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# Examining the Effectiveness of Teaching Vietnamese Language among Ethnic Minority Primary Students in Son La Province

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## Abstract

The Vietnamese language is the common language of different ethnic groups and also it is the official language used in the education sector. The development of the language skills of ethnic minority children is a fundamental issue in the development of education in ethnic regions. The main research question is; how effective are the current strategies in teaching the Vietnamese language to the ethnic minority primary students in Son La province? The methods used are collecting secondary documents, analyzing, and evaluating the situation. Data from the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years show that ethnic minority students in primary schools in Son La province still face certain limitations in language proficiency when learning Vietnamese. The level of Vietnamese usage among ethnic minority students outside the classroom is 45%, and at home is only 5%. Based on the current situation, this article aims to propose some solutions to help ethnic minority primary school students in Son La province overcome language barriers, especially in light of the new requirements of the 2025 General Education Program, and to provide educators and teachers with guidance on building and selecting content as well as teaching methods that are more suitable for learners.

**Keywords:** *Ethnic Minorities, Primary Students, Language Barrier, General Education Program, Vietnamese Language, Son La Province.*

## 1.0 Introduction

The effectiveness of teaching Vietnamese as a second language to Ethnic Minority Primary Students in Son La Province, Vietnam, is emerging as an important area of discussion and research in line with the modernization process of Vietnam and educational reforms in the country. In Vietnam, ethnic minority students face many barriers when it comes to learning and even mastering Vietnamese. The language plays an essential role in the learning processes the children go through and in integrating them into broader Vietnamese society. This study will assess the efficiency of the methods used in teaching the Vietnamese language in Son La

Province, the educational context shaped by its multinational and geographically disadvantaged population. Language education in the context of multilingual societies has received more attention internationally in recent decades (Thuyet, 2013). Colin Baker's 'Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism' (2011) and UNESCO 'Education in a Multilingual World' (2006) show that teaching in a multilingual context is challenging and that there is an urgent need to find the best ways to deal with the issue of providing bilingual education. In the same vein, Sandra and Nancy's "Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching" (1996) highlights the social factors involved in language learning that are fundamental to understanding the contextualized nature of language learning and teaching. There is growing interest in researching how Vietnamese can be taught to ethnic minorities. In this respect, Son La Province is a particular site of interest due to its geographical accessibility, topographical difficulty, and highly ethnical identity. Like most provinces in China, this province struggles with the language education policy due to the large percentage of the ethnic minority population at 83.51% (Huong, 2006). Therefore, this research will evaluate the existing practices in teaching the Vietnamese language to ethnic minority primary students in Son La to establish areas of success and failure. However tentative, it has been shown that there has been some improvement, but there are still many difficulties at hand. Thus, this study aims to enrich the overall objective of improving educational practices and performance of ethnic minority students in Vietnam.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

In recent decades, there has been a growing concern about language education in multilingual societies across the globe. The following research works should be noted: Colin Baker's "Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism" (2011); Educational Outlooks of UNESCO "Education in a Multilingual World" (2006); and "Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching" by Sandra & Nancy (1996) which introduced the social dimensions in a language. The books "Methods of Teaching Vietnamese" by Le A and colleagues (1996), the article "From the Concept of Communicative Competence to the Issue of Teaching and Learning Vietnamese in Contemporary General Education" by researcher Vu Thi Thanh Huong (2006), and "Some Issues in Evaluating the Current Literature Textbooks and Proposing New Program and Textbook Directions" by Nguyen Minh Thuyet (2013) are all centered towards teaching Vietnamese language among the minority as well as ways of improving the second language competence among these students. Over the years, many authors have further engaged in an extensive analysis of language proficiency among general education students, including being able to characterize, analyze the cause, and proffer solutions for the language education situation in ethnic minority areas in Vietnam. For instance, such authors have focused on the impact of spoken language on written language and language acquisition in ethnic minority areas, as seen in Tran Tri Doi (2006) and Nguyen Thi Thu Hang (2013). However, it is still vital to understand the current status and the factors that have impounded the mastery of the language among the minority, as observed in provinces like Son La Province. The present research aims to identify appropriate and workable strategies that can enhance students' language competence to fit the ongoing changes in the curriculum and textbook development.

## **2.1 Study Purpose**

This research aims to assess the existing condition and factors influencing the language skills learning of ethnic minority primary school students in Son La province. It then provides recommendations for addressing language barriers and improving these students' Vietnamese language proficiency to correspond to the demands of the 2025 General Education Program in the current educational reform process.

### **3.0 Methods and Materials**

The study primarily employs the following research methods: collecting secondary data from the Department of Education and Training of Son La Province and using analysis methods to examine the situation and make further suggestions on teaching Vietnamese to ethnic minority students.

#### **3.1 Data Sources**

In this study, the data was mainly collected from secondary sources from the Department of Education and Training of Son La Province. Such source materials comprised educational policies, pilot studies on the effectiveness of bilingual education, and performance indicators of ethnic minorities learning the Vietnamese language. Furthermore, curriculum materials and teacher training manuals were also analyzed to determine the conventional way of teaching Vietnamese as a second language. Data from the national and provincial databases included the enrolment of ethnic minorities in schools, completion of a Vietnamese language subject, and the percentage of ethnic minorities who did not complete Vietnamese. Education problems faced by students of ethnic minorities were discussed based on socio-cultural factors and ethnographic accounts of specific ethnic groups in Son La Province. The study also reviewed the results of the prior studies of language education for ethnic minorities in Vietnam to identify all the existing problems adequately.

#### **3.2 Data Analysis**

The gathered data was analyzed to identify the effectiveness of the current strategies used to teach the Vietnamese language. To determine the existence of a performance gap, a comparison was made between the ethnic minority students and the Vietnamese-speaking students regarding their achievements. The analysis also explored the relationship between the resources for bilingual education and the learners' language proficiency level. Due to the study's complexity, quantitative methods, which quantify the level of language acquisition success, and qualitative methods were adopted through the administration of thematic analysis on the socio-cultural experiences of the participants. The study was concluded by presenting research-based recommendations on how the second language can be taught better in the ethnic minority schools in Son La Province, based on the ethnolinguistic realities identified (Malone, 2004).

### **4.0 Findings**

#### **4.1 Background of Vietnam State Policies on Language Education in Ethnic Minority Areas**

Decision No. 53-CP of the Government Council (February 22, 1980): “The spoken and written language of each ethnic minority in Vietnam is both a valuable asset for these ethnic groups and a common cultural asset of the entire nation (Tran Thi Yen, 2021). Ethnic minorities without a written script will be assisted in developing a script based on the Latin alphabet. Ethnic minorities with an old script, if they request it, will be assisted in developing a new script based on the Latin alphabet. It is necessary to develop or improve ethnic scripts to align with the common phonetic system. Old ethnic scripts and the ancient books of these ethnic groups will still be preserved and utilized in ethnic minority areas, and ethnic scripts will be taught alongside the common script at the primary level.”

A review of Vietnam's legal and policy provisions on ethnic minority languages reveals a strong and coherent position that supports national unity. Implemented through the Primary Education Law ratified on August 16, 1991, it outlines that primary education is done in Vietnamese with the exception of ethnic minorities who have the right to use Vietnamese in combination with their languages and scripts (Department of Education and Training of Son

La Province, 2023). This provision goes a long way in establishing the need to protect the diversity of languages in the educational system. This position is supported by the 1992 Constitution, which granted ethnic groups the freedom to use their languages and scripts. This constitutional guarantee is backed up by the 2014 People's Court Organization Law, which provides that a person has the right to use his/her ethnic language and scripts in legal proceedings before the court. The ruling was useful in ensuring the preservation of linguistic rights in legal settings. In the 2005 Primary Education Law, the policy of allowing ethnic minority students to use their language and scripts along with Vietnamese is reaffirmed, thus continuing the bilingual education policy. Likewise, the Press Law and Publishing Law allow the utilization of ethnic minority language and scripts for media and publication, thus providing its promotion. The VIII Theatre Congress 1998 adopted Central Resolution 5 to foster ethnic minorities to become good role models in understanding and proficiently using their language and script. It also promoted the identification, cultivation, and mobilization of ethnic minority people to participate in the production, compilation, and study of cultural, literary, and artistic products. However, this resolution seems to emerge from a more positive action framework towards maintaining and developing ethnic languages. Central Resolution 9, adopted at the XI Congress in 2014, further underlines this. It called for the protection and development of minority cultures and their unique identity features such as language, writing system, clothing, and holidays.

#### 4.2 Situation

In the 2021–2022 school year, there were 90,127 primary school students in grades 1, 2, and 3 in Son La Province. Among these, 77,024 students were from ethnic minorities across all three grades. (Table 1). The minority students who completed Vietnamese language studies satisfactorily in grade 1 were 12,367 students (48.07%), in grade 2 was 12,324 students (48.12%), and in grade 3 was 6,429 students (25.03%). The total number of students who achieved the standard level in Vietnamese language studies was 12,371 students in grade 1 (48.09%), 12,881 students in grade 2 (50.30%), and 18,864 students in grade 3 (73.43%). The total number of students who did not complete Vietnamese language studies was 988 students in grade 1 (3.84%), 404 students in grade 2 (1.58%), and 396 students in grade 3 (1.54%). (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Number of Ethnic Minority Students Completing Vietnamese Language Studies at the Primary School Level in Son La Province.

Person (Unit)	Academic Year 2021 - 2022					
	Vietnamese Language Grade 1		Vietnamese Language Grade 2		Vietnamese Language Grade 3	
	All Student	Ethnic Minorities Student	All Student	Ethnic Minorities Student	All Student	Ethnic Minorities Student
Total	30.315 (100%)	25.726 (100%)	29.892 (100%)	25.609 (100%)	29.920 (100%)	25.689 (100%)
Completed Well	16.316 (53,82%)	12.367 (48,07%)	15.937 (53,32%)	12.324 (48,12%)	9.159 (30,61%)	6.429 (25,03%)
Completed	12.951 (42,72%)	12.371 (48,09%)	13.544 (45,31%)	12.881 (50,30%)	20.353 (68,02%)	18.864 (73,43%)
Not Completed	1.048 (3,46%)	988 (3,84%)	411 (1,37%)	404 (1,58%)	408 (1,36%)	396 (1,54%)

*Source:* Report No. 139/BC-SGDĐT, March 23, 2023, of the Department of Education and Training of Son La Province

### **4.3 Current State of Language Proficiency of Ethnic Minority Students in Some Primary Schools in the Son La Province**

The Department of Education and Training of Son Lai Province discovered several language skills difficulties of ethnic minority primary school students for the 2021-2022 academic year. Pronunciation skills are particularly difficult for these students to handle. Some shared concerns are problems with the combination of vowels: “uê” is said like ‘u’ or ‘ê,’ and “iu” is like ‘i’ or ‘u.’ Moreover, Mong ethnic students often have difficulty in reading words in which one of the syllables is followed by the voiceless stop. The Tay, Nung, and Mong University students, for example, tend to produce the tone “ngã” (tilde) incorrectly by replacing it with the tone “sắc” (acute accent) or “nặng” (underdot). They also have issues distinguishing between distinct phonemes that are closed, including ‘s’ and ‘x’; ‘d’ and ‘r’ and ‘gi,’ and the problem of native language identification interferes with the precise production of some phonemes such as ‘v’ and ‘b.’

Reading Skills also represent another critical area of concern. Most students read slowly with the wrong pronunciation of most words and no pauses at commas and periods. Their reading mistakes are often phonetic rather than phonic, and there is often no comprehension (Doi, 2006). Students read words phonetically and rely on syllables that rhyme, and most of the time, they do not comprehend what is being read; hence, they find it hard to answer questions on comprehension. As a result, such responses are frequently incomprehensible or erroneous.

Writing Skills are particularly weak. Students fail dictation activities and can write only the first part of the text with numerous spelling mistakes in the first consonants, rhymes, tones, and capital letters (Nguyen, 2019). Both have issues with regard to alignment, spacing, and compliance with spelling conventions. Many writers misunderstand the content/ focus of the task and so write irrelevant or incorrect text, for instance, mixing up “truyền thống” (traditional) for “chiếc thuyền” (boat).

Another area that has not been developed is speaking and listening skills. Affected students are unable to make links between concepts and express themselves in cause-and-effect or coordinated sentences because they only learn a few Vietnamese words and grammar structures (Baker, 2008). Their pronunciation errors due to native languages are also a determining factor when using complex sentence structures and compound sentences.

### **4.4 Causes of the Language Proficiency Situation of Ethnic Minority Primary School Students in Son La Province**

The Vietnamese language proficiency of ethnic minority primary school students in Son La province is quite limited when they first attend school. Like ethnic minority students in other regions, the students' first language in Son La province is their mother tongue, and Vietnamese is their "second language." Students' language skills before entering school are those they have accumulated through their family and social environments where they were born and raised (Yen, 2021). When learning Vietnamese, Kinh (ethnic majority) students have many opportunities to interact with adults at any time and place, both inside and outside school. The topics they encounter in conversations are very diverse and abundant. Ethnic minority students, however, do not have as many opportunities for communication in Vietnamese as Kinh students do. At school, ethnic minority students only interact with their teachers, who are proficient in Vietnamese. Since there are many students in the class and only one teacher, the opportunities for communication in Vietnamese between students and teachers are very limited. The content of the discussions in these interactions primarily relates to the lessons, while the issues of linguistic life are always vibrant and diverse. Following a natural tendency, the habit of using their mother tongue is brought into learning Vietnamese by ethnic minority

students. The result is that similarities between Vietnamese and their mother tongue facilitate learning, while differences create obstacles and difficulties for ethnic minority students when learning Vietnamese. This is also the reason why ethnic minority students make errors in using Vietnamese, such as pronunciation errors, word usage errors, and sentence structure errors. Due to the characteristics of their mother tongue and limited Vietnamese vocabulary, ethnic minority students often make certain sentence errors such as incorrect word usage, improper use of pronouns and terms of address due to not understanding the meaning of words, using incomplete sentences, omitting subjects, creating incomplete sentences, or using incorrect word order in sentences.

The space and time for using Vietnamese in ethnic minority areas are always limited and shortened. Children from ethnic minority regions, from preschool age to the end of primary school, spend more time in the family environment than in the school environment. They have more exposure to family members who speak their mother tongue as their first language than to teachers who use Vietnamese (Hang, 2013). This situation poses disadvantages for teaching in Vietnamese and developing language skills in these children. The shrinking space and reduced time for using Vietnamese create an environment less conducive to stimulating the use of Vietnamese as a communication tool. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for students to practice and improve their communication skills.

The most effective method for teaching a language is to create an environment that stimulates language practice activities. However, the environment for practicing Vietnamese among ethnic minority students in Son La province is negatively affecting them. These students have limited interactions in Vietnamese with their teachers, while communication with their classmates in their mother tongue is common. This situation places the students in a "passive role" and creates a reluctance to use Vietnamese for communication and exchanges, even within the school environment.

Due to the "cohabitation" nature of multiple ethnic groups in Son La province, a natural multilingual environment is present in most areas of the province. In this environment, communication occurs in several forms (Ministry of Education and Training, Hanoi, 2024). Within the family, people converse with each other in their own ethnic language; in society, a common language is used, which could be the regional lingua franca (the language of one ethnic group that is considered the common communication language in the region); if both parties know Vietnamese, they use Vietnamese. Sometimes, the conversation happens in a way where the speaker uses their own ethnic language, and the listener understands as much as they can (this phenomenon was observed at an elementary school in Son La province when H'Mong and Nung students were talking to each other).

In such a context, speakers try to use simple words and short sentences so that the listener can understand. This affects students' habits in using language: responding with short sentences or just a few simple words is quite common, not only when communicating with their peers but even with teachers. When starting first grade, students will face fewer language difficulties. In daily life, whether students use Vietnamese or their ethnic language depends on the communication partner and the specific environment. The level of Vietnamese usage among ethnic minority students in the classroom is 100%. In environments outside the school, it is 45%, while at home, it is only 5%. With teachers, it is 92%; with parents and grandparents, it is 3.75%. Even when communicating with friends, they use Vietnamese only 25% of the time. Thus, although Vietnamese is the country's official language, it is not commonly used among ethnic minority students in Son La province. This partly explains why students often do not know or know little Vietnamese before starting school. It can be said that these students live in a limited Vietnamese language environment, mostly restricted to the classroom with teachers.

## 5.0 Discussion

### 5.1 Learning Environment

According to the information obtained from the research, learning and using the Vietnamese language play a crucial role in helping students from ethnic minorities develop their Vietnamese language skills. Therefore, the solution to creating and maintaining this environment is always a focus of schools that invest in it. Some forms of creating a Vietnamese learning environment with many ethnic minority students in the classroom include organizing activities to support students, such as reading books, watching videos, playing games, participating in arts and culture competitions, and joining exchange programs; fostering the habit of using Vietnamese for students at home and in the community (Nancy & Sandra, 2010). In this article, the research team also proposes some solutions to build and maintain a Vietnamese communication and usage environment for students:

From the family's perspective, it is necessary to enhance the use of Vietnamese at home. Families where both parents speak Vietnamese should be encouraged to use Vietnamese to communicate with their children and discuss their studies and daily activities. For families whose parents do not speak or rarely use Vietnamese, students should be encouraged to speak Vietnamese with their parents to create an integrated communication environment between Vietnamese and the minority language (Đa et al., 2019). However, in this solution, teachers also need to guide students to understand the use of Vietnamese in communication and learning, helping them acquire Vietnamese knowledge and general knowledge more easily and effectively while still preserving and using their own ethnic language.

From the school's perspective, it is necessary to improve management, enhance training for teachers, and guide them in applying suitable teaching methods for students from ethnic minorities. The goal of this solution is to direct teachers on teaching and learning methods appropriate for ethnic minority students who are studying cultural subjects through a second language. The school must also pay attention to organizing extracurricular activities to support ethnic minority students in meeting the 2025 National Education Program requirements (Hoa, 2019). Specifically, for literature subjects, teachers need to be flexible in planning lessons, adjusting the schedule as needed, monitoring and categorizing students, and identifying students' strengths and weaknesses in using Vietnamese to create timely enrichment and supplementary plans (Lavoie, 2011).

According to the observed challenges, future research needs to focus on the appropriate materials that can be used by all students to help them learn a second language. One experiment that needs to be done is assessing the students after every level upon using the materials.

### 5.2 Some Language Education Models for Students in Ethnic Minority Regions

**Model One:** Teaching Vietnamese speaking skills to ethnic minority preschool students before they enter primary school. The goal is to help students develop reflexes and actively use Vietnamese by becoming familiar with words, sentences, and expressions in specific situations in Vietnamese right from preschool. In addition to the teacher and students in the classroom, there should be a "teaching assistant" responsible for interpreting and explaining (in the student's native language) so that students can understand the teacher's instructions (in Vietnamese). This model yields certain results in preparing students to acquire knowledge of Vietnamese confidently in their early days at school (Sharifian, 2015).

**Model Two:** Teaching and learning the native language first using the student's native language and then gradually shifting to teaching and learning Vietnamese using Vietnamese, while the native language moves to the status of a subject. As Kimmo Kosonen suggests based on experiences in other multi-ethnic countries and considers suitable for the situation in Vietnam:



"Effective bilingual education programs aimed at developing education in Vietnam should be implemented as follows: 1. First, read and write in the native language, then transition to learning Vietnamese; 2. Teach subjects in the native language first to build a knowledge base that makes learning in Vietnamese easier to understand; 3. Teach more understandable issues in Vietnamese" (Kosonen, 2004, p. 31).

## 6.0 Conclusion

The issue of language education in ethnic minority areas of Vietnam has long been a concern. It remains urgent today, with two primary demands: preserving and developing the traditional identities of each ethnic minority, including their native languages, and mastering Vietnamese as the "common language," "the standard language," and "the official language used in schools and other educational institutions." In the specific context of Vietnam, combining the first model (initially teaching and learning "immersed" in Vietnamese) with the second model (teaching the students' native language as a subject) is a feasible approach. This method addresses cultural diversity, traditional values, social status, and the self-determination of ethnic minority communities, focusing first on a bilingual state of ethnic minority languages and Vietnamese. It aims for ethnic diversity within national unity while promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students.

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