

Indigenous Bilingual Education in Vietnam

Initiatives and Lessons America's Schools Can Learn From

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As America's classrooms become more diverse every day, schools which receive immigrant students become more attentive to their language needs and to the need to initiate and maintain communication with their families. Despite the limited funds allocated to bilingual education and the not so-friendly bilingual education policies in several states, at the school level, teachers and administrators make sincere efforts to better serve their immigrant students. They take many extra steps to welcome and include their immigrant students into the classrooms by adding multicultural themes and topics to the curriculum, providing First Language Support (FLS) when available and approved, using interpreters for parent-teacher conferences, and employing translators for letters to the parents and for homework instructions.

However, despite the schools' efforts and especially in areas where multilingual immigrant groups reside, often the necessary language resources are not available. Although it may be difficult to accommodate linguistically every student and every parent, being aware of the diversity that exists among students of the same nationality can help teachers and administrators better know and understand their

students and their families and avoid erroneous assumptions and pitfalls in the process of education and home-school connections.

This article discusses the great diversity that exists among Vietnamese immigrant students and the developments of bilingual education policy and practice in Vietnam as well as new initiatives for the education of indigenous children in this country.

The goal is to increase teachers and school administrators' awareness about the bilingual/multilingual situation in Vietnam and consequently, to help ease the adjustment of the newcomer students who are Vietnamese nationals in America's schools.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Vietnam

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic/multi-lingual nation with 55 officially recognized ethnic groups and languages. Fifty four are minority groups and account to about 13% of the country's total population. The minorities tend to concentrate in the highlands and remote areas often living several minority groups together in the same village under hard conditions and having minimal economic development.

The majority group, the Kinh people speak Vietnamese (Kinh). Ethnic minorities in Vietnam speak over 100 different languages of which only 28 are written — few using traditional scripts and most using Latinized scripts — and only very few of them have a

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School in a Vietnamese village on the water.



Kindergarten class during nap-time.

newspaper or are represented in the media (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007; Pinnock, Dinh, and Nguyen, 2006; Thea, 2003).

The languages spoken in Vietnam are classified in three linguistic categories: Austro-Asiatic, Austronesia, and Sino-Tibetan (Thea, 2003). After the Declaration of Independence from France in 1945, the Vietnamese (Kinh) language became the official language of the nation and the language of instruction in all schools from primary to tertiary education (Archibald, 1988).

Initiatives to Improve Bilingual Education Policy

The Vietnamese national policy supports the revitalization of the minority languages and emphasizes the strengthening and expansion of bilingualism and multilingualism. Since 1946, the country's language constitutional policy clearly states that "ethnic minorities have the right to receive compulsory and free primary and lower-secondary education in their languages" (article 15 of the Constitution, 1946). The policy also states with article 5 of the amended Constitution (1981) that "ethnic minorities have the right to use their own languages and scripts, maintain and develop their good traditions, practices, customs, and culture" (Thea, 2003; Archibald, 1988).

Bilingual education in Vietnam has been implemented in some form since the 1920s (Archibald, 1988). Today, there are several private schools in Vietnam which offer English language as a subject and others which offer French. Vietnamese indigenous education programs use about 10 of the minority languages which are spoken by about one million inhabitants (Thea, 2003).

Bilingual education in Vietnam begins at the primary school level. The goals of the bilingual programs are to develop: bilingual communicative ability; bilingual oral and written fluency; bilingual social language skills; and academic language in the content areas. Several policies of bilingual education have been tried out: using the mother tongue (L1) in grades one through three while simultaneously introducing oral Vietnamese (L2) and in grade four switching to L2 as the language of instruction; using only oral L1 instruction (for minority languages with Latinized alphabet) and both oral and written L2 in grades one through three and introducing written L1 in the upper primary grades; introducing both languages (L1 and L2) in first grade and transitioning to L2 only in the upper primary grades; and using L1 as the medium of instruction for up to 15% of the curriculum in all primary grades (Archibald, 1988).

Class size in Vietnam varies from 60-70 students in urban areas to sometimes 18-20 in minority areas. Some schools in remote areas have only one or two classes — usually first and second grade — and older children attend some larger schools which are located in more central areas and act as educational centers. Kindergarten in Vietnam is not compulsory. Primary school has five grades, lower secondary has four grades, and upper secondary three (K+5+4+3). About 83% of the majority students continue their education at the secondary level. However, only 33% of the minority children transfer to secondary school and only very few of them become teachers. The majority of the minority children who drop-out of school are girls and of all the

students who drop out only about 10% want to return back to school. The move to make middle education free of charge which targets poor and ethnic minority children has been successful so far tripling the number of children who participate in secondary education (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

For the past 17 years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and the Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education (RCEME) have been exploring multi-level class teaching strategies (since there are numerous multi-level classes in minority areas), and have been working on ethnic minority education policies.

Although the country's constitution supports the use of the minority languages in schools, there is a push by the government for mastering the majority language which is Vietnamese. The main focus of the educational policy remains to strengthen the Vietnamese language and in order to do that, MoET explores different ways through pilot programs such as FLS, teacher training, the development of instructional materials in the children's mother tongue, adaptation and modification of the existing instructional materials to be culturally and contextually appropriate for minority children, and adult education (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

Where available, the use of bilingual materials in the primary grades has made a big difference in minority student participation and achievement. However, in most minority areas, children who enter primary school begin instruction in Vietnamese and all textbooks with the exception of very few are written in the majority language. The translation and modification of textbooks to the minority languages is not widely spread and occurs under the auspices of MoET and with the participation of international and national experts, local teachers and community members (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

Initiatives to Improve Bilingual Education Practice

The minorities lack behind in both educational achievement and economic growth comparing to the majority of

the Vietnamese people the "Kinh" ethnic group. Competence, fluency, and academic language development in both the native and the second language for minority children are essential in order to have access to and enjoy the benefits of fully participating in all aspects social, educational, professional, and political life (Thea, 2003). Coming to the same realization, the Vietnamese government emphasizes the need for developing good educational programs for ethnic minority children and bilingual education programs continue expanding to more minority languages and geographical areas (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007; Thea, 2003).

There are several obstacles in improving the education of poor and indigenous children in Vietnam. One of them is the time children spend in school. Although primary school is free of charge for all children, the Vietnamese government covers only the costs of schooling for three hours a day (half-day) for each child. In order for children to stay in school for a full instructional day, their parents must cover the rest of the cost. This is very difficult for the indigenous people who have limited financial resources (B. Crumpton, UK DfID/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

Other challenges bilingual education in Vietnam faces include lack of qualified bilingual teachers, organization of the curriculum with respect to subject areas and the time allocated for each subject, uniformity on teacher training, minority parent negative attitudes towards using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, and lack of instructional materials and resources (Thea, 2003). An advantage however which some of the minority children may have upon entering primary school is that to some degree, they may have developed some abilities in both their mother tongue and Vietnamese if they have been exposed in various ways in both (Thea, 2003).

International agencies and organizations and country donors support the efforts of the Vietnamese government. They provide technical and financial assistance for the development of bilingual and multilingual programs for minority children and training programs for teachers and parents. They also support the development of bilingual literature, poetry, journalism, and broadcast programs at a regional, national, and inter-

national level (Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007; Thea, 2003).

The UK Save the Children in Vietnam began its efforts to support minority children in pre-primary school in 1991 opening about 12 kindergarten classes in minority areas. Today, these classes account to about 87 and their number is continuously growing. Each class has 25 to 30 three- to five-year old children. The language of instruction is the mother tongue and Vietnamese is taught as a second language. The program has expanded and since 2006, UK Save the Children has begun a pilot project to try FLS to minority children up to grade three. Some of the minorities which participate in the pilot are H'mong, Thai, Dao, and San Chi children. This pilot model is based on the transitional bilingual approach in which the children begin instruction in kindergarten in the mother tongue while they receive oral only instruction in Vietnamese. Slowly, they increase instruction in Vietnamese and by grade three they start using Vietnamese in class to introduce academic concepts. The teachers use the Total Physical Response teaching method combined with active learning. They follow the bilingual teaching methodology based on the same principles and practices of bilingual education which have been successful in many world countries (P.T. Dinh & T.B. Nguyen, UK Save the Children/Vietnam, personal communication, November 28, 2007).

Due to the lack of qualified bilingual indigenous teachers and in order to provide FLS, UK Save the Children has initiated the concept of "Key Mothers" in the schools. The Key Mothers are usually nominated by the community. UK Save the Children supports the Key Mothers with training and various programs in building skills and developing abilities as teaching assistants. The Key Mothers provide FLS in each class as well as psychological and social support to the minority children. The Key Mothers are the link between the school and the community. They work closely with the classroom teachers and keep track of who is attending school and who is absent and this way they are able to bring more children to school on a regular basis. They assist teachers in the development of the curriculum and of the instructional materials in order to ensure that teaching

is culturally and contextually appropriate and tailored to the minority children's needs (P.T. Dinh & T.B. Nguyen, UK Save the Children/Vietnam, personal communication, November 28, 2007).

Some of the Key Mothers receive training for three consecutive summers while they teach during the year. Those who pass the national exam become teachers and with an agreement made between UK Save the Children and the Vietnamese government are appointed to teach in their communities. This way, the number of the minority teachers who speak the children's language grows. The project supports social mobilization and community interest in the school and capacity building in the minority areas. It has been very successful so far and several ethnic minority communities have volunteered in implementing it in their schools (P.T. Dinh & T.B. Nguyen, UK Save the Children/Vietnam, personal communication, November 28, 2007; Mme. Diep, MoET/RCEME, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

The UK Department for International Development (DfID/Vietnam) also supports ethnic minority education and minority teacher professional development. They provide pre-service and in-service teacher training and technical assistance for the develop-

ment of teacher training materials focusing on innovative ways to evaluate teacher quality. The teacher training materials are all written in Vietnamese and are usually developed by universities and teacher training institutes under the auspices of MoET. UK DfID/Vietnam provides funding and technical support through the hire of international and national consultants. Usually master teachers are trained and then these teachers become trainers and disseminate the training to more teachers. Following cascade training allows more opportunities for peer consultation and support among the teachers, builds capacity, and improves teacher motivation (B. Crumpton, UK DfID/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

With respect to teacher evaluation, emphasis is given not on qualifications but on performance. Ten provinces out of the 64 in Vietnam have been selected to participate in a pilot project trying the new teacher evaluation system. According to the new system which has been adopted as a national policy, after a teacher masters a set of previously identified competencies he/she must then begin working on mastering the next level of pre-identified competencies and after that the next level. Therefore, there is a plan in place for continuous professional development and skills improvement for teachers. Monetary incentives are given to the teachers who as they improve their competencies they climb higher to the pay scale. In terms of the training, some core training modules are provided for all teachers but there are also other modules tailored specific to the various disciplines of the teachers and the developmental stages of the children they teach (B. Crumpton, UK DfID/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

UNESCO in Vietnam supports minority education and is a strong advocate for bilingual education. One of the projects that UNESCO is involved currently is to provide educational programs for adult education for the Bahnar minority people who live in the central highlands of Vietnam. The Bahnar people have a strong dialect and live quite concentrated in their communities. UNESCO works on the development of adult and primary education materials as well as the training of teachers and administrators. The primary education component of the project is relatively new and it is slowly developing. The adult education component includes training to improve the

reading and writing skills of adults and their listening comprehension. The curriculum highlights mainly practical issues and incorporates group discussion and debates. The curriculum and materials are tailored to the needs of the Bahnar people with respect to their cultural and ethnic profile and identity (E. Tajima, UNESCO/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

UNICEF in Vietnam has been involved in an action research on mother-tongue based bilingual education. The objectives of this action research are to implement a design of bilingual education which is valid and feasible and to contribute to the development of educational policies and practices in Vietnam. The design of the program suggests transitional bilingual education. Children begin kindergarten with instruction in the mother tongue (L1) while they receive oral instruction in Vietnamese which is the second language (L2). The same pattern continues through grade five while the instruction in the second language steadily increases from kindergarten through grade five and literacy transfers in stages from L1 to L2 (J. B. Miller, UNICEF/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

The model represents a "Late-Exit" bilingual education approach. This has been proven to be the most beneficial and effective model since bilingual children may need about five to seven years to master academic language, a prerequisite to school success, in the second language (Cummins, 1992). By offering five to six years of FLS while slowly transitioning to second language instruction, the model allows adequate time for children to master the academic language and necessary skills so that they can perform well in school in all subjects (J. B. Miller, UNICEF/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

UNICEF has selected three languages (Hmong, J'rai, and Khmer) and about 485 teachers and 6,800 students in three parts of Vietnam (north, middle, and south) to pilot the new program. The first phase of the research which included the project design with international technical support, the orientation and consultation workshops, and the survey tools and field visits has been completed. Now the project's second phase has begun and involves the training and orientation of the local stakeholders, the development of the curriculum and the materials, and the teacher training (J. B.



Miller, UNICEF/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

The project faces challenges due to its complexity and political sensitivity, the lack of indigenous qualified teachers in pilot schools, the linkage between pre-primary and primary school curricula, and the development of effective instructional materials and of a good evaluation system to track results. The lessons learned so far are that important prerequisites to success are the support and commitment of all stakeholders, the effective partnership between UNICEF, MoET, and other contributing organizations and partners, quality international technical support, and active participation of the local communities (J. B. Miller, UNICEF/Vietnam, personal communication, December 3, 2007).

Conclusion

There are a lot of lessons to be learned in the US from Vietnam's bilingual education policies and practices. First and foremost, American teachers and administrators who receive Vietnamese immigrant students in their schools need to be aware that they represent a very diverse group culturally and linguistically. Vietnamese students in America's schools may not necessarily speak Vietnamese (Kinh) at home and they may have experienced hard schooling conditions or no schooling at all in Vietnam prior to their arrival in the United States. An initial meeting with the student and the parents and an interview will provide a lot of useful information about the student's linguistic, social, cultural, and educational background and it is a prerequisite for further supporting the student educationally and for developing successful home-school collaboration.

Second, the concept of Key Mothers that UK Save the Children in Vietnam has developed presents a wonderful idea and an opportunity to provide a wealth of FLS resources and built capacity at the school level in collaboration with immigrant parents. Training "Key Mothers" or "Key Fathers" as teaching assistants with the option of providing them employment in the schools will help build strong connections between the school and the immigrant communities, expand the teachers' abilities in developing a multicultural curriculum, and support newcomer immigrant students academically while they are working on mastering the English language.

Third, the cascade teacher training approach that the UK DfID is following

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in Vietnam can be replicated in the US especially in areas with limited financial resources for bilingual teacher training and professional development. In addition, this *level by level* teacher evaluation system based on which teachers have to master a set of competencies before they move to the next level of performance, presents a good idea for a *scaffolded* teacher evaluation system which is systematic, realistic, and does not overwhelm new bilingual teachers.

Finally, the system that UNESCO and UNICEF in Vietnam follow for the development of bilingual student and adult textbooks and instructional materials by employing the participation of international and national experts, the local education authorities, teachers, parents, and the entire community is essential to the improvement of teaching and immigrant student learning in the United States. Changing our "know it all" approach when it comes to educating bilingual immigrant students can be proven extremely beneficial and effective in our

efforts to improve bilingual student academic achievement. Instead of maintaining the attitude of "we know what they need" in order to do better in school, we may try to "ask them what they need" and work with immigrant students and parents as a team to develop bilingual education programs which are culturally and linguistically appropriate for our diverse English language learners. ★

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Note:

This article provides a synopsis of information obtained through school visits, meetings, and personal communications of the author with teachers, administrators, and education officials from the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Technology/Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education (MoET/RCEME), the UK Save the Children/Vietnam, the UK Department for International Development (DfID/Vietnam), UNICEF/Vietnam, and UNESCO/Vietnam. The meetings, observations, and communications took place in November and December of 2007 in Vietnam and were made possible with the support of the UK DfID/China and the Gansu Provincial Department of Education/China in an effort to share lessons from the two countries' experiences on indigenous bilingual education. For inquiries and comments please contact the author at GouletaE@trinitydc.edu