at RMIT Vietnam

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By the end of this workshop, you will…

- learn how familiar classroom routines can reinforce the Intermediate plateau;
- experience four classroom shifts for B1-B2 learners;
- redesign a conventional Intermediate lesson.

Read two learner samples. At your table, answer the questions 1-2.

Learner A

Last weekend, I went to Da Lat with my friends. We went to the night market and ate a lot of food there. The weather was good and the trip was fun.

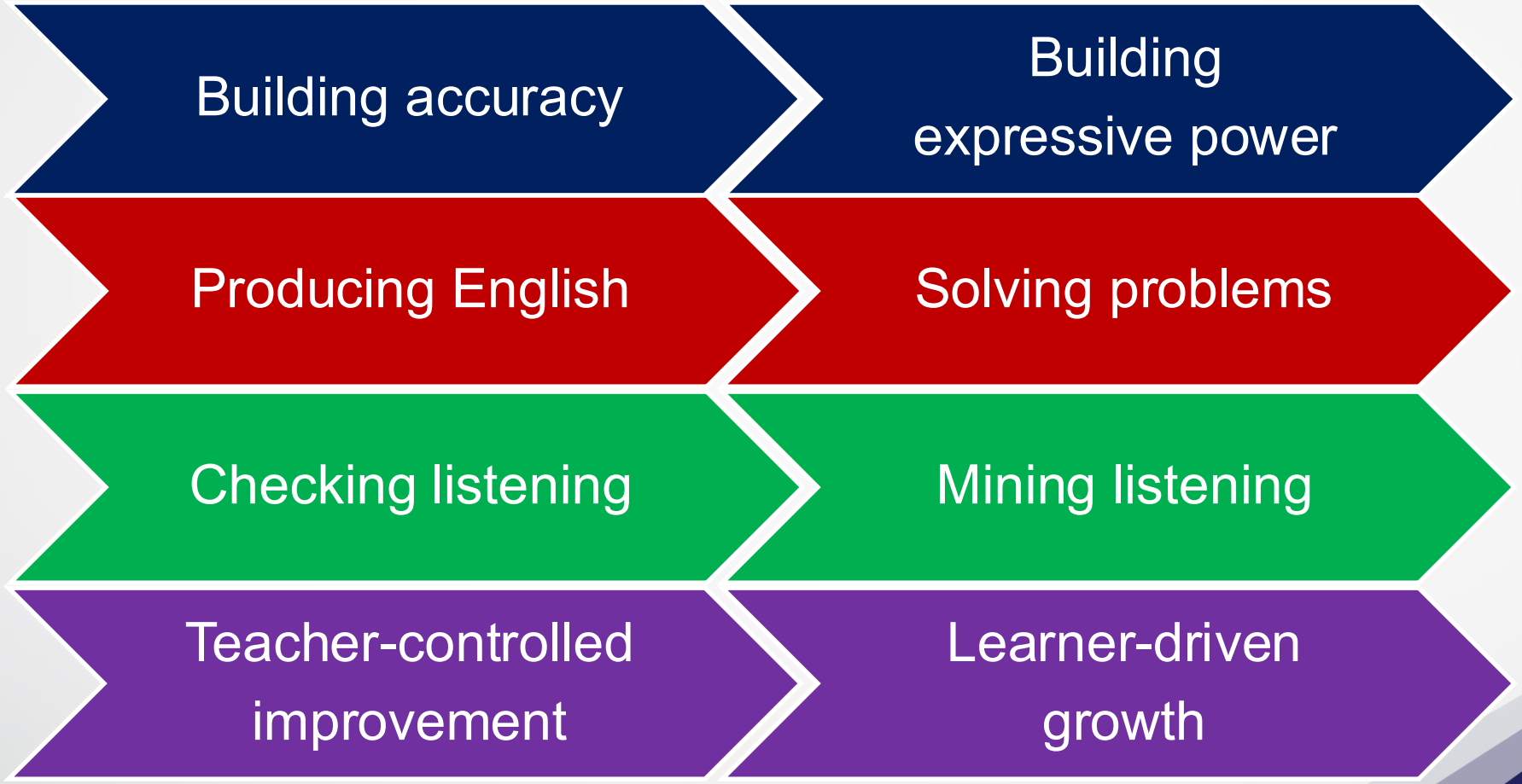
Learner B

Last weekend, my friends and I escaped to Da Lat for a short break. We wandered around the night market, sampled local food and made the most of the cool weather.

1. Which learner sounds more advanced?
2. What creates the difference?

What if the Intermediate plateau is not primarily a learner problem, but a pedagogy problem?

Four recommended shifts to help learners move beyond B1/B2



Shift 1

From building accuracy to building expressive power

Intermediate “artists” often need more colors–not just neater brushstrokes.

Lexical specificity: Use richer vocabulary

What a B1 student often says:

I went to the beach with my family last weekend. The weather was good, and we did many things. The trip was very fun.

Task

- Keep the grammar.
- Use specific vocabulary (e.g., verbs, adjectives, collocations).
- Use vocabulary B1–B2 learners can realistically use.

Expressive power comes from specific language

Same grammar / Richer language

I spent last weekend on the beach with my family. The warm weather was perfect for swimming, so we stayed until sunset. We tried fresh seafood at a local restaurant and explored the night market. It was a memorable trip.

precise verbs

stronger collocations

greater specificity

Teaching implication

Intermediate lessons should include more **lexical tasks**, including

- lexical specifying
- chunk noticing / collocation building
- paraphrasing

instead of just more grammar exercises.

Shift 2

From producing English to using English to solve problems

The quality of speaking depends less on the topic than on the task design.

Common textbook task

In pairs, discuss these questions:

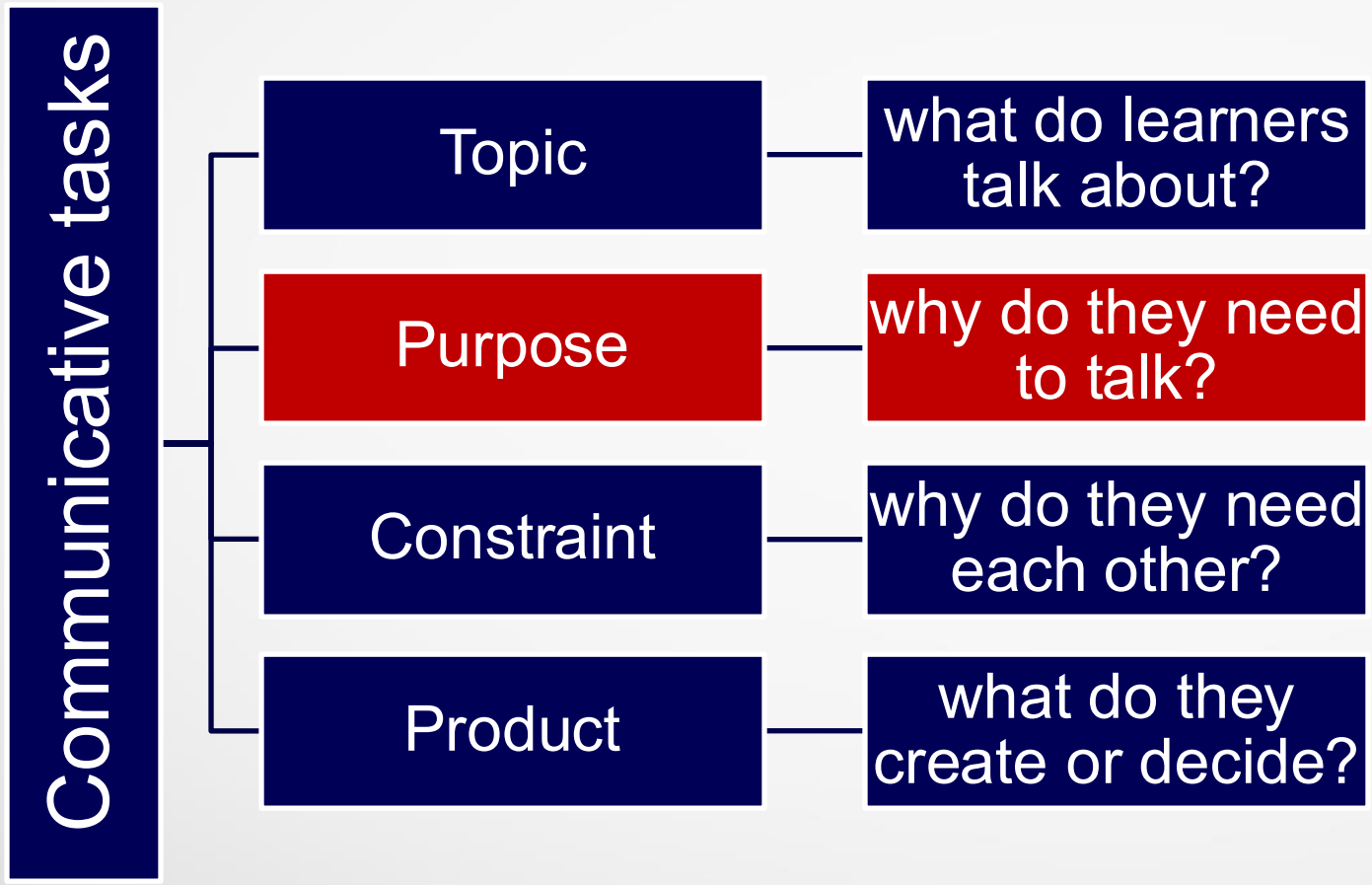
1. Are you a healthy person?
2. What are some ways to improve your wellbeing?

Decision task

Your school has 100 million VND to improve learner wellbeing. Choose TWO options. Everyone must agree.

- Student representative
- Teacher
- Parent
- Finance officer
- Quiet study area
- Monthly sports events
- Counselling workshops
- Free healthy snacks

A simple formula for communicative pressure (TPCP)



Questions for your next planning:

What must learners agree, choose, rank, solve, design or defend?

What is the final product?

Shift 3

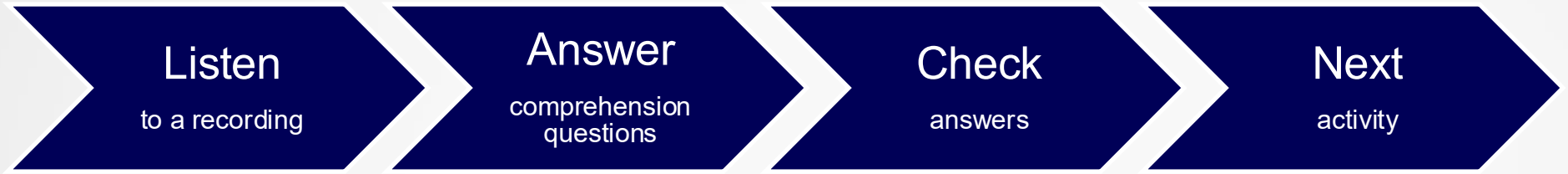
From checking listening to mining listening for language

"Good teachers exploit listening texts to the full" (Harmer, 2007, p. 136)

Harmer, J. (2007). *How to teach English* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Limited.

Turn one short recording into a language lesson

Typical cycle



Mining cycle



One minute of audio can become 15–20 minutes of language growth.

Listen once for meaning. Listen again for language.

A. Listening for comprehension

Listen and answer the questions:

1. What was the speaker's mistake when he first started learning English?
2. What change helped the speaker make progress?

B. Listening for language

Listen again and complete the chunks:

- make the same _____
- make any _____
- make the biggest _____
- little and _____
- a quick _____

C. Using language for communication

Discuss the questions below.

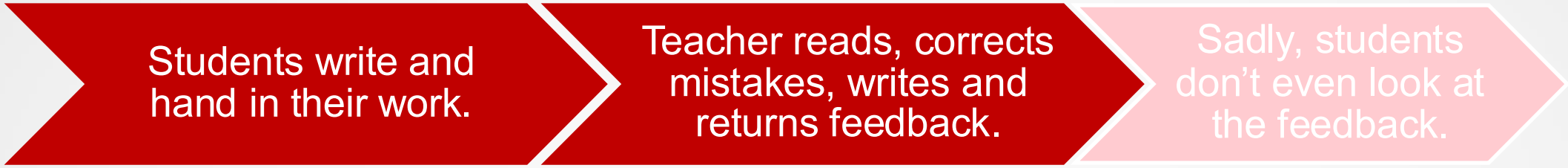
1. Did you make the same mistake when you first started learning English?
2. Have you ever felt like you stopped making progress?
3. What made the biggest difference to your English learning?
4. Do you prefer to learn too much at once or little and often?
5. Is there a quick fix to pronunciation?

Shift 4

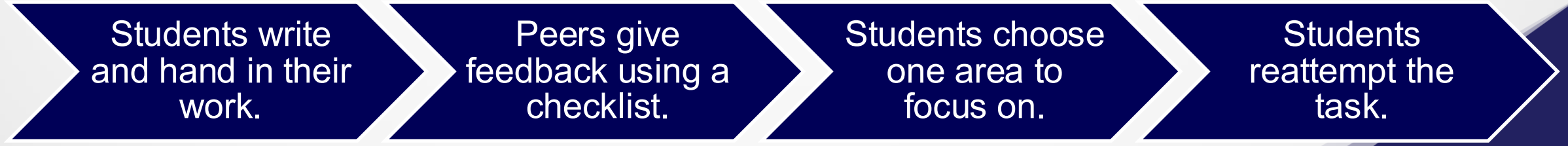
From teacher-controlled improvement to learner-driven growth

Feedback only becomes learning when it changes the next attempt.

Teacher-controlled feedback for writing



Learner-driven feedback for writing



Peer checklist (for a *Paragraph* lesson)

Read your partner's paragraph, check the relevant boxes or take notes.

Be ready to discuss your feedback with them.

- ❑ **Topic sentence:** Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea.
- ❑ **Supporting sentences:** Are they relevant to the controlling idea?
- ❑ **Linking:** How many linking words are used? Underline them.
- ❑ **Vocabulary:** What one word is repeated more than four times?
- ❑ **Vocabulary:** Is there one useful word or phrase worth keeping?

The writer chooses ONE target to focus on. Make changes to their writing.

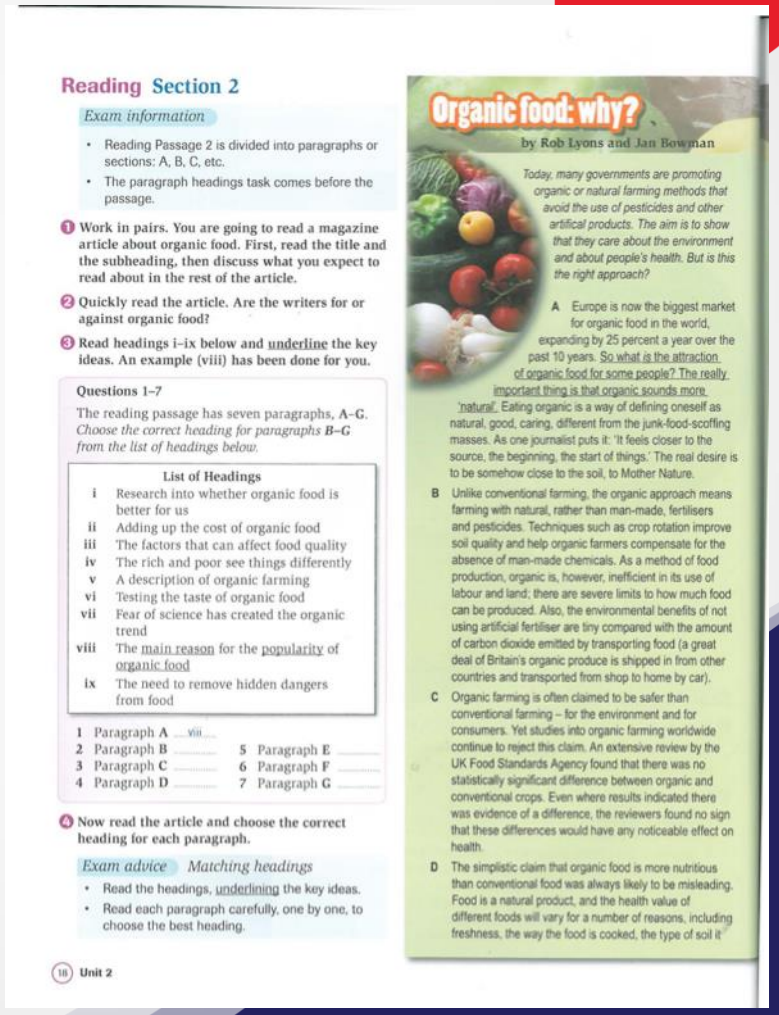
Final Task: Redesign a familiar Intermediate lesson

Common reading lesson flow

1. Students read a text.
2. They answer comprehension questions.
3. They discuss topic-related questions.

Task

1. Which ONE part will you change or add?
2. Which shift(s) will guide it?
3. What will learners notice, decide, produce or re-attempt?
4. What visible product or improved second attempt will show progress?



Reading Section 2

Exam information

- Reading Passage 2 is divided into paragraphs or sections: A, B, C, etc.
- The paragraph headings task comes before the passage.

1 **Work in pairs. You are going to read a magazine article about organic food. First, read the title and the subheading, then discuss what you expect to read about in the rest of the article.**

2 **Quickly read the article. Are the writers for or against organic food?**

3 **Read headings i–ix below and underline the key ideas. An example (viii) has been done for you.**

Questions 1–7

The reading passage has seven paragraphs, **A–G**. *Choose the correct heading for paragraphs B–G from the list of headings below.*

List of Headings

i Research into whether organic food is better for us
ii Adding up the cost of organic food
iii The factors that can affect food quality
iv The rich and poor see things differently
v A description of organic farming
vi Testing the taste of organic food
vii Fear of science has created the organic trend
viii The main reason for the popularity of organic food
ix The need to remove hidden dangers from food

1 Paragraph A viii
2 Paragraph B
3 Paragraph C
4 Paragraph D
5 Paragraph E
6 Paragraph F
7 Paragraph G

4 **Now read the article and choose the correct heading for each paragraph.**

Exam advice *Matching headings*

- Read the headings, underlining the key ideas.
- Read each paragraph carefully, one by one, to choose the best heading.

Unit 2

Organic food: why?

by Rob Lyons and Jan Bowman

Today, many governments are promoting organic or natural farming methods that avoid the use of pesticides and other artifical products. The aim is to show that they care about the environment and about people's health. But is this the right approach?

A Europe is now the biggest market for organic food in the world, expanding by 25 percent a year over the past 10 years. So what is the attraction of organic food for some people? The really important thing is that organic sounds more 'natural'. Eating organic is a way of defining oneself as natural, good, caring, different from the junk-food-scoffing masses. As one journalist puts it: 'It feels closer to the source, the beginning, the start of things.' The real desire is to be somehow close to the soil, to Mother Nature.

B Unlike conventional farming, the organic approach means farming with natural, rather than man-made, fertilisers and pesticides. Techniques such as crop rotation improve soil quality and help organic farmers compensate for the absence of man-made chemicals. As a method of food production, organic is, however, inefficient in its use of labour and land; there are severe limits to how much food can be produced. Also, the environmental benefits of not using artificial fertiliser are tiny compared with the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by transporting food (a great deal of Britain's organic produce is shipped in from other countries and transported from shop to home by car).

C Organic farming is often claimed to be safer than conventional farming – for the environment and for consumers. Yet studies into organic farming worldwide continue to reject this claim. An extensive review by the UK Food Standards Agency found that there was no statistically significant difference between organic and conventional crops. Even where results indicated there was evidence of a difference, the reviewers found no sign that these differences would have any noticeable effect on health.

D The simplistic claim that organic food is more nutritious than conventional food was always likely to be misleading. Food is a natural product, and the health value of different foods will vary for a number of reasons, including freshness, the way the food is cooked, the type of soil it

Brook-Hart, G., & Jakeman, V. (2012). *Complete IELTS bands 5–6.5 student's book with answers*. Cambridge University Press.

Reflection
& Questions

At your table:

- Which shift is most feasible in your context?
- What barrier might make it difficult?

Thank you.