

The Influence of the Mother Tongue on Ethnic Minority Students' Vietnamese Language Acquisition: A Bilingual Education Perspective

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Abstract: Vietnamese serves as the national language and the common language used in social communication, public administration, and education in Vietnam. However, for the majority of ethnic minority students, Vietnamese is not their mother tongue but is learned as a second language. This situation gives rise to distinctive characteristics in the process of learning Vietnamese and leads to language transfer phenomena from the mother tongue to Vietnamese. This study employs a document analysis approach to synthesize findings from both domestic and international research on the influence of the mother tongue on ethnic minority students' acquisition of Vietnamese. The findings indicate that the mother tongue exerts a dual influence on the acquisition process. On the one hand, differences in phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and language-use environments may create challenges in the development of Vietnamese listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. On the other hand, the mother tongue serves as a cognitive foundation that supports concept formation, cognitive development, and the acquisition of a second language. Based on these findings, the study advocates a shift from viewing the mother tongue as a barrier to recognizing and leveraging the advantages of bilingualism in the education of ethnic minority students.

Keywords: Bilingual education; ethnic minority students; mother tongue; language transfer; Vietnamese as a second language.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is a multiethnic country comprising 54 ethnic groups. According to the General Statistics Office, ethnic minorities account for approximately 14.7% of the national population and are primarily concentrated in mountainous, remote, and border areas (General Statistics Office, 2019). Within these communities, the mother tongue serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for preserving indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and ethnic identity. However, within the national education system, Vietnamese is the official language used for instruction, assessment, and educational administration. As a result, most ethnic minority students are required to learn through a language different from the one predominantly used in their families and local communities.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that proficiency in Vietnamese has a direct impact on the academic achievement of ethnic minority students. Difficulties in listening comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension, and writing in Vietnamese affect not only students' performance in Vietnamese Language and Literature but also their ability to acquire knowledge across all other subject areas. For a long time, the influence of the mother tongue on Vietnamese language learning was predominantly viewed from a deficit perspective, with mother-tongue interference being regarded as a major

source of pronunciation, lexical, and grammatical errors in Vietnamese. However, with the advancement of research on bilingual education and second language acquisition, many scholars have argued that the mother tongue is not merely a source of learning difficulties but also a valuable cognitive resource that facilitates second-language learning.

In the context of ongoing educational reform, a comprehensive understanding of both the positive and negative influences of the mother tongue on Vietnamese language learning is of considerable theoretical and practical significance. Such understanding contributes not only to clarifying the mechanisms underlying ethnic minority students' acquisition of Vietnamese but also to providing a scientific basis for the development of appropriate educational policies and pedagogical interventions aimed at improving educational quality in ethnic minority areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationally, the influence of the mother tongue has been one of the most extensively studied topics in the field of second language acquisition. Early studies primarily focused on the phenomenon of language transfer, referring to the influence of a learner's first language on the acquisition and use of a second language. According to Odlin (1989), learners tend to draw upon linguistic knowledge

acquired through their mother tongue when using a new language. Such transfer may be positive when the two languages share similar features or negative when substantial differences exist between them.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks in this field is Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (1979, 2000). According to this hypothesis, the development of the first language does not hinder but rather facilitates the learning of a second language. Cognitive skills, academic thinking abilities, and learning strategies developed through the mother tongue can be transferred to the second language. Based on this perspective, Cummins argues that maintaining and developing the mother tongue plays a crucial role in the academic success of bilingual learners.

Similarly, studies by Krashen (1982), Baker (2011), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) emphasize the importance of the mother tongue in supporting learning processes, cognitive development, and the preservation of cultural identity. UNESCO (1953, 2003, 2016) has repeatedly recommended mother-tongue-based education as an effective strategy for improving educational quality among minority and marginalized student populations.

In Vietnam, the teaching and learning of Vietnamese among ethnic minority students has attracted considerable attention from researchers in linguistics, education, and ethnic studies. Works by Tran Tri Doi (2004), Hoang Thi Chau (2004), Nguyen Van Khang (2012), and many other scholars have examined the linguistic characteristics of ethnic minority languages and the challenges students encounter when learning Vietnamese.

Research findings indicate that differences in phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems between Vietnamese and students' mother tongues are major causes of errors in Vietnamese language use among ethnic minority learners. In addition, limited exposure to Vietnamese, disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, and cultural differences have been found to significantly affect students' academic performance.

In recent years, alongside the implementation of Vietnamese language enhancement programs for children and students in ethnic minority regions, an increasing number of studies have approached this issue from a bilingual education perspective. These studies suggest that the strategic use of the

mother tongue in instruction can facilitate concept formation, cognitive development, and more effective acquisition of Vietnamese. Nevertheless, existing research has tended to focus on specific language skills or particular ethnic groups, while comprehensive analyses addressing both the positive and negative influences of the mother tongue on Vietnamese language learning remain relatively limited.

Overall, the literature indicates that previous studies have focused predominantly on the difficulties ethnic minority students encounter when learning Vietnamese. In contrast, the cognitive and educational advantages associated with the mother tongue have not been examined comprehensively. Furthermore, there remains a lack of integrative studies that simultaneously consider both the facilitating and constraining effects of the mother tongue on the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in Vietnamese. Addressing this gap is the primary objective of the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed the following research methods:

- Document Analysis: Relevant studies on second language acquisition, the education of ethnic minority students, and contrastive linguistics between Vietnamese and ethnic minority languages were collected and analyzed.
- Theoretical Synthesis: Existing scholarly perspectives were synthesized to develop an analytical framework for examining the influence of the mother tongue on the learning of Vietnamese.
- Contrastive Linguistic Analysis: Phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of Vietnamese were compared with those of selected ethnic minority languages in order to explain the sources of language errors commonly observed among ethnic minority students.

RELATED CONCEPTS

According to UNESCO (2003), a mother tongue is the language that an individual acquires first during early childhood and that is typically used within the family and the immediate community.

According to Rod Ellis, a second language is a language learned after the learner has already acquired a first language or mother tongue.

Odlin (1989) defines language transfer as the influence of similarities and differences between a

previously acquired language and a target language being learned. Positive transfer occurs when features of the mother tongue facilitate the learning of a second language. In contrast, negative transfer occurs when learners apply rules from their mother tongue to the second language, resulting in pronunciation, lexical, or grammatical errors.

Cummins (1979) argues that the languages possessed by an individual do not exist independently but rather share a common underlying cognitive foundation. Learning skills developed through the mother tongue can be transferred to a second language. This perspective emphasizes the mother tongue as a valuable educational resource rather than an obstacle in the education of ethnic minority students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Negative Influences of the Mother Tongue on the Acquisition of Vietnamese

Influence on Listening Skills

Listening plays a fundamental role in second language acquisition, as it serves as a primary source of linguistic input through which learners receive and process language information. For ethnic minority students, Vietnamese listening comprehension is directly influenced by the phonological characteristics of their mother tongue. According to Odlin (1989), second-language learners tend to rely on their existing linguistic knowledge when processing a new language. Differences between the phonological systems of the first and second languages may result in negative language transfer, thereby affecting learners' ability to identify and discriminate sounds accurately.

In Vietnamese, a number of phonemes and tonal distinctions do not exist in certain ethnic minority languages. Consequently, students often experience difficulties distinguishing consonant pairs such as "l/n", "tr/ch", and "s/x", as well as tonal contrasts such as the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones. These difficulties may reduce learners' ability to accurately perceive linguistic signals, leading to misunderstandings or the omission of information during communication and learning activities (Ellis, 1997). In classroom settings, limitations in listening comprehension can directly affect students' ability to understand instructional content, follow teachers' directions, and participate effectively in oral interactions.

In addition to phonological factors, limited Vietnamese vocabulary may further hinder listening comprehension among ethnic minority students. In many cases, learners can recognize sounds but fail to fully understand the meanings of the words or phrases being used. This indicates that listening involves not only the perception of auditory signals but also the processing and interpretation of linguistic information. Without appropriate support, deficiencies in listening skills may negatively affect students' overall learning process (Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

Influence on Speaking Skills

Speaking is the language skill most visibly affected by language transfer. According to Odlin (1989), second-language learners tend to apply pronunciation patterns, vocabulary knowledge, and grammatical rules from their mother tongue when using a new language. This phenomenon is particularly common among ethnic minority students learning Vietnamese.

At the phonological level, students frequently transfer pronunciation habits from their mother tongue when communicating in Vietnamese. This may result in errors such as substituting initial consonants, omitting final consonants, or producing tones inaccurately. Such pronunciation errors not only reduce the accuracy of spoken language but also impede communication, as listeners may experience difficulties in interpreting the intended message (Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

At the lexical level, differences between the two languages may lead to inappropriate word choice or expressions that reflect direct translation from the mother tongue into Vietnamese. Furthermore, limited Vietnamese vocabulary often makes it difficult for students to express academic content or abstract concepts effectively (Nation, 2001).

At the grammatical level, learners may transfer grammatical rules from their mother tongue to Vietnamese. This can be observed in inappropriate word order, unnatural sentence structures, or non-standard grammatical constructions. Such patterns reflect the effects of negative transfer and illustrate the close relationship between the first language and the second language in the process of communication (Ellis, 1997).

In addition, limited exposure to Vietnamese constitutes another factor affecting the development of speaking skills. In many ethnic minority communities, the mother tongue remains the primary medium of communication in both

family and community life. Due to insufficient opportunities to practice Vietnamese on a regular basis, ethnic minority students often develop speaking proficiency at a slower rate than students for whom Vietnamese is the first language (Cummins, 2000).

Influence on Reading Skills

Reading involves not only the ability to recognize written symbols but also the capacity to comprehend and interpret the meaning of a text. For ethnic minority students, limitations in listening and speaking skills often extend to the process of reading comprehension in Vietnamese.

One of the primary contributing factors is limited Vietnamese vocabulary. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge is a key determinant of reading comprehension. When learners do not fully understand the meanings of words in a text, they encounter difficulties in grasping its content and constructing overall meaning. Consequently, many ethnic minority students may be able to decode written words accurately without fully comprehending the text.

In addition, differences in cultural background and life experiences significantly influence reading comprehension. According to Anderson and Pearson (1984), text comprehension relies heavily on readers' prior knowledge. When a text reflects cultural or social contexts that are unfamiliar to ethnic minority students, they may experience difficulties in making inferences, establishing connections, and interpreting information.

Furthermore, limitations in phonological awareness and in understanding the relationship between written symbols and Vietnamese speech sounds may reduce reading fluency and negatively affect reading comprehension performance (Perfetti, 2007).

Influence on Writing Skills

Among the four language skills, writing is generally regarded as the most complex because it requires the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive components. For ethnic minority students, the influence of the mother tongue on writing manifests itself in various ways.

First, spelling errors frequently arise as a result of the influence of mother-tongue pronunciation patterns. When students have difficulty distinguishing Vietnamese phonemes, they are more likely to confuse initial consonants, rhymes, or tones in their writing. Such errors reflect the

close relationship between spoken and written language (Ministry of Education and Training, 2020).

In addition, limited Vietnamese vocabulary constrains students' ability to express ideas in writing. Learners often encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate words, developing ideas, and constructing coherent paragraphs. According to Hyland (2019), second-language writing proficiency depends heavily on vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, and the degree of exposure to the target language.

Moreover, insufficient opportunities to communicate in Vietnamese reduce the extent to which listening and speaking skills can support the development of writing ability. As a result, Vietnamese writing proficiency among ethnic minority students often develops more slowly and requires more extensive practice than that of students whose first language is Vietnamese (Cummins, 2000).

Positive Influences of the Mother Tongue on the Acquisition of Vietnamese

Despite certain negative effects, a substantial body of research in bilingual education has demonstrated that the mother tongue serves as an important resource for learning and second-language development. According to Cummins (1979), cognitive and academic skills developed through the mother tongue can be transferred to a second language, thereby facilitating learning.

First, the mother tongue provides the foundation for the development of learners' initial cognitive concepts. Through their first language, children learn to understand the world, develop logical thinking, and accumulate knowledge about their surrounding environment. These cognitive capacities continue to support the learning of Vietnamese and other school subjects (Cummins, 2000).

The mother tongue also functions as a bridge that helps students understand new concepts in Vietnamese. When teachers connect new knowledge with understandings that students have already developed through their mother tongue, learners are able to acquire new content more effectively. This principle constitutes a fundamental basis of contemporary bilingual education models (Baker, 2011).

Furthermore, maintaining and developing the mother tongue contributes to the preservation of

cultural identity while enhancing students' self-esteem and self-confidence. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that mother-tongue-based education not only supports academic achievement but also promotes linguistic and cultural diversity. These positive psychological factors enhance learning motivation, encourage active participation in Vietnamese-language learning activities, and ultimately improve educational outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review indicate that the influence of the mother tongue on ethnic minority students' acquisition of Vietnamese is multifaceted and should not be viewed merely as an obstacle. Difficulties in learning Vietnamese often manifest through negative language transfer from the mother tongue to Vietnamese, including influences on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse organization. These findings are consistent with Odlin's (1989) theory of language transfer, which posits that learners tend to rely on previously acquired linguistic knowledge when learning a new language. When substantial differences exist between two linguistic systems, the likelihood of errors in second-language use increases.

However, viewing the mother tongue solely from a negative perspective results in an incomplete understanding of the issue. The findings suggest that many of the difficulties experienced by ethnic minority students do not stem directly from the mother tongue itself but rather from limited opportunities to use Vietnamese, insufficient language exposure, and instructional approaches that fail to adequately address learners' bilingual characteristics. In other words, the mother tongue is not the cause of low Vietnamese proficiency; rather, the absence of effective mechanisms for facilitating transfer between the two languages constrains learning outcomes.

The findings are also consistent with Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (1979, 2000). According to this framework, cognitive and academic skills developed in the first language can be transferred to a second language through a common underlying proficiency. This helps explain why students with strong mother-tongue proficiency often demonstrate more effective Vietnamese language acquisition when supported by appropriate educational approaches. The mother tongue enables learners to develop conceptual systems, logical thinking abilities, and

fundamental learning strategies before transferring these competencies to the second language.

These findings are further aligned with UNESCO's recommendations regarding mother-tongue-based multilingual education. UNESCO argues that the use of the mother tongue during the early stages of education does not weaken proficiency in the national language. On the contrary, it contributes to improved academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, and increased student participation in educational activities. In the Vietnamese context, this perspective is particularly relevant given current efforts to strengthen Vietnamese language education for children and students in ethnic minority areas.

Another notable finding concerns the close interrelationship among language skills. Difficulties in listening and speaking frequently lead to limitations in reading and writing. This suggests that the development of Vietnamese proficiency among ethnic minority students should adopt an integrated approach, beginning with the enhancement of oral communication skills before progressing to reading comprehension and academic writing. This principle is widely supported in second language acquisition research.

From a bilingual education perspective, the findings indicate the need to move beyond an educational model that treats Vietnamese as the sole focal language and toward an approach that actively utilizes the relationship between the mother tongue and Vietnamese. Such an approach not only facilitates more effective Vietnamese language learning but also contributes to the preservation of ethnic minority languages and cultures, thereby supporting the broader goals of sustainable development and inclusive education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Vietnamese language education for ethnic minority students.

First, the mother tongue should be regarded as an educational resource rather than an obstacle to be eliminated. In the teaching and learning process, teachers can use students' mother tongue as a supportive tool for explaining new concepts, clarifying lesson content, and connecting new knowledge with learners' existing understanding. The effective use of the mother tongue can reduce linguistic barriers and facilitate knowledge acquisition.

Second, greater emphasis should be placed on the development of Vietnamese listening and speaking skills during the early years of schooling. Communicative activities, storytelling, role-playing, language games, and experiential learning should be promoted to provide students with opportunities to use Vietnamese in authentic communicative situations. As listening and speaking proficiency improves, the development of reading and writing skills is likely to become more effective.

Third, instructional content should be closely connected to the cultural contexts and lived experiences of ethnic minority students. The use of learning materials that reflect local environments enables students to draw upon their prior knowledge, enhances reading comprehension, and increases learning motivation. Such an approach also strengthens the connection between school education and community culture.

Fourth, teachers should receive professional development in bilingual education, second language acquisition, and the linguistic characteristics of ethnic minority languages. Such knowledge enables teachers to accurately identify errors resulting from language transfer and to implement appropriate pedagogical interventions rather than viewing these errors merely as mistakes that require correction.

Fifth, educational authorities should continue to refine policies aimed at strengthening Vietnamese language proficiency among ethnic minority students while simultaneously supporting the maintenance and development of their mother tongues. This approach provides a foundation for building an equitable educational environment that respects linguistic and cultural diversity within schools.

CONCLUSION

The mother tongue exerts a profound influence on ethnic minority students' acquisition of Vietnamese. These influences affect all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and are manifested across multiple linguistic dimensions, including phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Differences between the mother tongue and Vietnamese may give rise to negative transfer phenomena that create challenges in the learning process. At the same time, however, the mother tongue serves as an important cognitive foundation that supports

concept formation, cognitive development, and second-language acquisition.

The findings of this study confirm that the mother tongue is not merely a factor influencing learning outcomes but also a valuable educational resource in the education of ethnic minority students. Therefore, Vietnamese language instruction should be implemented through approaches that capitalize on the advantages of bilingualism, strengthen the connections between the mother tongue and Vietnamese, and create supportive learning environments that are responsive to learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such an approach is of considerable significance for improving educational quality and ensuring equitable learning opportunities for ethnic minority students in the context of ongoing educational reform.

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