



Talking With Children in Multilingual Preschools in Central Vietnam

Learning in a child's mother tongue is crucial for enhancing critical thinking, the skills to learn a second language, and literacy skills.

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1. Introduction

Since 2009 the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) increased its focus on early childhood education through curriculum renovation, providing facilities and, teacher policies. Over the past decade, a rapid increase in access among 3- to 6-year-old children has been achieved with a current enrollment rate of 99% for the 5-year-olds. More vulnerable and disadvantaged children, such as those from remote and ethnically diverse districts, are increasingly being reached.

However, universal access does not equal learning. Not all children are developing to their full potential. Children from ethnic minority groups are particularly vulnerable and challenges remain in improving learning outcomes for them.

Vietnam as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation

Vietnam is a diverse society with 54 officially recognised ethnic groups. About 86% of the population is Kinh, whose language is Vietnamese. While Vietnamese is the official national language, it is estimated that more than 100 languages are spoken by the other 53 ethnolinguistic communities. Only 29 of those languages have a script. Despite existing policies supporting the use of non-dominant languages in education and positive results of some pilot programmes, Vietnamese remains the main language of instruction (L2) throughout all levels of education. This obviously disadvantages many children from ethnic minority groups who have limited or, sometimes, no understanding of Vietnamese when they start in preschool. They do not only have difficulty in learning a new language but also have challenges in understanding what they are taught due to learning contents that are disconnected from the children's daily lives.

Challenges in policy implementation

Language policy reflects a government's ideologies and priorities. It is rather common in Southeast Asia to assign assimilation of minority populations into the narrative of an integrated and unified nation as an important goal for education. Understanding is often limited about the relevance of education in the child's first language. A common misconception is that by simply introducing Vietnamese to children as early as possible the learning of that language increases and accelerates.

Despite high motivations, teachers with limited pedagogical skills and concerns about making change that is not explicitly mandated keep to traditional, teacher-centered practices that are not adapted to the interests, needs, or social reality of the children. These teacher-directed approaches used in classes limit speaking opportunities for children, who miss out on meaningful and language rich interactions which are essential for language development. Vietnamese is introduced to 3-year-olds via direct vocabulary instruction and repetition, via focus on form rather than content (teachers correcting pronunciation or word choice instead of replying to what the child tried to say).



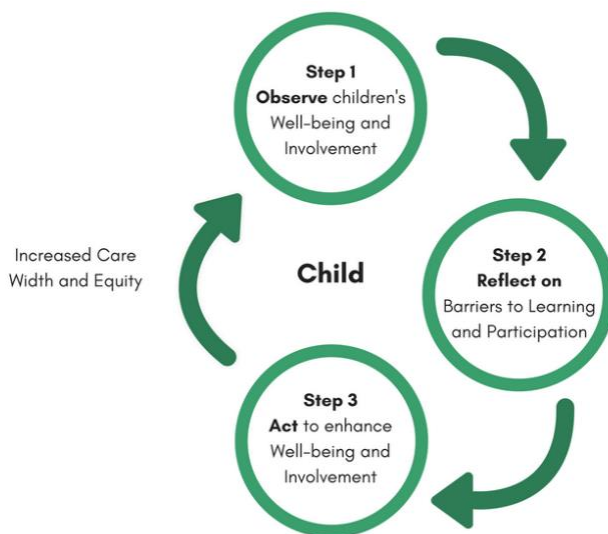
Picture 1 Vietnamese language teaching

2. A Collaborative Intervention

In response to the situation described above, *Mitigating Preschool Children's Barriers to Learning in disadvantaged and ethnically diverse districts in Central Vietnam' (2017-2021)*, a collaboration of VVOB, a Belgian non-profit organisation, and its partners, the Department of Education and Training (DOET) of three central provinces in Vietnam, Kon Tum, Quang Nam and Quang Ngai, provinces, works on mitigating preschool children's barriers to learning in disadvantaged and ethnically diverse districts.

Wellbeing and involvement as a proxy for learning

The program introduced process-oriented child monitoring that prompts teachers to focus on children's individual well-being and involvement, which are conditions for learning and participation. Teachers identify and address social barriers to learning and take actions to enhance children's well-being and involvement (see Figure 1).



Process-oriented child monitoring methodology is an experiential education method which helps teachers to observe the level of wellbeing (1) and involvement (2) of children. Teachers then identify barriers (3) to learning and participation and take action (4) in order to mitigate the barriers and to ensure deep learning of all children.

Figure 1 The process-oriented child monitoring approach supports the teacher to become a reflective teacher that continuously improves the quality of education and the care width for all children (VVOB, 2020)

- 1) Children who are in a state of wellbeing, feel like a 'fish in water'. They are spontaneous and comfortable. They show self-confidence and self-esteem. They are receptive towards their environment.
- 2) Children with a high level of involvement are highly focused and absorbed by their activity. They show deep satisfaction. There is intense mental activity. They operate at the limits of their capabilities.
- 3) Once teachers have monitored children's levels of wellbeing and involvement, they identify which children are doing well and which are at risk of not learning. The teachers reflect on barriers to learning and participation (Booth, 2016) experienced by children at risk.
- 4) Based on the reflection, teachers prioritise changes in physical space, materials, activities, and interactions:
 - a. Rearrange the classroom in appealing corners or areas
 - b. Check and update materials in the corners
 - c. Introduce new and unconventional materials and activities
 - d. Discover children's interests and offer related activities
 - e. Support ongoing activities with stimulating and enriching impulses
 - f. Increase free initiative, support this with sound rules
 - g. Improve relation with each of the children and between children
 - h. Activities to explore the world of behaviour, feelings, and values

For more information about process-oriented child-monitoring: Laevers, F., Moons, J., & Declercq, B. (2012). *A process-oriented child monitoring system for the early years (POMS)*. CEGO Publishers.

The intervention content

While not challenging the prevailing policy and practices, such as Vietnamese language teaching, the intervention increased the understanding of the language-related barriers, helped teachers to better understand language development in a mono- and multilingual context, demystifying some existing myths and misunderstandings, and how they can create the best circumstances in the classroom to help children develop to their full potential, while valuing and using their language and cultural background. The intervention supports the teachers to explicitly establish an age-appropriate and playful language practice, or a language rich environment -throughout the entire classroom environment, activities and interactions.

Capacity development

The capacity development ran over the course of 1 year and 8 months (Aug 2019-March 2021) and consisted of a modular training approach (3 trainings, in total 4.5 days), complemented by on-site coaching with all teachers of the school (4 sessions of 1 day per school), school-based collaborative learning (professional teacher meeting, peer learning and co-teaching), online learning (support and reinforcement of learning via quizzes and reflective questions), and harvesting workshops where participants exchanged and celebrated changes and identified next steps. A coaching team of 3 local specialists visited schools in pairs, accompanied by district officers (BOET) as part of their coaching capacity development. All coaching was done in Vietnamese.



Figure 2 Capacity development methods



Picture 1 Designing language-rich activities starting from a story book

3. The results

As a result of the intervention, language input has been enriched. Teachers use a slower pace when speaking, use more understandable phrases. They rephrase when children do not understand and use synonyms. They support what they say using pictures, drawings and gestures. Teachers have become more aware of the relevance of the child's context for learning (they now more often visit cultural sites in the area and invite community members to classroom) but don't yet find meaningful ways to do so beyond including the child's context in certain themes (e.g. festivals) and in classroom decoration. Many schools mention a better and more frequent interaction with parents.

Most language offering comes from the teacher, rather than initiated by children. Language offerings by teachers primarily occurs in plenary/circle moments. Teachers spend too little time in any activity corner to meaningfully connect and interact with children. Teachers do not yet describe actions of children, nor their own thinking and reasoning.

The questioning skills of teachers have improved a lot. Teachers create more time and space for children to speak. Due to the more open-ended nature of the questions, children have more opportunity to express themselves. However, interaction is often limited to these question-and-answer sessions and is seldom spontaneously initiated by the children.

In some schools, children of different ages can now play in the same outside play areas, which automatically leads to informal interaction. Language production opportunities can be created at any time, not only during instructional and language teaching moments. Some schools note: "We now interact with children as often as possible, anytime [e.g., during drop-off and pick-up time, lunch time] to support them to develop language."

Teachers indicate that they let children find solutions for problems more often and avoid doing things for children they could do themselves. Applying these techniques with storybooks for language-rich activities has made the books more meaningful for children, which enhances telling and re-telling stories. While teachers use more prompts and additional questions to help children, they do continue to ask children to repeat exact phrases, rather than creating opportunities for children to practice new phrases and words in a meaningful context. Teachers generally lack the techniques to support language development through interaction (scaffolding) and need more support to understand how to enrich, rephrase, paraphrase, expand, and confirm what children (try to) say.

4. Discussion

The learning trajectory aimed at a change in knowledge, attitudes, and practices and the results of the analysis indicate that changes have been made at all three levels.

Taking away misconceptions and tackling sensitive issues

Possibly the biggest impact of the intervention is correction of certain myths and misconceptions about language development and multilingual language acquisition. Exposing participants to research about the importance of a first language for a child's holistic development and therefore acquisition of L2 was a real eye-opener. It directly impacted educators' attitude toward the children's mother tongues and led provincial officials to guide schools (not only the pilot schools) on this matter. Learning that children, when exposed to a new language, normally go through a silent period, was a big relief for many teachers, as they perceive a lot of pressure to "make these children speak." This directly influences the classroom climate.

Policy implementation

Participants indicated that learning about language-rich environments helped them to better understand and implement directives on the child-centered approach, as requested by the Vietnam MOET. They also indicated that the intervention's trajectory complements what is described in the MOET guidelines regarding strengthening Vietnamese, which is often misunderstood and operationalized as language *teaching*, not as creating opportunities for language *learning* in a natural and interactive context. Their better understanding of the role of the mother tongue will hopefully also open doors to considering a multilingual teaching approach in the future that, rather than focusing on early exposure, gives more

space to the use of mother tongue and local culture in preschool and gradually makes the transition from to L2 throughout primary education.

What is meaningful and functional?

The model of the powerful or language-rich learning environment includes three related layers: establish a safe environment, create meaningful interactions, and provide language support through interactions. Participants struggle with the concept of “meaningful and functional interactions.” For example, in the market corner they ask children, “What is this?” or “Can you describe your products?,” rather than, “What products can you recommend?” or “I would like to cook *phở*, but what do I need for that?” The difficulty teachers experience is directly related to the lack of child-centered. This can be seen in all classrooms, not only in those with children from ethnic minorities. Creating language-rich environments therefore cannot and should not be separated from child centered and learning through play approaches.

Tricks versus deep understanding

After exposing participants to the model of the powerful language-rich learning environment, we offered some concrete recommendations and techniques. One of these was how to use a story book in class, creating playful and language-rich activities that introduce the book or that use the essence of the story and expand children’s understanding. All participants embraced this technique, as they had struggled to find entry points for using books with children. District officials immediately added this approach to teacher professional development in their districts. However, class observations show that teachers who were only exposed to professional development on the use of books run the activities without creating opportunities for language-rich interactions. This points to the importance of fully understanding the nature and purpose of the introduced activities and the underlying processes, especially in a context that values compliance. Connecting a language-rich environment to child observation will help teachers see the connection between what actions they take to change their practices and the observed levels of well-being and involvement. Engaging in collaborative reflection will enhance this process.

Valuing diversity

Schools face difficulties in integrating ethnic minorities’ language and culture in the classroom. While decorations are present (houses, dresses, and tools), what people think is missing. Positive and empowering stories of ethnic minorities are rarely represented in teaching and learning materials. Teachers find it difficult to use the children’s living environment to develop meaningful learning activities or to adapt the national curriculum to fit within local context/culture.

Teachers, school leaders, and education officers indicate achievement and development gaps between Kinh and ethnic minorities, and are working hard to remedy the gap. Their approach, however, often exacerbates the common view on ethnicity and language as a deficit and not an asset. This impacts the well-being of children and the community, who start interiorizing a feeling of inferiority. The underlying beliefs also influence teacher’s expectations and approaches, which has a direct negative impact on students’ learning outcomes.

The trajectory of this initiative prompted participants to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes toward diversity. There is need for deeper cultural awareness, and hence VVOB has started a pilot project exploring the beliefs of education practitioners.

Teacher professional development

In line with the VVOB capacity development approach, the intervention exposed participants to a variety of capacity development methods. Participants appreciated these, especially the coaching. As an unexpected result, they have incorporated the methods into their own professional development system, at school, district, and provincial levels. Providing participants with models of effective professional development turns out to lead to change.

5. Going forward

Although progress is visible, many of these practices are emergent and need further support to strengthen, expand, and generalize. Schools and teachers need to create meaningful, playful, and challenging learning opportunities for children, which children can relate to and feel connected to. This

means that the education system values and uses the diverse contexts and languages children bring to the classroom.

Interactions should not be limited to question-and-answer sessions initiated by the teacher, but rather start from child-initiated input such as what they think and feel. The focus should shift from talking to the child to talking with the child. This shift recognises the competent child image, following insights from sociocultural educational theories. When the child is seen as rich in experiences, capable, and competent, the teacher's role as mediator of a child's development focuses on further expanding the child's existing abilities through scaffolding and interactional support.

Language scaffolding entails specific skills, such as paraphrasing, expanding on, and enriching what a child said. Such skills are not currently part of the pre-service trainings in Vietnam and the in-service system faces a persistent challenge regarding real change in classroom practices. Yet acquiring these skills will help teachers fully establish language-rich environments for children, ensuring that all children are developing to their full potential.

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