

Multilingual education in the community of minority peoples of Vietnam¹

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Abstract

Vietnam is a multinational and multilingual nation, with 53 ethnic communities in addition to the majority Kinh people.

Before 1945, under French colonial rule, all Vietnamese languages were secondary to French in social and functional uses. After the Declaration of Independence in September 2nd, 1945, Vietnamese, the language of literature, the press, publications and daily life, took the place of French for all social functions and officially became the language of the independent nation. Vietnamese was revitalized and developed through cultural and social uses, becoming the voice of the whole Vietnamese community as it struggled for independence and freedom. The role of Vietnamese as the national language has now been affirmed.

This same process of revitalization has taken place among many of the ethnic languages. In addition to helping create a new vigor for Vietnamese, Viet Nam's language policy also stresses the expansion and quality of multilingualism and bilingualism in Viet Nam.

In Viet Nam today, four ethnic communities—Cham, Thai, Tay and Khmer—use traditional scripts and twenty-one have Latinized scripts established since the beginning of the 20th century. The creation of scripts for other ethnic languages is still being carried out. The training of teachers and compilation of textbooks in minority languages has played a decisive role in implementing bilingual and multilingual educational programs in dozens of regions in Viet Nam.

These activities have also contributed actively to the formation of a batch of native writers, poets and journalists capable of composing works in two languages and around twenty minority communities broadcast programs on the national, international or regional radio or television networks.

Social and lingual background

Viet Nam is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. According to official statistics of the State Statistics General Department, Vietnam currently has 53 minority groups who, with the Kinh, the majority people, make up the Vietnamese community comprising 76,323,173 inhabitants. This multi-ethnic and multi-lingual characteristic, according to historical documents as well as legends, dates back to the first formation of her elements of civilization in Viet Nam and became more obvious in her historical development. All languages of the present community of Vietnamese people belong to eight groups of languages: Vieät- Möðøng, Moãn-Khmer, Taøy-Thaùi, Hmoâng-Dao, Kadai, Chaêm, Haùn, Taïng-Mieán, and are classified into the three language families – Austro Asiatic, Austronesian and Sino - Tibertan. The first two families are distributed mainly in the South-East Asian region.

Before 1945, under French colonialism, all languages spoken in Vietnam were secondary to social functional activities as the official language in Vietnam as well as in other countries in Indo-China, such as Cambodia and Laos was French. This situation was not favourable to the all-around development of Vietnamese, a language that has been the means of expression for a centuries-old national literature and the language of many Vietnamese minorities – the owners of a rich folk literature with well-known poems such as *Ñam San*, *Xinh Nha*, *Abundance in Land and Water*, *Sweetie seeing-off*, *Chöông Hain*, etc... The fact that this rich traditional and folk literature which continued to be preserved and developed in such

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unfavorable conditions has served to nurture their languages and provided them with continuous encouragement so as to, in favourable conditions, assume appropriate social functions required by their new life.

Since August 1945, in Vietnam, the social situation and language activities have undergone radical changes. Starting with the September 2nd, 1945 Declaration of Independence, Vietnamese-the language of literature, the press, cultural publications and daily life – has replaced French as the language all social functions and has officially become the national language of an independent country. This is due to the fact that Vietnamese with its romanized script, even during in the French colonization, has been put to the test of a rich cultural and social life. This fact has been reflected in newspaper and magazines, novels and many other publications by a contingent of writers having the people language and culture at heart. Once a language continues functioning braving all limitations, it ceaselessly develops and perfects itself. Once the limitations in the administrative field are no more, Vietnamese has a good opportunity for development. Moreover, with more than half of a century since 1945, Vietnamese has been revitalized and has fully met all communication requirements of an ever-changing life and has reassured its position as the national language.

Before August 1945, the situation was all the less favourable for the development of minority peoples' languages. During this period of time, most of these languages functioned within the scope of families, hamlets and folk festivals and in the fields of customs, culture and creed. In these functional activities, the peoples' languages not only preserved traditional features but also reflected their constant changes.

Multilingual education in the present Vietnamese education system

After the Declaration of independence on September 2nd 1945, the Vietnamese educational system gradually shifted to using of Vietnamese in teaching from primary schools to universities. This was the first area of interest by the new state – the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (before 1975) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after national reunification – concerning its language policy. Another domain of interest in by the national language policy is regarding the ethnic minorities' languages and cultures, which has its own factual social background. The ethnic minorities' in Vietnam account for 30% of the entire Vietnamese population (about 24 million people). They live in areas holding important political, economic and strategic positions – mountain areas, borders, etc...- covering 75% of the national territory. The minority groups' languages have so far contributed a great deal to the preservation and development of each concrete group as well as of the whole community of Vietnamese. The constitution of independent Vietnam, through stages, has been perfected and supplemented to be appropriate to the practical social development (1946, 1960, 1981 and 1992) has consistently affirmed the legality and the organic relationship and mutual supplementation between the two factors – the national language and the languages of ethnic minorities – in the language life in Vietnam. This spirit is also expressed in the compulsory primary education.⁽¹⁾

The above-mentioned legal texts have created the basis for bilingual/ multi-lingual education⁽²⁾ for the ethnic minorities in Vietnam. One of the first requirements of bilingual/ multi-lingual education is the script. In Vietnam 20 of the 54 ethnic groups have their own script. Among them, six script systems could be considered traditional, meaning its formation dates back from long ago, with the specific time of development needing additional research to be found out. The Chàm, the Khmer and the North-West Thài scripts derived from the South Indian script system, while Chinese-transcribed Tày, Dao and Cao Lan scripts were set up based on Chinese characters. Other scripts, including the Romanized Vietnamese script, were set up on the basis of Latin script. Except for Quốc ngữ, the Romanized Vietnamese script, which took form around the beginning of the 17th century, most of the other romanized scripts were formed at the beginning of the 20th century. Except for a number of scripts such as those of Bahnar, Jarai, Eñeà existing before 1945, many other scripts were jointly created by Vietnamese teachers, linguists and the members of the ethnic minority (in the North) or by the American Summer Institute of Linguistic and the Ministry of Education in the South.

Today, in Vietnam, over 10 languages of ethnic minorities with a population of around 1,000,000 people are made use of in bilingual education: These are the Tày-Nùng, Hmông, Mông, Êđê, Jarai, Bahnar, Kôho, Xeông, Mông, Chăm, Khmer. The number of ethnic minorities' languages used in radio and television systems and other cultural activities are about the same. The two necessary tasks needed to service these cultural and educational activities are the compilation of books - the tools that highlight traditions and socio-cultural reality of each people - and the training of the people's contingent of teachers and educated people. These two tasks should be done under strict collaboration between the peoples' intellectuals and the educators and linguists. Thanks to this collaboration, the traditional features of the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities will be preserved and, in the mean time, the changes in the peoples' languages will also be reflected in textbooks and cultural publications.

The above-mentioned is most clearly shown in the languages with traditional scripts. It is necessary to add that a Government document clearly affirms this: "The existing languages and scripts of the ethnic minorities are respected and supported by the state for their maintenance and development" (Decision 53-CP, February 22, 1980). Its effectiveness is to promote even further the exploitation and research of the traditional cultures of the ethnic minorities to fulfil the present task of bilingual/multi lingual education.

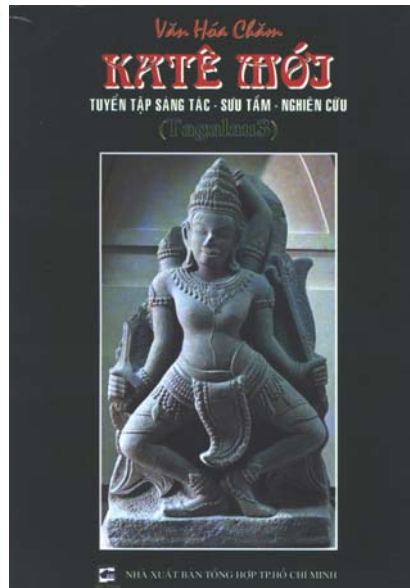
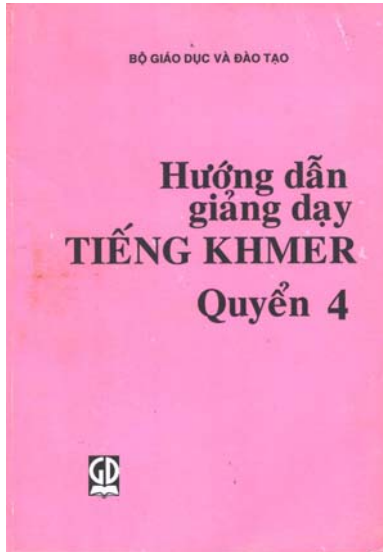
Following are a number of images illustrating this remark.

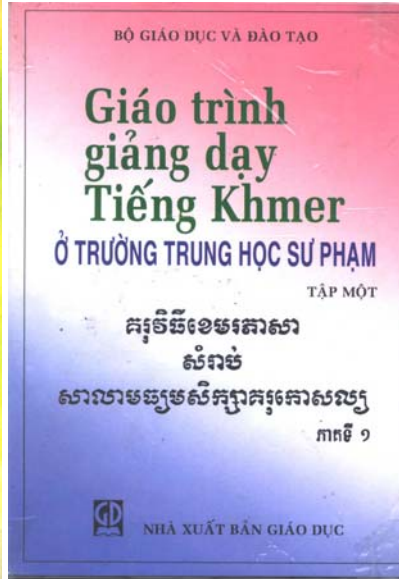
The 10-minute-long documentary film is about the researcher who went looking for the origin of the Chăm culture in the service of the work of bilingual education and the composition of today's literature. (Introduction to the documentary "Inrasara, looking for Cham origin to reserve present life")

The author's latest book (May, 2003) "Self-learning book of Cham language" is for people of differing backgrounds, ages and levels of general knowledge in and outside the community. To my knowledge the subjects outside the community are not just researchers at home and abroad, but also the common Viets (Kinh) living in the areas shared by both the Viets and the Chams. In the case the bilingual requirements is a real fact today. Moreover, there are also people who would like to have a high level of bilingual knowledge, e.g. they can read comprehensibly texts written in the Cham traditional script.

In comparison to the bilingual level of Viet-Cham, the level of Viet-Khmer, in general, is lower. According to preliminary remark of a young researcher Dinh Lu Giang, in the area shared by the Viets and the Khmers, the equal bilingual ratio is just around 5%, while in most cases, the level is at the level of daily conversation among villagers. Because the Viets and the Khmers resided in the Cuu Long delta area where villages and hamlets were far apart. Consequently, the time for language contact between the Viets and the Khmers was not as frequent as long as that of the Viets and the Chams in the region they shared. It is the reason why bilingual education in this area should be concentrated on the two tasks of teacher training and textbook compiling. The tasks have been delegated to the Soùc Trang teacher's Training Secondary School and a group of authors comprised of both the Khmer and the Viet teachers and linguists.

The textbooks teaching Khmer at the *teacher's Training Secondary School* (Volume I and II) are the results of scientific work collected under the guidance of the Khmer People's teacher Laâm ES.





**People's Teacher LAM ES,
editor-in-chief of the above book set**

The books have been used effectively in bilingual Viet-Khmer teacher training courses. The two volumes, some thousand pages thick, comprise various parts of a language structure. Owing to the fact that the traditional Khmer script is different from the Romanized one, the authors of the books have devoted a considerable period of time to the script and all the parts are presented bilingual.

Last June, 2003 the *University of Social Sciences and Humanities* organised a scientific seminar on education in the Cuu Long river delta. All the authors acknowledged the effectiveness of the bilingual education form and system in the living area shared by the Viets and the Khmer.

Some characteristics of bilingual education in Vietnam

As a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation experiencing a long language contact, Vietnam has many bilingual areas at many different levels. There are areas of generalized bilingualism. In many areas bilingual individuals⁽³⁾ are limited to a certain strata of the people in the communities of minority peoples: local officials, people doing business, people dealing with cultural activities, and people who have

relationship with other communities. Elderly people, especially children, whose scope of communication is mostly within the family or hamlet, generally have no or a very limited bilingual capability. This means that minority peoples' children, even the ones living in bilingual areas, who want to become bilingual individuals with full free access to education ⁽⁴⁾, and be able to participate in scientific and technological and cultural and social activities need the capability of equal bilingualism ⁽⁵⁾, e.g. the capability of use of their mother tongue and the national language – the language-media of communication and language-media of instruction ⁽⁶⁾ – about the same level. This requires minority children, even the ones who live in bilingual areas, need bilingual language skills in order to gain access to an all – around bilingual education.

Bilingual educational curricula in Vietnam is used in primary schools. Upon entering the school, the children of ethnic minorities already were listening and speaking skills of Vietnamese, besides those of their mother tongue. The objective is heighten the school children's bilingual capability through speaking, to supply them with vocabulary used in corresponding subjects, helping them gradually get used to the Vietnamese written style and initially simple to more complex texts. Another goal is also to meet the requirements, the primary school bilingual curricula are arranged parallel the school children's mother tongue and Vietnamese with a view to helping them consolidate and improve their communicative ability of both languages.

The bilingual educational curriculum in Vietnam today is not applied to all subjects but just the ethnic minorities language and Vietnamese. This practice is based on two things. One is that language helps learners train their thinking in the two languages through orientated bilingualism as expressed by M.Houis when he discussed bilingualism in black Africa. The other is that, thanks to Vietnamese vocabulary accumulated over a long process, all scientific terms used by minority groups in Vietnam derive from a common source, the Vietnamese language. Thus, in many concrete subjects in primary schools, the difference is focussed on descriptive language and not in concrete terms.

Among the minority peoples' languages with a bilingual curricula, Cham and Khmer are the languages having their own traditional scripts. Beside textbook compilation and bilingual teachers training (see 2.4.1, 2.4.2), Cham and Khmer teaching has been properly and flexibly carried out. The thing that needs special care in the field is the fact that Cham and Khmer scripts are different from Latin script, so they need aids out of class hours which are still so limited. Aids differ from place to place. For instance, in areas where the Chams live in a dense group (Ninh Thuaän, Bình Thuaän), *a center compiling books in Cham language* was established and has been functioning since 1975. The center published not just textbooks but also books on culture and books popularizing sciences to be widely spread among the population. These kinds of cultural publications help make youngsters care about the spoken language and the script of their own people. In areas where the Khmer people live, pagodas are also places teenagers and school children can get help to consolidate their knowledge on the traditional spoken language and script of their people.

Conclusion

During over half a century since 1945, owing to the fact that the state has an appropriate language and educational policy towards the country's multi-ethnic and multilingual state, the bilingual educational activities have become more active in improving the people's general knowledge, thus creating more intellectuals within the minority communities. These intellectuals have not just contributed to the building, development and prosperity of their homeland, many of them have also effectively taken part in leadership, social management, scientific and technological and economic activities of their society.

However, in the area of general economic and social development, the average general knowledge of ethnic minorities is still poor, especially for those who live far from city centers, motorways or in mountainous severed and border areas.

Bilingual teaching in a number of areas still faces several disadvantages including: a proper ratio of teaching periods to different subjects not being achieved and a lack of teachers for bilingual curricula. Teachers' training schools at different levels, with a section for training bilingual teachers like the one in Sóc Trăng, are still rare.

The attitude of many school-children and their parents is one of impatience as they just want the teaching at school to be done in Vietnamese, so as not to waste time on learning the minority people's mother tongue. However, to the minority school children whose Vietnamese is not good, e.g they have not got an equal bilingual capability (Vietnamese and minority group's language), such an impatient attitude only brings negative effects.

Lack of material means and teaching instruments to carry out bilingual curricula (models, audio-visual aids, bilingual reading books etc...) is also an obstacle for a number of regions.

In summary, the bilingual educational plan in Vietnam has been actively carried out and has returned encouraging results. It is expected to be expanded to other mixed population regions. However, there are still difficulties lying ahead in the field. Many additional lessons need to be learned from other countries with multilingual curriculums.

Recently, the *Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam* has issued a decision on establishing the ***Minority Peoples Educational Research Center***. At the ceremony of proclamation of the decision (on the afternoon of September 8, 2003), a deputy minister of Education said: "The Center has the function of studying all the problems concerning ethnic minorities education, supplying sources of documents and scientific findings so that the *Ministry of Education and Training* can work out decisions, policies and measures for the development of ethnic minorities education with a view to meeting the requirements of the schooling and training of human resources for the mountain areas and areas far away from cultural centers". (News from "Tuổi Trẻ" on September 9, 2003). There is much probability that in the scope of these functions, exist the function of study of bilingual education, Therefore, it is safe to say that from now on, conditions for a more thorough study and more appropriate guidance will be given to bilingual education in Vietnam.

Notes

1. The 1960 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam states: "All the peoples have right to maintain or read just their customs and habits and use their spoken languages and scripts to develop their own cultures". The 1981 Constitution put it: "The state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a unified state of all the peoples living in the territory of Vietnam and they are all have rights and obligations... All the peoples have the right to use their spoken languages and scripts, maintain and bring into full play their traditional customs and habits and their fine cultures." This content is also mentioned again in 1992 Constitution. Article 4 of Primary Education Law affirms: "Primary education is carried out in Vietnamese. The minority peoples have the right to use their own spoken languages and scripts together with Vietnamese to achieve primary education" (1991)
2. In this text bilingual/ multilingual are referred to in this sense: to each concrete ethnic minority peoples is carried out on a bilingual basic – Vietnamese as the national language and the language of the ethnic minority, whereas on the national scale, the second component in bilingual education refers to different ethnic minorities.
3. Generalized bilingualism, a term used by Houis M to denote a situation where a high ratio of community members have bilingual capability, eg bilingual individuals. There are different factors that constitute the bilingual ability of these individuals: the contact areas of the two

languages –owning communities are interwoven or compact, the result of political, historical, factors.

4. The fully system of education in Vietnam today after pre-school years comprises primary school (5 years) secondary school (7 years), college (4-6 year depending on subjects), master’s degree and doctor’s degree. Apart from primary education that can be carried out by using bilingual curricula, other grades from secondary education upward, Vietnamese is used as the medium in teaching and learning as it is the national language and the communi language among different ethnic minorities.
5. As far as an equal bilingual standard is concerned, even in a minority community with compulsory bilingual education like the Chaêm, this standard is only achieved at a certain age range. Following is a number of figures that illustrate this remark.
Concerning the ability of speaking Vietnamese, a rather big difference between that of men and women is found on calculating the ratio of different age ranges.

Table 1. Age ranges

Ratio of age ranges	Female	Male
From 03-06 years old	0	0
From 07-14 years old	40	40
From 15-30 years old	50	80
From 31-45 years old	30	90
From 46-60 years old	10	60
Over 60 years old	0	20

Table 2. Number of people who can read and write the national language, the Vietnamese Romanized script.

Age	Male	Female	Total	Percentage as against the population
From 3-6 years old	45	45	93	3.5
From 7-14 years old	262	119	381	12.2
From 15-30 years old	382	380	762	28.9
From 31-45 years old	95	128	223	8.4
From 46-60 years old	83	58	141	5.3
From 61 upwards	10	3	13	0.4
Total	877	736	1613/2630 people	61%

Table 3: Number of people who know Akhar thrah, the traditional Cham script

Age	Knowing traditional Cham script	
	Male	Female
From 3-6 years old	0	0
From 7-14 years old	5	0
From 15-30 years old	24	0
From 31-45 years old	17	0
From 46-60 years old	59	0
From 61 upwards	17	0
Total	152/2630 people	0

Source: Buøi Khaùnh Theá, 1979

6. The terms are taken from M.Blanc in *Societal Bilingualism*.

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Appendix: Inrasara on origins serving the present life

The figure introduced in this documentary is one of the new generation Chaêm culturists. These culturists include scientists, anthropologists, linguists, historians and other people whose works are related to culture such as, art, painting, music and carving. Notably, the man in this documentary has characters of a researcher and an artist. He is not interested in earning high titles of scholarship. He has patiently worked on scientific works highly valued by local and foreign researchers. Although he does not spend his entire time writing literal works, his poems are still read and attract the attention of both Chaêm and Vietnamese readers.

His name is Phuè Traïm and his “pen name” is Inrasara which is Chaêm word for “salt”. This “pen name” may come from this saying: “If salt on the ground loses its saltiness, it is not useful”. He applies this concept “If a man does not preserve and develop his traditional and national characteristics, he plays non-sense roles in his people’s society”. More deeply, through his experiences in life, working, living with his people and reading books to enrich his knowledge, he has realized a paradox related to his Chaêm culture: Traditionally, Chaêm culture is very rich in oral folklore, written documents and other resources. However, this culture has not been highly valued. It is acceptable if foreigners say that Chaêm culture can be summarized in 20 pages. However, even Vietnamese researchers have not deeply understood the Chaêm contribution to Vietnamese macro cultures.

Inrasara says in about 1 minute:

“From the various parts of the country we have contributed.

A lot of tomb statues and epics

And hundreds of Chaêm towers in my Son, and the bronze drums, and the poetry of Nguyen Du, Nguyen Trai.

We have contributed, too

Thousands of folk poems and proverbs

And our common pride and private pains.”

Even young generation Chaêm do not pay attention to and do not understand their culture clearly. In order to change this matter, Inrasara thinks that traditional properties, language being the most primary, should be used to serve their present lives. With careful analysis, he has conducted hundreds of field studies related to culture and linguistics. He has also collected and translated Chaêm literary works of older people into Vietnamese. His works have been published into Chaêm and Vietnamese to be easily popularized. He also joins in “Editing Chaêm books” and cooperates with linguists in writing bilingual dictionary. He quietly edits books introducing Chaêm literature. His books have been published and valued highly. Therefore, he received awards from E.F.E.O (French Far East Organization) and “Vietnamese Committee on Ethnic Minority”.

- (Prof. Bui Khanh The talks for 1 minute)

In order to feed his inner spirit, he needs an occasional recess to write down some poem verses and epics. Whenever his poems have been published, they are always received with respect. His particular

poems contributing much to Vietnamese contemporary literature, and are always highly appreciated by Vietnamese artists. As a result, his poem “Thaùp naéng” was awarded second prize from “The Vietnamese Literary Committee” in 1997. His second poem “Caây xööng roàng” was awarded second prize from “The Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities’ Artistic and Literary Committee” in 1998. Cooperating with other young Chaêm culturists, he has published “The Tagalau Magazine” regularly. This magazine has been published 3 times. He spends most of his time researching and popularizing Cham language through writing books, teaching Chaêm language and “akhar thrah” to Chaêm young generation and those interested in studying Chaêm language and Chaêm culture. One scientist said that Inrasara is one who discovers traditional origins by his creative labor in order to serve present – day life. His contributions have been also reflected in bilingual educational forms. His latest book is “Töi hoïc tieáng Chaêm” (Learning Chaêm language by yourself)

Inrasara is regarded as “Ñöùa Con Cuûa Ñáát – The Son of the Earth) fed by “folk resources”. His poem “Naéng queâ höông” was written in Chaêm, his mother tongue. His works and experiences have been transferred to offspring through many means including bilingual forms which he studied.