

Chapter 8

Languages and Ethnic Minority Students' Access to Education in Vietnam: Problems Turned into Opportunities from the Perspective of Translanguaging



Chinh Duc Nguyen and Thanh Nguyen Thao Tran

Abstract Compared to students of the ethnic majority (the Kinh), minority students have a lower level of educational attainment. Language barriers have been widely accepted as a cause for this disparity. That is, ethnic minority students encounter schooling difficulties due to their disadvantages in Vietnamese, the national language and also the language of the ethnic majority in Vietnam. This chapter reports part of the findings of a project that explored schooling opportunities for ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Specifically, the chapter highlights the findings related to language difficulties experienced by students of two ethnic minorities in two highland provinces (Gia Lai and Dak Lak). Data were collected from informal talks/interviews with educational/school leaders, teachers, and parents in local villages. The findings show that a low level of Vietnamese was perceived as the major challenge to the ethnic minority students' schooling opportunities. In addition, students were discouraged to capitalize on their indigenous languages to facilitate their learning and engagement in the classroom. The chapter begins with an overview of educational inequalities between ethnic majority and minority students in Vietnam. Next, we focus on language barriers experienced by ethnic minority students by reviewing relevant studies. The findings and discussion will be the central section of this chapter. Based on the literature and our research findings, we suggest a solution to the perceived problems. That is, policy and practice of education for ethnic minority students need to be innovated in accordance with translanguaging, which posits ethnic minority students' language resources should be seen as strengths rather than challenges.

C. D. Nguyen (✉)
Dong Nai Technology University, Bien Hoa City, Vietnam
e-mail: nguyenducchinh@dnvu.edu.vn

T. N. T. Tran
Dong A University, Danang, Vietnam

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Introduction

The world today is characterized by inequalities, which are manifested in income, accommodation, job opportunities, and access to public services (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019; Zeichner, 2011). Educational inequalities, which are simply understood as differences in schooling attainment between rich and poor students, have become a great source of concern in many societies. In other words, disparities in familial and socioeconomic backgrounds among students are reflected in their educational achievements. In many multiethnic societies, students of the majority outperform their minority peers, and the differences in schooling attainment result from a wide range of factors, such as family income and parents' educational background (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021). Languages are, to some extent, one of the reasons behind schooling inequalities (Nguyen & Ha, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2017). That is, the ethnic majority language has been used as the national language or medium of instruction in mainstream education. As such, students whose languages and ethnicities are minoritized tend to be disadvantaged as they have to abide by mainstream practices in the schooling system. The monolingual perspective on educational practice has been criticized for partly leading to educational inequalities (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Zeichner, 2010). As part of initiatives or solutions to the perceived problems, translanguaging has been put forward for classrooms mixed by students of multilingual and multiethnic backgrounds. Simply put, translanguaging is more like a pedagogical approach that encourages or helps students capitalize on their multilingual resources or capabilities for learning within and beyond the classroom (García, 2009; Lewis et al., 2012; Williams, 1996).

Vietnam is known as a multiethnic nation encompassing 54 recognized cohabiting ethnic groups. However, the ethnic majority, the Kinh, accounts for over 85% of the population; whereas, the rest of 15% is for 53 other ethnic minorities (General Statistical Office, 2019). Unsurprisingly, institutions in mainstream society have been grounded in the 'standard' of the Kinh majority (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). For example, Vietnamese, the language of the Kinh, has been acknowledged as the national language of Vietnam since the national independence in 1945. The national language has also been employed as a medium of instruction in the schooling system nationwide. The monolingual policy and practice in most schools have caused schooling inequalities between students of the majority and those of minorities (Bhowmik et al., 2018; Nguyen & Ha, 2021; Truong, 2011). Despite the perceived problems, policy and practice of education have yet to accommodate the bilingual or multilingual resources of ethnic minority students. On the basis of this reality, we conducted a study on educational equity for ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Part of the findings of this study pertained to the language barriers experienced by ethnic minority students, which helped to explain their schooling difficulties. In this chapter, we selected the findings related to language issues as part of the findings of our research project on educational equity for ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Translanguaging is presented as our recommendation for transcending the language barriers experienced

by ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands and throughout Vietnam. The chapter begins with an overview of educational inequalities between ethnic majority and minority students in Vietnam. Next, relevant studies are reviewed to delineate language obstacles experienced by ethnic minority students. Based on the literature and our research findings as the central section of this chapter, a workable solution is proposed to alleviate the perceived issues and facilitate favorable experiences among ethnic minority students.

Literature Review

Schooling Inequalities Between the Ethnic Majority and Minority Students in Vietnam

Recognised as a nation with 54 existing ethnic groups among which the Kinh makes up 85% of the total population, Vietnam has witnessed significant socio-economic disparities between the dominant Kinh, Hoa (Chinese), and other minority groups in terms of income, infrastructure, geographical areas, transport, educational access, and standards (Bui et al., 2017; Giacchino-Baker, 2007; Imai et al., 2011; World Bank, 2009). The Hoa (Chinese) group, despite how small it is, gathers with the Kinh predominantly residing in urban areas, and plains due to similar social and economic aspects while other ethnic minorities live in mountainous and remote regions of Vietnam (Pham & Doane, 2021). Whereas the delta regions have experienced greater economic expansion and infrastructural growth, poverty remains entrenched in the hilly North West and Central Highlands associated with meager income, limited healthcare systems, and scarce educational access. Imbalanced resource and opportunity allocation between these geographical areas has hampered educational equities among ethnic minority groups, leaving local children impoverished (Vu et al., 2013). The wealthy-impoverished divide is also delineated in the big picture of inequalities in Vietnam. As seen in everyday life across the country, people from deprived backgrounds described as socioeconomically underprivileged groups have a difficult time satisfying their fundamental necessities. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are frequently ostracized from mainstream culture, limiting their growth opportunities. Particularly, children of rich families or communities have access to higher-quality institutions, a more sophisticated curriculum, contemporary resources, modern facilities, and experienced instructors. Children from low-income families, on the other hand, are neglected and live in deplorable conditions (Rolleston & Krutikova, 2014).

Predicated on particular facts and statistics, researchers also emphasized the educational discrepancy between minority groups and the dominant Kinh, which was linked to revenue and living standards (Baulch et al., 2007, 2012). According to Trieu and Jayakody (2019), poverty has been identified as the major cause for minority students not transferring to upper-secondary institutions. This schooling chasm results in low minority enrolment rates, posing severe challenges, not just

economically but also socially and politically. According to social capital theory, students' conducts are frequently shaped and governed by social norms and standards in a macro-level context (Coleman, 1988). For example, child marriage known as married life prior to the age of eighteen has gained in popularity in underprivileged regions of Vietnam. Not only does early marriage hamper minority students' scholastic and financial chances but it tends to be linked to premature pregnancy and dropouts (Baulch et al., 2007; Kutor et al., 2005). As a result, educational disparities may be conceived as a prism reflecting all discriminatory practices at all levels. Through positioning schooling barriers in Vietnamese official policy discourses, DeJaeghere and other researchers (2015) reveal that a lesser status is attached to ethnic minority groups typically framed as the polar opposite of the Kinh majority. Such policy paradigms have not only failed to address ethnic inequities in schooling in Vietnam but have aggravated the problems related to ethnic class separation, exclusion, and inferior learning achievement (Truong, 2011).

It is highlighted that ethnic minority students performed academically worse than those of the majority (Giacchino-Baker, 2007). While their weak academic attainment is blamed on their dearth of Vietnamese capabilities, a prescribed 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and Training appears alien to minoritized children, putting students in underprivileged areas at a disadvantage in classrooms. Additionally, monolingual teachers who can only use Vietnamese (Giacchino-Baker, 2007; Luong & Nieke, 2013; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021) are more prone to have misunderstandings and lack of interaction between professors and students in classrooms. Due to the hegemonic curriculum and instructional medium, national records and multinational exam results may obscure the disparities between underrepresented groups and dominant (Kinh) children (DeJaeghere et al., 2015). Therefore, numerous teachers adhere to ethnocentric beliefs about ethnic minority students and their academic performance (Nguyen & Ha, 2021; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). The ethnocentric beliefs are not spontaneous but derive from Kinh's learning culture where exam scores are regarded as a pivotal component in determining students' ability. These issues are considered a reminder to all citizens and state institutions to partake in the battle against educational inequities. Among substantial breakthroughs in the target for closing educational majority-minority gaps (Oxfam in Vietnam, 2017; World Bank, 2016), teacher education is highlighted through a plethora of ongoing professional teacher programs to alleviate the shortage of trained instructors in disadvantaged areas (Giacchino-Baker, 2007; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). Nevertheless, these programs are based on a nationwide shared curriculum that is centered on a basic understanding of discipline and pedagogy instead of tailoring to instructors in minority areas. As a consequence, educational inequalities in minority regions of Vietnam are attributed to top-down approaches in policies together with existing disparities in social practice. Dilemmas around being differently valued among ethnic minority and majority children emerge in schools as a social field of power embedded in ideological structures. The dynamics of inequalities contribute to the contradiction between underperformance and positive educational achievement among diverse learners.

Language Barriers Experienced by Ethnic Minority Students in Vietnam

Language barriers have also been regarded as a critical contributor to poor academic performance among minorities (Lavoie, 2011; Nguyen & Hamid, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2017). Some researchers have examined the disproportionately low learning outcomes of ethnic minority students in Vietnam and linked these low performances to their incompetence in Vietnamese (Kosonen, 2009), impoverishment, and poor teaching (World Bank, 2009). Students of the Hmong community, one of the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, are the case in point. Luong and Nieke (2013) determine that the underperformance of Hmong students stems from difficulties in comprehending instructions, particularly in the initial years of schooling, when Vietnamese is the instructional medium and teachers cannot speak indigenous languages. Similarly, concerns about teacher-student interaction together with instructors' competence in local languages are expressed in a report by Action Aid Vietnam (2003). This entanglement in languages is also delineated in multiethnic classes with nationally standardized curricula and exams, triggering varied educational performance among learners (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001; Truong, 2011). Numerous minority children are stereotyped as "slower" and "less proficient" learners in school, with little regard for language barriers. In comparison with Kinh students, statistical evidence frequently shows inferior enrolment rates, greater dropout rates, and worse accomplishment levels among minorities (Truong, 2009). It can be seen that subtracting schooling not only shapes inequalities in academic outcomes but also creates exclusion among students of diverse groups. In Vietnam, academic performance has a significant impact on social standing and how differently they are valued. In this sense, subtractive schools are more like a social field that exacerbates existing underlying inequities and hierarchies of power across ethnic groups. It can be inferred that poor educational attainment among ethnic minority groups as a result of language barriers or subtractive learning contexts has long been a source of concern for authorities (Save the Children-UK, 2002; Vu, 2008).

The aforementioned entanglements around schooling among ethnic minority students have urged to alleviate language barriers to lower ethnic divides, decrease inequalities and improve minorities' educational achievements (Nguyen et al., 2017). While teachers play a pivotal role in reducing language barriers in education settings, Nguyen and Ha (2021) explore that teachers are neither constructed with knowledge nor engaged in any practice appropriate to ethnically diverse learners, especially minorities. For those trained in institutions in urban areas, pedagogical approaches to teaching the marginalized are largely ignored. Even when they are employed to teach in ethnic minority areas, no systematic induction is organized to acquaint them with indigenous learners and cultures. This reality places an intolerable burden on teachers, requiring them to seek different expectations and ways to teach students from ethnic minority communities. The dearth of teacher training together with ethnocentric beliefs about the minorities drives a lowering of expectations for minorities, triggering their poorer academic performance and school failure (Bhowmik

et al., 2018; Nguyen & Ha, 2021). As explored by Ogbu (1987), learners' learning and growth are hampered when their teachers are far from empathetic to their life circumstances or they lower standards for students. According to Taylor (1994), a modification of oppressed people's perceptions of inferiority is required to promote social reform and the enhancement of minority learners' educational positions. With that aim, the Ministry of Education and Training (2014) adopts the policies that enable minority students to pass the Vietnamese national high school graduation examinations with lower scores than those from the Kinh group. Even Kinh students residing in rural and mountainous regions are also given precedence in these examinations but to a slightly lesser degree than other minority groups. Expecting them to gain simpler knowledge further marginalizes local learners. Ironically, these policies are far from a solution to language barriers but impede the holistic development of minority students.

Prior research also reveals that poor academic attainment among ethnic minority students is ascribed to the ineffective implementation of minority-focused education programs (Truong, 2011). Given the government's apparent pledges in policies to encourage minority languages, these policies have not yet been completely implemented. The emphasis on Vietnamese as the dominant and national language in instructional medium has left a very minor room for indigenous languages in education (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). Very scarce schools in ethnic minority regions effectively follow the educational law published by the Vietnamese Government (2005) that supports local languages in schooling (Lavoie, 2011). It is clear that existing language barriers have precluded ethnic minority students from their full access to their own languages in schooling. Therefore, some bilingual education programs are established in primary schools where regional languages are taught as a subject (Lavoie & Benson, 2011). Particularly, the bilingual learning initiatives in Hmong villages, launched in 2008 in line with Freire (1974)'s educational philosophy of awareness, permit the Hmong to study the national language in the most efficient manner. As a result, the objective of these initiatives is not to preserve minority languages but to leverage their native language literacy to swiftly teach Vietnamese literacy and adapt them to the Vietnamese language (Kirkpatrick, 2012). In lieu of supporting minority learners, the failure in policy adoption puts a burden on entangled language practices among ethnic minority students, affecting their learning outcomes and holistic development.

Translanguaging: Problems Turned into Opportunities

An extensive literature on translanguaging has been highlighted as the theme of theoretical and practical debate. This concept has been defined as an umbrella term that pertains to multilingual speakers' adaptable language practices (Nikula & Moore, 2019). The term 'translanguaging' emerged in the research context of bilingual

Welsh-English-medium schooling in Wales (Williams, 1994). On this point, translanguaging is defined as a pedagogical approach in multilingual classrooms that intentionally alters the language mode of input and output, such as giving information in one language while enabling students to practice in another language (García, 2009; Lewis et al., 2012; Williams, 1996). While American scholars in the field of bilingual education regard translanguaging as code switching, much research indicates a distinct perspective on the positioning of translanguaging beyond code switching. Beyond its original focus on languages, translanguaging refers to different discursive practices that multilinguals partake in to understand their bilingual worlds (García, 2009). In other words, this term is understood to use individuals' *idiolect* with a complete disregard for socially or politically imposed language designations or borders (Otheguy et al., 2015). Despite different explanations, it is substantiated that translanguaging is the process of making meaning, gaining experiences, attaining understanding, and wisdom through the simultaneous use of two languages in class activities according to a provisional and growing concept (Baker, 2011). As a result, both languages are employed to organize and facilitate psychological processes in interpreting, communicating, literacy, and particularly learning in a dynamic and functionally-coordinated way.

The translanguaging characteristics can be influenced by numerous cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors. Regarding cognitive and linguistic elements, translanguaging takes full advantage of the knowledge and strengthens various competencies in the "weaker language" by harmonizing the hierarchy of languages inside the classroom. Similarly, translanguaging, according to Williams (2002), necessitates utilizing one language to strengthen the other to enhance students' understanding and amplify their capabilities in both languages. While Williams (1996) deems translanguaging a pedagogic paradigm, he acknowledges that it is predicated on a cognitive process of a bilingual interchange such as receptive skills, knowledge absorption and accommodation, and selection from brain memory to interact in an oral and written manner. As it progresses from discovering parallel terms to processing and transmitting meaning and knowledge, translanguaging necessitates a deeper understanding than just translation. In terms of socio-cultural values, this approach facilitates home-school collaboration by encouraging parental involvement in students' school activities, together with classroom connection between dominant and minoritized language learners (Baker, 2001). In contrast to traditional education, which is primarily geared at one particular language, translanguaging strengthens home-school ties, particularly when students are taught in a medium of instruction that their parents hardly understand. This practice empowers students to deepen and intensify what they have learned in one language in school-wide contexts through discussions with their parents at home in the other tongue (Baker, 2011). It is clear that the powerful mechanism of translanguaging furthers a reasonably balanced growth of students' two languages, fostering "professors' understanding of students' sociolinguistic, cultural and historical backgrounds" (Mazak et al., 2017, p. 72), and facilitating sociocultural values among diverse communities (García, 2009). As a result, more than a scaffold in multilingual teaching, translanguaging connects multilingual students' worlds inside and beyond the classroom by utilizing their complete

cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural repertoire as well as engrossing learners in heteroglossic practices to support their academic success. Given that interpretation, bilingual students, through this pedagogic practice, develop and maintain multiple language competencies together with their multicultural identity.

Translanguaging has quickly gained popularity and has been endorsed throughout different contexts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Similar to the original research in bilingual Welsh–English schools in Wales, De Korne (2010) discovered additional good effects in Luxembourg, where she recorded genuine translanguaging practices, including Luxembourgish, German, French, and English, during a project to compose and perform an English-language play. These practices demonstrate heteroglossic ideologies regarding multilingualism and language in education. In Flores and García (2013)'s research, ethnographic data taken from two primary school classes in the United States suggests a heteroglossic understanding of languages as assessment techniques for bilingual students. Nowadays, translanguaging is commonly used as an umbrella phrase to encompass conceptual and practical evidence of dynamic language use that defies a tight separation paradigm both outside and within the classroom, particularly in areas where minority languages are spoken. As per Otheguy and other researchers (2015), translanguaging can assist underrepresented groups and their tongues by supporting the disruption of the socially constructed linguistic hierarchies that are responsible for the suppression of the languages of minoritized populations. Therefore, this practice has been applied to contexts of minority language education in many studies. In Leonet et al. (2017)'s research on trilingual education in the Basque Country, translanguaging interventions are highlighted to be consistent with the development of language and metalinguistic awareness as well as minority language preservation. Through Hong Kong's multilingual setting, where English is widely employed as a medium of teaching, He and Lin (2017) also further the idea that translanguaging can be used to encourage South Asian learners to employ multilingual repertoires in classroom interactions to enhance collaboration, stimulate learning, and validate ethnic minority students' identities. This teaching technique, however, may be counterproductive at times without taking into account the unique peculiarities of the social setting. If there is no room for minority languages in specific regions, translanguaging may end up benefiting majority language speakers rather than minorities, possibly triggering increasing language extinction (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Consequently, translanguaging needs to pertain to minority languages and be adapted to social environments of multi-communities in which schools are positioned.

The Study

Data used for this chapter were selected from records of a research project on educational equity and culturally responsive teaching to ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Gia Lai and Dak Lak, two major provinces in the Central Highlands, served as the research sites. Gia Lai is the home to the Jarai and

Dak Lak to the Rhade. Jarai and Rhade people have their own languages which are members of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of Austronesian language family (Dang et al., 2010; Hoang, 2004). Although each province has been recognized as the native land of each tribe, the Kinh is the majority group in the two provinces as well as in the Central Highlands (General Statistical Office, 2019). Similar to other hilly or isolated areas in Vietnam where the discrepancy between the dominant Kinh and minorities is accentuated, the Jarai and Rhade together with other ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Nguyen & Ha, 2021; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Pham & Doane, 2021).

The lead researcher of the project undertook two field trips, one to Gia Lai and the other to Dak Lak. During the field trip, the researcher visited two secondary schools and two villages in each province. In each school, the researcher met principals/vice-principals, teachers, and students. While interviews were conducted with teachers and school leaders, students were engaged in informal talks. In total, there were 16 interviews (1 with an officer working in the Department of Education, 4 with school leaders, and 11 with teachers). The interviewed teachers taught a wide range of subjects, including mathematics, sciences, arts, civic education, and English language. In four indigenous villages, the researcher directly interacted with children, parents, and other villagers while visiting and staying with local families. Field notes, which involved the talks between the researcher and local families on the language issues, were utilized as a method of data collection in the villages. While semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection from the school staff, informal conversations were employed with the Jarai and Rhade villagers. The questions of the interviews and informal talks were centered on the Jarai and Rhade students' schooling. Specifically, the researchers highlighted how students of these two ethnic minorities were taught and what schooling practices they were engaged in.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted for data analysis of the large research project. The researchers adhered to the steps of thematic analysis in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Specifically, interview transcripts and field notes were first coded by the research team. Based on these codes, the team collaborated to reach an agreement on the themes, which were regarded as the answer to the research questions of the project on educational equity for ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands. Data analysis for this chapter was initiated by a theme that highlighted the language barriers experienced by the Jarai and Rhade students. That is, the theme of language barriers was a springboard for the research team to further explore how languages affected, or more precisely, inhibited the Jarai and Rhade students from accessing schooling opportunities. Emerging as the research results were three themes related to language issues in ethnic minority students' schooling in the Central Highlands, which were situated in the literature and the Vietnamese context. The themes were then linked to the theories of translanguaging, on which the research team drew to suggest a model for transcending language hurdles experienced by ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands and throughout Vietnam.

Findings About Language Issues in Ethnic Minority Students' Schooling

Ethnic Minority Students Criticized for 'Low Level of Vietnamese Language'

All of the interviewees expressed their concern about the Vietnamese language levels of ethnic minority students as explicitly manifested in the language they used for stating the problem, such as “incompetent”, “low-level”, “too bad”, “below standard”, “unsuitable for learning higher” and “not meeting the requirement”. Mai, a teacher of biology, observed, “Some in Grade 6 or 7 at secondary school, but their Vietnamese is lower than that of primary students [of the Kinh majority] in Grade 3 or 4 at primary school.” Likewise, Hoa, a teacher of Vietnamese and literature, provided a detailed description:

They [Rhadé students] have no difficulty in communicating with teachers and friends who are the Kinh majority. But their written language and the way they express their ideas about knowledge had a lot of problems. I read many answers and essays but could not understand what they meant.

Not only in fields of humanities like literature and history, but sciences and mathematics did teachers discover the apparent difficulty in their classrooms. As per Nam as a representative for science teachers, there was no equivalent in their ethnic minority languages for basic concepts in biology, physics, and chemistry. As a result, many students failed to comprehend explanations or classroom instructions given by their teachers.

From the perspective of a leader, all the interviewed principals and vice-principals were also concerned about the level of Vietnamese language proficiency among ethnic minority students in the school each one managed. Nguyen, a principal, said, “This issue has always attracted the attention of school leaders like me and leaders at higher levels in the Department of Education.” Huy, the officer in charge of regulating the quality of teaching and learning in a district of Gia Lai province, observed, “There has been great improvement in teaching and learning, but lots of Jarai students are still left behind due to their incompetent Vietnamese language.” He further noted that this problem was always a key point on the agenda of meetings among educational leaders and political authorities. The participants, to varying degrees, related ethnic minority students' low educational attainment to their poor command of the Vietnamese language. In particular, the interviewed teachers and school leaders both agreed that ethnic minority students with high proficiency in Vietnamese would achieve better academic results than those with a restricted level. Lan, a vice-principal, even argued, “I know a lot of Rhadé students whose Vietnamese is superb can get good grades, even as good as the Kinh students.” In addition to pointing out the perceived problem in secondary schools where the respondents were working, they all contended that being inept at Vietnamese impeded this population of students from gaining access to education at higher levels.

To the community members, mainly Jarai and Rhade parents having school-aged children, the low level of Vietnamese language has been perceived as the primary schooling concern of their children and also in their indigenous community. Similar to the interviewed teachers and school leaders, the parents whom the lead researcher talked to during the field trip shared their perspective that the Vietnamese proficiency of their children was significantly lower than that of Kinh students. One parent explained, "We [the Rhade] can't speak or write Vietnamese properly because we use our language every day." A father of four school-aged children admitted, "I am regularly invited to school to meet the teachers to discuss what can be done to enhance my children's Vietnamese." A mother in a Jarai hamlet stated, "Our children and even us adults always feel inferior to the Kinh people just because we're far behind them in Vietnamese." Through visits to many families, the primary researcher discovered that the spoken Vietnamese or accent of both Jarai and Rhade people is clear and, to some extent, simpler for many Kinh people in the rural or remote areas. The bulk of both Rhade and Jarai people, however, did not acknowledge this strength. Instead, they have been swayed by the belief that ethnic minority people are always inferior to the Kinh community in all respects, notably the Vietnamese language.

"Vietnamese Only" as the Practice in the Classroom

The interviewed teachers and principals/vice-principals all emphasized the necessity of the "Vietnamese only" regulation and practice within and beyond the classroom boundary. When asked whether there was a document or policy that regulated the mandatory use of the Vietnamese language in the classroom, the teachers and school leaders all responded that no official document from the Department of Education had been issued at all levels. However, as they pointed out, the national language has been acknowledged as the medium of instruction for secondary education nationwide regardless of ethnic or geographical differences. Nga, a school principal, said, "We, like all schools throughout the country, have to align with the national curriculum, textbooks, pedagogical practices, and assessments, so everything must be in the national language." From the leadership perspective, Huy also agreed with school leaders in his district, "If Vietnamese only is not strictly mandated in the classroom, ethnic minority students may use their own languages, and then their schooling attainment will not improve."

Through their stories about the language problems in mixed ethnic classes including Kinh and ethnic minority students, the interviewed teachers maintained a uniform perspective of the Vietnamese exclusively in the classroom. Lien, a teacher of mathematics, observed in her classes:

Some Jarai students study very well but others do not. So, it's uncommon that the 'weak' students try to ask for help from the good or strong ones like telling the answers or explaining what I said in Jarai. But I ask the strong ones not to help their friends like that. Instead, I always ask the weak ones to use Vietnamese to ask me for help. Only in this way can they improve their Vietnamese.

With a shared background of ethnicity, Jlut, a chemistry teacher, could comprehend what her Rhade students talked with each other or even asked her in Rhade language. However, as strictly confined to the practice of Vietnamese only, Jlut asked those students to use the national language, not the Rhade language for classroom communication:

I am a member of the Rhade community. Rhade students often ask me this or that in the classroom, a lot about the learning content. But I always pretend not to understand or try to talk back to them in Vietnamese. I only use the Rhade language when dealing with something very urgent. All I do is to create a learning environment with the Vietnamese only so that the Rhade students can change and improve their schooling attainment.

Similar to Jlut, Eba, a teacher of civic education, insisted on strictly using Vietnamese in the classroom despite her shared ethnicity with her Jarai students. “Bilingual education, Vietnamese-Jarai, is only for primary education, not for secondary education,” she emphasized. Other Jarai teachers, according to Eba, also expressed their intolerance towards the use of indigenous languages in the classroom, especially in secondary education. In general, all the interviewees, including teachers, school leaders and ethnic minority parents, adhered to their belief about the role of Vietnamese as a common language for all students regardless of students’ ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Another factor that partly accounts for the practice of Vietnamese only is the national curriculum for all schools throughout the country. As teaching and learning of all school subjects are strictly prescribed by the national curriculum, teachers have limited space for accommodating ethnic minority students’ languages. Instead, they tend to employ Vietnamese-only textbooks without any modification or adaptation due to the lack of professional training and follow the credit-driven practice of the Vietnamese education system. These contextual factors provide insight into the perspectives on the language issues shared by both stakeholders and community members.

Despite their view against the use of ethnic minority languages in the classroom, when questioned about the effectiveness of teaching in Vietnamese solely to ethnic minority students, they all pointed out several problems. More noticeable is a lack of understanding from Jarai or Rhade students because their Vietnamese repertoire is far from complicated to understand the lesson, especially the scientific concepts. “I have set up the rules about the Vietnamese only and students have been cooperative, but it seems that they don’t grasp much of my teaching,” said Nam, a teacher of physics. In general, all the stakeholders recognized the problem related to the inefficiency of using Vietnamese as the only medium of instruction for ethnic minority students. They were, however, required to comply with the national curriculum and classroom practice, which has no room for ethnic minority languages.

In order to free themselves from the mandated use of the national language, the Jarai and Rhade students tend to utilize their own languages outside the classroom. That is, during the breaks or after class hours, ethnic minority students frequently congregate and converse in Jarai or Rhade languages. Minh, a history teacher, remarked, “Their faces showed their happiness and comfort, not like what they had to undergo in the classroom.” The underlying reason for this contrast is their freedom in

language use outside the classroom. Although the teachers did not explicitly indicate their desire to experience student engagement like this in their classes, they all wish their ethnic minority students would overcome the language barriers and actively engage in classroom activities.

Still on the Journey of Finding Workable Solutions

The section centers on using or neglecting indigenous languages and cultures in school contexts as teachers' responses to language barriers encountered by ethnic minority learners in teaching practices. An analysis of those pedagogical practices is also offered to help clarify whether they alleviate or exacerbate the educational difficulties of the Jarai and Rhade students.

The interviewed teachers and school leaders have been on their shared journey of finding feasible strategies or solutions to the perceived challenges regarding the inadequate proficiency of Vietnamese among ethnic minority students in their areas. First, both teachers and school leaders voiced a need for innovation in policies that would specifically assist teachers and schools in dealing with language issues related to ethnic minority students:

In meetings with principals and education leaders in the district or in the province, we always make a lot of suggestions for improving the national language of Jarai students. We also expect specific policies that help us deal with the problem. For example, there should be extra tutorials to support and assist the Jarai students in improving their Vietnamese language. (Nga, a principal)

Huy, in the role of an officer in the Department of Education, shared his experience of learning Jarai as a prerequisite for government officers but only for those in key positions. As Huy explained, this strategy was beneficial and appropriate for understanding indigenous cultures through their languages. Although this policy has been critiqued for its effectiveness during the stages of implementation, Huy advocated the idea that Jarai language classes should be offered to teachers working with ethnic minority students. He further stated, "Many officers just learned to get the certificate to meet the requirement of promotion, but I learned a lot to work with Jarai communities, especially the students." Analogous to Huy, the principals and vice-principals were aware of the benefits of knowing Jarai or Rhade languages when they were employed to work in local villages. However, this competency is not explicitly listed as a requirement for teachers.

Among the interviewed teachers, Tu (a teacher of English) and Dinh (a teacher of geography) picked up some basic words and sentences for engaging with the Jarai and Rhade populations. Their initiatives are commendable because teachers are not required to do so:

During my early years of teaching, I often went to the local villages, visiting students' families. I had a chance to talk to many Rhade villagers. Of course, they spoke Vietnamese. I learned a lot about their customs and cultural life and acquired a bit of Rhade languages.

I have made the best use of my limited repertoire of Rhade to talk to my students at school. When they knew that I could say something to them in their language, they were closer to me and listened to me more. (Dinh)

Like Dinh, Tu learned Jarai at a very basic level, focusing mostly on vocabulary and simple sentences. As he claimed, students would trust him and share their troubles or difficulties in learning if he talked to them in Jarai. Vu did not explicitly state the necessity of knowing Jarai language among students in his district, but he demonstrated his bilingual awareness when working with ethnic minority students. Other interviewees, despite their awareness of bilingual competence as an advantage for teaching ethnic minority students, did not have time to learn their students' languages.

Although the interviewed teachers explicitly stated their approval of the use of Vietnamese solely in the classroom, they occasionally permitted ethnic minority students to speak in their native tongues. Most striking was the use of ethnic minority languages to provide support in some situations, as in the extract below:

I know that it's not good to let the Rhade students use their own languages in my classes, but sometimes I want to remind them of something important. I often ask the Jarai students who are good at Vietnamese to explain to their friends. (An, a teacher of mathematics)

Similar to An as in the aforementioned excerpt, Minh, a teacher of biology, frequently solicits assistance from Rhade students who are fluent in Vietnamese to help her explain important knowledge to other Rhade students. As Minh explained, "Doing that way does not help Rhade students improve their Vietnamese, but it's effective for tests or examinations." With a shared background with ethnic minority students, both Jarai and Rhade teachers in this study also stated their disapproval of the use of minority languages in teaching. However, they sometimes draw on their shared languages with students in order to have appropriate support or interventions. Yban, a teacher of biology, told a story about how she related biological or scientific knowledge to everyday phenomena to explain concepts to minority students:

In a lesson about tropical vegetation, if teachers strictly follow the textbook and explain the knowledge in a formal way, many Jarai students will not understand. Instead, based on my ten years of teaching experience, I remind students of natural phenomena in their daily life. I also use a little bit of Jarai language to guide half of the indigenous students in my classes. After that, I link all the things students are familiar with to the biological knowledge.

As in the example above, the teacher, despite her disapproval of the use of ethnic minority languages, recognized the effectiveness of indigenous resources, including the language in imparting scientific knowledge. However, she did not further explore or implement this pedagogical practice as all the teachers comply with the mandated use of the national language for all classroom activities. This practice is more like a mirror to reflect the entanglements between how hegemonic curricula impede ethnic minority students' development and teachers' effort to respond to their unfavorable learning experiences. As regards professional development for in-service teachers in the Central Highlands and throughout Vietnam, knowledge and practice related to language use or culturally responsive teaching have not been provided in training

programs. As such, ethnic minority languages have no place in teachers' perceptions and practices in the sense that students are encouraged or given opportunities to maximize their language capabilities. As a result, there is a need to understand language barriers faced by ethnic minority students and promote the use of indigenous languages in teaching practices and policy as feasible approaches or measures to transform beliefs and pedagogical practices at individual and institutional levels.

Discussion and Recommendations

The cornerstone of this study is the entanglement between policy and reality, between teaching and learning practices in the monolingual context of Vietnam. The findings are intended to offer fresh perspectives on language barriers to schooling practice in ethnic minority areas in the Vietnamese context and some suggestions for alleviating those challenges from the perspective of translanguaging.

Our Thoughts on Language Barriers to Ethnic Minority Students' Access to Education

The findings highlight how Jarai or Rhade students' access to education is constrained by ethnic stereotypes, national curricula and monolingual teaching practices of Vietnam. Those language barriers are emphasized as a culprit of their academic under-performance, similar to existing studies in the educational literature (Lavoie, 2011; Nguyen & Ha, 2021; Nguyen & Hamid, 2018; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2017). Their inferiority arises from their perceived inability to grasp Vietnamese in subtractive education systems where monolingual medium of instruction is emphasized together with nationally standardized Kinh-centered curricula applied in multiethnic classes (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001; Luong & Nieke, 2013; Truong, 2011). Teachers are aware of minorities' language difficulties and the great importance of integrating their living contexts with what could be seen as the hegemonic curriculum that emphasises the values, beliefs and understandings of a majority's view and which is largely outside the practices, beliefs and understandings of Jrai and Rhade community. However, most teachers, regardless of their competence in indigenous languages, tend to abide by this hegemonic curriculum to seek performance accomplishments and fulfill local and national learning outcome criteria. This tendency results in educational hurdles among ethnic minority pupils in the Central Highlands analyzed in three themes regarding language barriers to their schooling in the findings of this chapter.

Highlighted in this study is the stereotyped belief about ethnic minority students' inferiority compared to the Kinh population in all aspects, stemming from the "Vietnamese only" policy and practice within and beyond classrooms. Despite no existing

specific measure or panacea for these challenges, the most striking element in the findings is the positive indication of bilingual worlds to ethnic minority students' educational development. Particularly, educational effectiveness is also enhanced when teachers apply minorities' everyday events or take advantage of bilingual competence of minority students fluent in Vietnamese to explain crucial concepts to lower-ability groups through their regional languages. Therefore, there is a need for growing recognition and integration of their indigenous languages and cultures into mainstream schooling in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In particular, the integration of bilingual and multilingual resources need to be promoted in school settings mixed by students of the Kinh and other ethnic minorities. As a result, there is an urge to facilitate translanguaging to cross the boundary and enhance the existing educational practice in multilingual schools in Vietnam. When planning this chapter, we meant to use 'translanguaging model' as part for the heading of this section. However, after carefully reviewing the literature and the findings presented in this chapter, we found 'suggestions' more appropriate. The reason for our decision is that translanguaging is, to some extent, not to say completely, new in Vietnam, in both research and practice of education.

Suggestions for reducing Language Barriers to Ethnic Minority Students' Access to Education from the Perspective of Translanguaging

Predicated on the findings and the discussed literature, translanguaging will be proposed in this section as a recommendation on different domains including teaching philosophy, curriculum, instructional delivery, and environmental support to motivate students of disadvantaged backgrounds.

At an individual level, learners and teachers need to gain widespread perceptions of translanguaging practices and the imperative of multilingualism in minorities' learning access, critical thinking, and intercultural competences. The fact that linguistic resources utilized in classes might include or exclude students can be tackled by translanguaging spaces in cooperation with classmates and structural stakeholders (Kaufhold, 2018; Mendoza, 2020). Teachers' favorable attitudes toward translanguaging considered as a social and cognitive resource may facilitate a linguistically inclusive learning environment that enables ethnic minority students to integrate their home or community-wide language practices into the classroom (Axelrod, 2017; Carroll et al., 2021). In order to create such spaces, the divides between schools and ethnic minority families should be narrowed at the meso levels. Schools need to flexibly ratify specific instructions, collaborate with families and communities to encourage lower-ability students and promote dynamic nature of language learning in minority contexts. Simultaneously, pre-service and in-service teachers must be offered a comprehensive and detailed philosophical and practical training on how to draw on students' language repertoires through multilingualism and translanguaging

in specific educational contexts (Ganuza & Hedman, 2017; Mwindu & van der Walt, 2015; Yuvayapan, 2019).

As a key part of translanguaging practices, the mindset and leadership of school leaders are underlined in establishing the multilingual milieu, language regulations, and teaching methods (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016). School practices form and are structured by national language policies in education and macro-level ideologies together with human agency within locally situated milieus of interaction (Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Particularly, national curricula at all levels directed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) should be decolonised to cater to students from multicultural and multi-ethnic backgrounds. Students' heritage assets should be incorporated into the national holistic curriculum to appreciate the values of minority communities and empower students from different backgrounds in educational attainment (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). Systematic assistance regarding translanguaging initiatives, finance and time from the MOET and the Vietnamese government also needs to be tailored to support school leaders, educators, and practitioners in promoting inclusive learning environments. These steps contribute to obliterating ethnocentric beliefs and negative stereotypes among ethnic minorities in order to position those from underrepresented groups as insiders in quality education systems. Governments need to adopt socio-cultural and linguistic policies or strategies to arouse a sense of pride inside minoritized communities, enhance students' favorable multilingual identity (García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014) and facilitate their multilingual capacities. Individual, social and structural levels are intrinsically intertwined and influence each other, as well as learners' academic performance and developmental trajectories. These potential translanguaging techniques may be opportunities for more sustained inclusive learning environments for ethnic minority students.

Conclusion

The study is conducted to deepen profound understandings of language issues encountered by ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The findings indicate ethnocentric beliefs about ethnic minority students' academic performance in the "Vietnamese only" learning environment. Specifically, ethnic minority learners' underperformance is perceived as a mirror to reflect their inferiority to the Kinh students and their inability to comprehend and speak the Vietnamese language. Despite viewpoints against the use of indigenous languages in "Vietnamese only" practice, all the stakeholders acknowledge its inefficiency, especially in the incapacity of Jarai or Rhade students to comprehend the lesson due to their limited Vietnamese repertoire. Therefore, the use of ethnic minority languages is also applied to offer support in some situations in order to involve minority learners in classroom activities. In light of these language entanglements in ethnic minority schooling, translanguaging is proposed as a solution to existing challenges of catering for minority learners' linguistic development. Implementing translanguaging is far

from considered a panacea or one-size-fits-all pedagogic model but rather a viable source of treatment for language obstacles experienced by ethnic minority students in the Vietnamese-only practice.

Besides, Vietnamese educational leadership has maintained a top-down policy approach, highlighting the roles of the MOET or the Vietnamese Government in formulating and developing policy, followed by local authorities (Phelps et al., 2014). Most educational development initiatives have been associated with socio-economic progress programs rather than transforming pedagogical practices to alleviate the Kinh's long-established cultural supremacy. Consequently, promoting translanguaging in an attempt to transform sustained learning experiences for ethnic minority students is seen as a potential cornerstone for national education reform in Vietnam to improve cultural diversity and gain fulfillment of educational equity in multiethnic schools.

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Chinh Duc Nguyen is a lecturer and researcher of language education and teacher education. His scholarly interests include second language teacher education, identity in language teaching, sociocultural issues in language education, and social justice in education. He has publications in journals of education and language teaching, such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *Teachers and Teaching*, and *Educational Review*.

Thanh Nguyen Thao Tran is a lecturer at Dong A University, Vietnam. She attained a master's degree in Education from University College Dublin, where she is working as a research assistant in a large-scale educational project. She has extensive experience in teaching English language and culture as well as teaching methodologies, in EU-funded Erasmus + projects located in Dublin, Ireland. Her research interests encompass the sociology of education, curriculum studies, teacher education, higher education, and second language education. She is particularly passionate about education policy and advocating for education as a public good.

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