

Linguistic Dominance in Vietnamese Language Education: The Case of Mông as L2 in Primary Schools

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1 Introduction and background

In Vietnam where the national and de-facto official language is Vietnamese, nearly 50 out of over 100 minority languages are classified as “endangered” by Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2020). Besides Vietnamese and the minority languages, English is also an important language in the Vietnamese context: it is the most promoted foreign language and is a mandatory subject at most primary schools from grade 3. In a country dominated by Vietnamese and English, many minority languages are losing speakers and are at the risk of dying out.

Language education is the key to language preservation, and there has been many projects implemented to teach minority languages in Vietnam. Previously, there have been three models of teaching minority language and Vietnamese (Phan et al. 2014). The first mode is simultaneous introduction of Vietnamese and ethnic minority language as media of instruction. The second mode uses Vietnamese as the core language of instruction, while the ethnic minority language is supplementary. This model means that all subjects at schools are taught in Vietnamese, while the minority language is taught as a single subject. The third model, which is also the most effective one, is an early-exit program. Children are taught the main subjects in the minority language, and Vietnamese is introduced from grade 3 onwards. This model slowly phases out the minority language and uses Vietnamese more frequently as the medium of instruction. While the third model has been shown to be most effective for the language acquisition of children, the second model is most commonly used by the Vietnamese government.

Eight of the minority languages in Vietnam are optionally taught in school, per Circular 34 (henceforth the Circular) issued by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2020 (MOET 2020a). These eight languages are Bahnar, Chăm, Ede, Jrai, Khmer, Mông,¹ Mnong and Thai. Some languages in this list had already been taught at school such as Chăm and Mông. However, this Circular replaces all previous governmental policies regarding the teaching of minority languages in Vietnam, including the 2008 Decree on Promotion of Elementary Mông Language Program (MOET 2008). While the Circular was issued in 2020, there has been no qualitative research that evaluates the effects of these attempts to introduce minority languages in the school system. One rare project is Quang (2012), which evaluates the Chăm Mother Language Teaching Program in Ninh Thuan, Vietnam. Considering this wide gap in the literature on minority language educational policy, there is a need for a case study on the teaching of one of these eight languages in Vietnam.

Mông is a language in the Hmong-Mien language family. It is spoken by the Mông people living in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. In Vietnam, the Mông people live in the North. Mông had been taught since 2008 under the MOET’s Decree, and the program still continues in some form to date while the model of teaching has changed. The language is taught in schools in some northern provinces such as Si Ma Cai, Bac Ha and Lao Cai. My project focuses on Mông language instruction at the primary school level in Sapa, a town within Lao Cai. The driving research question of this paper is: What is the dynamic between Vietnamese and Mông in the context of a bilingual primary school in Sapa? In order to answer my main research question, I will combine critical discourse analysis (CDA) of policy texts with on-the-ground data from interviews with local stakeholders. My methodology and protocol will be elaborated in section 2. This project follows the protocols of the Institutional Review Board of Emory University.

Due to the level of interaction and involvement that fieldwork requires, author positionality cannot be ignored. I, the researcher, am a Vietnamese woman of the Viet (or Kinh) ethnic group, which accounts for over 85% of the

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¹ Mông is also written as H’ông, Hmong and Mong. It can refer to both the Mông ethnic group or the Mông language. In this text, I use Mông for consistency.

Vietnamese population. I was born and grew up in Hanoi, the administrative capital of Vietnam. I also grew up speaking Vietnamese at home, at school and in all social settings. I do not speak any minority languages spoken in Vietnam.

2 Project description and methodology

2.1 Project description In the summer of 2022, I travelled to Sapa, Lao Cai for a week. During this week, I visited primary schools and talked to educators in the area. These educators are either Mông language instructors themselves or have worked at a school that had a Mông language program. I had received prior approval from the Nhi Ha Primary School² and the Institutional Review Board of Emory University.

2.2 Critical discourse analysis CDA rests on the notion that the way we use language is purposeful (consciously or unconsciously), and it critically interrogates the way in which discourse establishes, maintains, and justifies social inequality. The policy texts I focus on are the MOET's 2008 Decree on the Promotion of Elementary Mông Language Program and the Ethnic Education Research Committee's 2021 *Manual on Applying Bilingual Education Method in Teaching Vietnamese for Grade 1 of the General Education Program in 2018*. By using CDA to examine policy texts, I will shed light on the inequalities and structures of power that are perpetuated, reproduced, or resisted in these texts. I examined the power dynamic between Vietnamese and Mông within the text of policies that aim to promote Mông language education in Vietnam.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews To complement the CDA of policy texts, I will collect more qualitative data from interviews with local stakeholders. This will allow me to put the policies in context and hear from people who are responsible for interpreting and appropriating (understood here as "implementing") these policies. I received approval and worked with the principal of Nhi Ha Primary School, Ms. Huong, and a Mông language instructor at the same school, Mr. Dung. One interview lasting approximately 45 minutes was conducted, and both participants took part in this interview together. It took place at Mr. Dung's house. Mr. Dung is Mông by ethnicity, and he speaks both Mông and Vietnamese well. Ms. Huong is not Mông, and while she has an elementary command of Mông, she is fluent in Vietnamese. The interview was conducted in Vietnamese, a language that all participants and the interviewer were comfortable with. The interview was recorded with a hand-recorder and was subsequently transcribed and coded by the researcher.

2.4 Rationale While neither CDA nor interviews are a new approach in Language Policy and Planning research, the combination of these two methods is relatively new in the field. Proponents such as Johnson calls this hybrid method "ethnography of language policy" and defines it as a method that "compares critical discourse analyses of language policy texts with ethnographic data collected in some local educational context" (Johnson 2009:140). In Language Policy and Planning, there is easily a gap between top-down and bottom-up practices. The textual analysis combined with hands-on data will allow me to link macro-level language policies to the micro-level interpretation and implementation. My research will employ a range of qualitative methods, from textual to ethnographic data.

3 Textual analysis

3.1 Decree in 2008 by Ministry of Education and Training In 2008, the MOET issued a Decree on the Promotion of Elementary Mông Language Program. According to this Decree, Mông is introduced as a subject from grade 3 and it is taught until grade 5. The program established through this Decree corresponds to the second model outlined by Phan et al. (2014), in which Vietnamese is the core language of instruction and Mông is secondary. Cited below is a part of the mission statement of the program:³

The Hmông language is taught at the primary school level at regions of the Hmông ethnic group with a goal to:

Develop listening, speaking, reading, writing skills; focusing on reading and writing, grasping the basic knowledge of the Hmông language and ethnic culture, aiding in developing critical thinking to *improve performance in Vietnamese* and other subjects at the primary school level.⁴ (MOET 2008, italics added)

² All names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity, including names of schools and educators, per Emory University IRB protocol.

³ All translation of policy texts and recording transcript is done by the author.

⁴ Original text:

Môn Tiếng Hmông được dạy ở tiểu học vùng dân tộc Hmông nhằm:

1. Phát triển kỹ năng nghe, nói, đọc, viết; chú trọng đọc và viết, nắm được những kiến thức sơ giản về ngôn ngữ và văn hóa dân tộc Hmông, góp phần rèn luyện tư duy để học tốt môn Tiếng Việt và các môn học khác ở tiểu học.

Even within a policy text that introduces a Mông program to improve Mông language skills, the purpose statement still mentions the goal of improving performance in Vietnamese and other subjects. In fact, the document claims that the improvement of language skills in Mông should serve as an “aid” to Vietnamese and other subjects. At the policy level, this shows that the ultimate goal of developing skills in Mông is not only for the sake of preserving Mông language and culture: the goal is also to integrate into the mainstream educational system. Note that in 2008 there were no Mông language programs available above the primary school level; to continue their education, Mông children will have to acquire Vietnamese. Integration into the mainstream educational system, then, necessitates a linguistic integration as well.

It is worth noting at this point that after the 2008 Decree, the MOET has issued a Circular in 2020 that promotes eight minority languages at school. The program is ambitious and aims for the instruction of these languages from grade 1 through 12. However, when I visited Sapa in the summer of 2022, there were no middle/secondary school (grades 6 through 9 in Vietnam) that had a Mông language program. In 2022, Mông language instruction in Sapa was still restricted to the primary school level.

3.2 Manual in 2021 by Ethnic Education Research Committee The Ethnic Education Research Committee,⁵ which is a part of the Vietnam National Institute of the Educational Sciences, issued a teacher’s manual in 2021. The manual, titled *Manual on Applying Bilingual Education Method in teaching Vietnamese for Grade 1 of the General Education Program in 2018*, tells and demonstrates to teachers how to implement a bilingual method in teaching Grade 1 Vietnamese to minority children. Similar to the 2008 Decree, the teacher’s manual highlights a need for developing proficiency in Vietnamese, among other things:

Apply the bilingual education method according to the new General Education Program in Vietnamese with a goal to help ethnic minority students:

Overcome *Vietnamese linguistic barriers* in students’ studies, a second language that is still strange to them;

Reduce the difficulty of receiving and exploring the new knowledge of Vietnamese lessons;

Specify new and difficult concepts and terminologies of lessons;

Develop *linguistic abilities* both in the ethnic language (students’ mother tongue) and *Vietnamese*;⁶ (Ethnic Education Research Committee 2021:7, italics added)

Similar to the 2008 Decree by the MOET, the teacher’s manual emphasizes the development of both the students’ ethnic language and Vietnamese abilities. However, different from the 2008 Decree, the teacher’s manual shows an acknowledgement for the difficulty that ethnic minority students face in the school system.

At this point it should be explained that Mông children in Sapa grow up in Mông-speaking families. They have little to no exposure to Vietnamese before entering the school system. However, once schooling starts, Mông is only taught as one subject while Vietnamese is the language of instruction for all other subjects. Children, forced to learn in a language they do not yet understand or speak, face difficulty in acquiring knowledge at school. Therefore, it is important that the teacher’s manual acknowledges the “linguistic barrier” that Vietnamese poses for children who do not speak the language at home.

Despite this initial acknowledgement of students’ struggles, the teacher’s manual reinforces the message that instruction in Mông is only supplemental to Vietnamese. As a special note in the Principles section, the manual states:

(1) Applying the bilingual method requires teachers to ensure they *do not abuse bilingualism*, which means to *limit using the ethnic language* to carry out the lesson, while students can use Vietnamese to express that content.⁷ (Ethnic Education Research Committee 2021:8, italics added)

The manual warns teachers against “abuse” of bilingualism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “abuse” as: “To use (something) improperly, to misuse; to make a bad use of; to pervert; to take advantage of wrongly”

⁵ Ban nghiên cứu Giáo dục Dân tộc

⁶ Original text:

Vận dụng phương pháp GDSN theo CTGDPT mới trong môn TV nhằm mục tiêu giúp HS người DTTS:

- Khắc phục rào cản ngôn ngữ tiếng Việt trong học tập của HS, ngôn ngữ thứ hai còn xa lạ và khó khăn với các em.
- Giảm độ khó trong việc tiếp nhận, khám phá nội dung kiến thức mới của bài học tiếng Việt.
- Chính xác hóa các khái niệm, thuật ngữ mới và khó của bài học.
- Phát triển năng lực cả ngôn ngữ tiếng dân tộc (tiếng mẹ đẻ của HS) và tiếng Việt cho HS

⁷ Original text:

Lưu ý: Việc vận dụng phương pháp giáo dục song ngữ đòi hỏi GV đảm bảo không quá lạm dụng song ngữ, nghĩa là hạn chế sử dụng tiếng dân tộc thực hiện nội dung bài học, trong khi học sinh có thể sử dụng Tiếng Việt để diễn tả nội dung đó.

(“abuse,” 2022). This use of the word suggests that somehow bilingualism, and specifically the Mông language within the Mông-Vietnamese bilingualism, can be an object of misuse. The use of Mông, in other words, can be improper. Teachers are allowed to use Mông to explain concepts to students when students cannot understand the content in Vietnamese, but teachers are warned against taking advantage of this and overusing Mông. This special note in the Principles section sends a clear message that Mông is only to be used minimally, and only used to ultimately aid students in learning Vietnamese.

3.3 Summary of section 3 Applying CDA to the two policy texts mentioned above yielded a consistent message. The 2008 Decree and 2021 Manual both emphasize that the acquisition of Mông is not a goal in and of itself, but only as a tool to acquire Vietnamese. While the 2021 Manual takes a positive step in acknowledging the difficulties of students who do not speak Vietnamese natively, it redoubles the message of Vietnamese dominance by advising teachers to not “abuse” Mông and only use it when absolutely necessary.

4 The interview

4.1 Positive attitude towards Mông Mr. Dung, who is Mông and speaks Mông as his first language, shows positive language attitude towards the Mông language. He emphasizes the importance of continuing to speak Mông: “Speaking Mông is also our custom, it cannot be abandoned.”⁸ When asked if he spoke Mông with his family, Mr. Dung emphatically confirmed and elaborated: “Currently I still teach Mông so why would I abandon it and speak Vietnamese and after a while we come back to learn Mông.”⁹

With his insistence on continuing to speak the Mông language, Mr. Dung shows a certain sense of protection and pride in the language as an aspect of the Mông’s culture: “Teaching Mông is also to preserve the Mông people’s culture then we also have to our own culture and customs are preserved so we have to be passionate that’s natural.”¹⁰

The positive attitude from Mông language teacher and the Mông community is a positive sign for the survival and maintenance of the language. Indeed, the language is still transmitted to younger generations. According to Mr. Dung and Ms. Huong, Mông children still speak Mông exclusively at home with their parents.

4.2 Vietnamese linguistic barrier Similarly to the 2021 Manual, Ms. Huong shows sympathy for the linguistic barriers that Mông children face at school: “Because they can’t fully understand so the amount of knowledge the kids retain is very little. It can’t—if you can’t fully understand of course you cannot retain.”¹¹ The fact that Vietnamese is the default language of education creates a linguistic barrier for anyone who does not speak the language at home or natively. This linguistic barrier systemically and negatively affects the educational outcomes of Mông children.

The weight of this barrier is shown most clearly when the barrier was partially lifted. In 2008 when the Mông language program was implemented in a (different) primary school in Sapa, Ms. Huong remarked on how the students’ performance and attitude to studying completely changed. Because students were able to learn in a language that they understand, their educational outcomes showed clear changes: “when we implemented the program, we saw that students were really *excited*, and in the process the study results especially the *students’ study results greatly improved*” (italics added).¹² Ms. Huong emphasized the fact that the students’ attitude changed and their confidence was boosted:¹³

the kids’ study attitude was very excited, we can feel the confidence. When they go to class the kids were more confident because they could speak, they could speak in their language to the teachers, and they could understand what the teachers say.

When the linguistic barrier was somewhat lifted, the change to children is not only quantitative in terms of grades at school—the difference is also qualitative. Being able to learn in a language they understand and being allowed

⁸ Original transcript: “Vì nói tiếng Mông cũng là một cái phong tục tập quán của mình là không thể bỏ được.”

⁹ Original transcript: “Hiện tại mình vẫn đang dạy tiếng Mông thế tội gì mà mình lại bỏ đi mình lại nói tiếng Việt mà sau này một cái thời gian sau mình lại quay lại mình học tiếng Mông.”

¹⁰ Original transcript: “Dạy tiếng Mông cũng gọi là là gọi là để bảo tồn văn hóa của người Mông thì mình cũng phải phải chính cái văn hóa của mình mà phong tục tập quán của mình được bảo lưu thì mình mình phải ham say là cái chuyện đương nhiên.”

¹¹ Original transcript: “Không hiểu hết cho nên là cái lượng kiến thức tức là các cháu tiếp thu lại thì nó rất là ít.”

¹² Original transcript: “khi mà thực hiện triển khai cái chương trình này thì thấy học sinh rất là hào hứng, rồi là trong quá trình kết quả học tập đặt biệt là kết quả học tập của học sinh là tiến bộ hẳn.”

¹³ Original transcript: “Cái thái độ học tập của trẻ con í, rất là hào hứng, nó rất là cảm thấy nó tự tin. Khi mà đến nóp ((sic)) học í, các em tự tin hơn, vì các em nói được, nói được bằng tiếng của mình cho thầy cô, và các em hiểu được thầy cô nói gì.”

to express themselves in this language gave them newfound self-confidence. This change in students' attitude poses a serious question on the negative impact of the linguistic barrier on their self-confidence.

4.3 Framing linguistic abilities as limitations Despite showing sympathy for students' struggle and concern for their success, Ms. Huong frames the linguistic ability of *Mông* children as limitations: "for first graders, they are still very limi—even though they learned, they got increased Vietnamese in kindergarten but when they enter primary school they still have a lot of *limitations*" (italics added).¹⁴ *Mông* children already speak *Mông* as their first language and are now gaining competence in a second language through the schooling system. They should be considered to have more linguistic resource than, for example, a Viet child who can only speak Vietnamese. However, because Vietnamese is considered the norm, not being fluent in this dominant language is considered a deficit regardless of what other languages one might speak. Sadly, this discourse is not uncommon in a situation where there is a dominant language. Instead of acknowledging the linguistic resource of the so-called minority, their linguistic ability is framed as a deficit in comparison to the dominant language instead.

4.4 Using *Mông* to teach Vietnamese Finally, both educators interviewed reiterated a message that was delivered in the policy texts: that *Mông* is a tool to help students learn Vietnamese.

When asked how he used language in teaching, Mr. Dung explained: "Ah mostly I teach in *Mông*. We can translate from *Mông* to Vietnamese and then from Vietnamese to *Mông*. [...] It's using *Mông* to help them learn Vietnamese well, yeah."¹⁵ Mr. Dung is *Mông* and works as a *Mông* language teacher for a population of students that is mostly *Mông*. Despite this, he felt the need to use both Vietnamese and *Mông* during his classes, translating between the two so that students can learn both. His *Mông* language lessons, then, serve to help students acquire Vietnamese.

Ms. Huong, the principal, also discusses students' improvement in Vietnamese when talking about the program's success: "So we can see that the program was very good for the kids and especially that the language ability, through this the Vietnamese language ability of students was also improved."¹⁶ If the purpose of the program was to improve the children's Vietnamese ability, then Ms. Huong was reaffirming that this purpose was fulfilled.

5 Conclusion

Combining language attitudes elicited through the interview with critical discourse analysis of policy texts, I find that there is a power dynamic between Vietnamese and *Mông* in a primary school in Sapa, with Vietnamese being dominant. This hierarchy manifests itself in two ways. First, the acquisition of *Mông* is framed as a tool to aid the acquisition of Vietnamese and, thereby, as a way to integrate into the Vietnamese school system. I analyze discourses at multiple levels to show that while the *Mông* language holds cultural values for *Mông* people, it is still instrumental in the acquisition of the national language. I argue that this is not only ideological but also practical because *Mông* children must be adequate in Vietnamese if they wish to pursue an education above the primary level. Second, the *Mông* students' language ability is framed as a deficit instead of as an advantage because they are compared to a Vietnamese standard.

The standard language ideology exists not only in policy texts but also in on-the-ground practices and language attitudes of educators. Educators have conflicting language attitudes towards *Mông*. On the one hand, they recognize its cultural value and work to implement minority language programs in schools. They show care for students' learning and empathy for students' struggle. On the other hand, they (re)produce the hegemonic discourse that learning *Mông* is a pathway to learning Vietnamese, as well as framing students' linguistic abilities in a deficiency point of view.

My case study of *Mông* language policies in a primary school in Sapa contributes to the literature that critically and qualitatively examines the effects of minority language educational policies. Since the MOET implemented an updated minority language program in 2020, my research is the first, to my knowledge, that qualitatively examines the effects of the new program. A direction for future research is conducting more qualitative case studies to evaluate educational policies regarding minority languages.

References

¹⁴ Original transcript: "đối với học sinh lớp một mà, các em vẫn còn rất là hạn—dù là được học, được tăng cường tiếng Việt ở mầm non nhưng khi lên tiểu học thì các em vẫn còn hạn chế rất là nhiều."

¹⁵ Original transcript: "À trong đây thì hầu như là dạy bằng tiếng *Mông*, tiếng *Mông*. Khi mà có thể là từ phiên dịch từ tiếng *Mông* sang tiếng Việt [...] Từ tiếng *Mông* để cho các em học tốt tiếng Việt mà."

¹⁶ Original transcript: "Thế cho nên là thấy rằng là cái chương trình này (nó) rất là tốt cho trẻ con và đặc biệt là cái, cái cái cái, cái vốn tiếng, thông qua cái này cái vốn tiếng Việt của học sinh cũng được phát triển."

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