

PROGRAMME BRIEF

Action Research on Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education
Creating Learning Opportunities for Ethnic Minority Children



Background

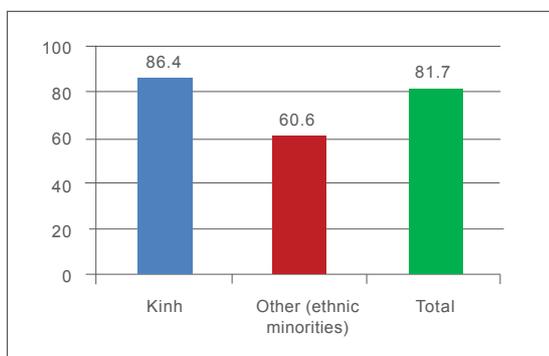
JUNE 2010

Viet Nam is an ethnically diverse society made up of 54 different ethnic groups, many of which have their own distinct language and live in remote and economically disadvantaged parts of the country. The ethnic minority population totals approximately 11 million; 13 percent of the total population of 85.8 million. The official language of instruction at school is Vietnamese and all children are taught through it. This has created a **“language barrier” for many ethnic minority children** who have a limited understanding and proficiency in Vietnamese or in some cases do not understand the language at all.

Because few teachers can communicate in local ethnic minority languages, many ethnic minority children struggle to understand their teachers and consequently cannot participate confidently in active learning. This is one of the reasons why the net primary school completion rate¹ among ethnic minority children (61 percent) is significantly lower than the corresponding rate for Kinh (86 percent)².

“If students only learn in Vietnamese,” says teacher Ly Mui Xuan of the H’mong ethnic minority group, “school is foreign to them and they often drop out. But learning in their own language from preschool is a good foundation.” At 24 years of age, and recently having graduated from teacher training college, Xuan beams with pride when she talks about taking on the Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education Action Research, her first job.

Figure 1. Net Primary School Completion Rates (%)



Source: 2006 MICS

In order for Viet Nam to achieve the Millennium Development Goal on Universal Primary Education, as well as the goals set forth in the 1991 *Law on Universalisation of Primary Education (UPE)*, and in order to maintain UPE under the 2005 Education Law, the Government has launched a number of initiatives to provide special support to disadvantaged children. One of the initiatives already proving effective after just one year of implementation is the Action Research³ on Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) being carried out by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in collaboration with UNICEF Viet Nam.

¹ Net primary completion rate (percent) = number of children (of any age) attending the last grade of primary school (excluding repeaters)/total number of children of primary school completion age (age appropriate to final grade of primary school) surveyed x 100 (source: 2006 MICS)

² Source: General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2006). *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006*.

³ Action research is a small-scale intervention based on ‘real world’ dynamics and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention. The ultimate aim of action research is to improve practice.



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Action Research on MTBBE

The MTBBE approach uses ethnic minority languages (i.e. the mother tongue of the pupils) as the main language of instruction and introduces Vietnamese as a second language for preschool and primary school 1st and 2nd grade students. It introduces Vietnamese as a language of instruction in grade 3, together with the mother tongue. Three years from grade 3 to grade 5 are a transition period. By the end of grade 5 students are expected to have developed bilingualism and biliteracy, and meet the standards of the national curriculum. The approach aims to help ethnic minority children overcome the language barrier enabling them to read and write in their mother tongue first, and then transfer these skills to learning Vietnamese.



Based on vast international experience and studies, MTBBE is considered to be one of the most effective learning models for ethnic minority children. Smalley (1994)⁴ argues that when children learn in languages other than their mother tongue, they usually "...lose two years in school before they follow well what is going on in class."

After signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in August 2007, MOET⁵ and UNICEF began implementing MTBBE Action Research in three provinces - Lao Cai, Gia Lai and Tra Vinh - with three respective ethnic minority languages, namely H'mong, J'rai and Khmer. The Action Research is designed to develop an applicable and sustainable policy for bilingual education, with practical guidelines for successful implementation by the end of 2015, based on the results of the Action Research programme.

MTBBE Action Research aims to achieve the following results:

- a detailed study design, including methodologies and assessments of ethnic minority children's learning performance;
- policymakers, education managers at all levels, principals, teachers, students and community members understand and support mother tongue-based bilingual education;
- teaching, learning, reference and advocacy materials in ethnic minority languages developed;
- a professional development programme for teachers implemented with intensive in-service support and pre-service orientation;

⁴ Smalley, W.A. (1994). *Linguistic Diversity and National Unity: Language Ecology in Thailand*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁵ Within MOET, a National Steering Committee, chaired by the Vice Minister, has been established with the participation of various departments, including the Early Childhood Education Department, Primary Education Department, Ethnic Minority Education Department and the National Institute of Educational Science. MOET's Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education is responsible for overall implementation and monitoring of the Action Research. Steering committees have also been established at the provincial and district levels in the three provinces.

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- education managers, teachers, teaching assistants, and student teachers in the Action Research programme sites understand and know how to apply mother tongue-based bilingual education methodologies in school management and classroom teaching;
- models of mother tongue-based bilingual education in selected preschools and primary schools successfully implemented and children's learning achievements measured; and
- an applicable and sustainable policy for ethnic minority languages and mother tongue-based bilingual education adopted.



MTBBE Action Research comprises three phases from 2006⁶-2015:

- i. Design and preparation (2006-2007);
- ii. Implementation (2008-2015); and
- iii. Outcomes and policy development (2015-).

Currently, the programme is in the implementation phase.

First steps

Two groups of students from pre-primary to grade 5 in each province will complete the pilot MTBBE programme by 2015. The first group, which began the programme during the 2008-09 school year, will complete grade 5 in 2014, while the second group, which began the 2009-2010 school year, will complete grade 5 in 2015.

In June 2009, the first group of 267 five-year-old pre-primary students with 3 languages, namely H'mong, J'rai and Khmer finished the first year of MTBBE in seven preschool in the provinces of Lao Cai, Gia Lai and Tra Vinh, respectively. These pupils have progressed to



⁶ The design started in 2006 based on mutual agreement between MOET and UNICEF, even before the signing of MOU in 2007.



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primary school for the 2009-2010 school year. The second group comprises approximately the same number of children as the first and entered preschool in September 2009, commencing MTBBE in the 2009-10 school year.

Progress to date

During the first steps of implementation the following results were achieved:

- i. the first year of Action Research implemented as planned and assessment of five year-olds students' language and cognitive skills in both mother tongues and Vietnamese carried out;
- ii. tools for assessment of students' language and cognitive skills developed, based on the adjusted bilingual curriculum for five-year-old pre-primary students⁷;
- iii. bilingual curricula for preschool and first term of the primary school's grade 1 developed, including textbooks and workbooks for students and a teacher's guide;
- iv. a six-module training manual featuring basic information and knowledge on MTBBE and Action Research developed and used to train teachers and education managers, as well as to inform local community members and parents about the programme;
- v. an advocacy training manual and parent education materials developed to support the programme's implementation in pilot schools; and
- vi. a number of people from all levels (national and provincial authorities and specific targeted schools) trained on Action Research, including 26 trainers, 106 teachers, and 40 education managers.

Student performance after one year of implementation

In September 2008, prior to the commencement of the MTBBE programme, an assessment of students' skills in five components in both mother tongues and Vietnamese was carried out.

Five components assessed in mother tongues:

- a. listening comprehension of spoken language;
- b. understanding simple concepts;
- c. understanding antonyms;
- d. arranging pictures and story-telling according to pictures; and
- e. recognising mother tongue alphabets.

Five components assessed in Vietnamese:

- a. listening comprehension of spoken language;
- b. knowing the names and functions of parts of the body, objects, trees and animals;

⁷ Tools were developed by the authors of the pilot materials from the Preschool Education Research Center, Viet Nam Institute of Educational Sciences.

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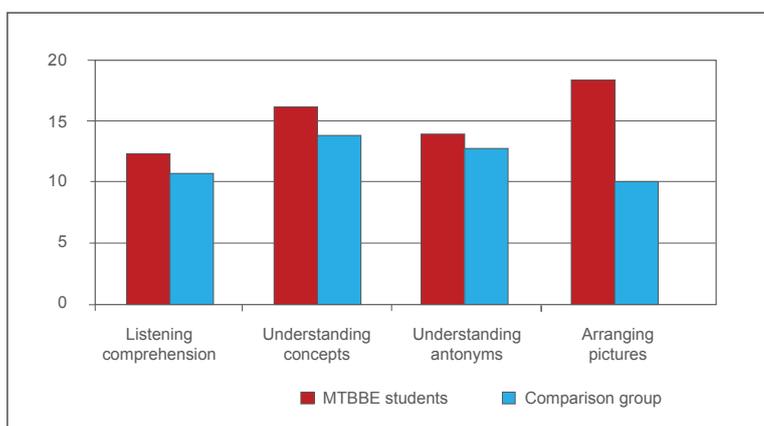


- c. implementing commands;
- d. naming people/animals and their activities; and
- e. arranging pictures in sequence.

In May 2009, the same assessment was carried out to assess the students' progress. The results found that the students had made significant progress in all five components, assessed both in mother tongues and Vietnamese. It also revealed that the students had become more confident in play and learning activities, and improved communication skills in terms of expressing emotions, answering questions and producing whole sentence answers. The students also answered questions in a more confident manner. It was also observed that the students were quick in understanding and answering questions, in identifying names and actions in pictures and in arranging pictures as instructed.

Using identical tools, a comparison group of students who did not participate in MTBBE classes was also assessed in May 2009, in the same categories with the exception of recognising mother tongue alphabets. Figure 2 shows the results of the two students groups' mother tongue proficiency.

Figure 2. Students performance - comparison between MTBBE students and non - MTBBE students in mother tongue (points, 20 maximum)



Key findings include:

- students who participated in MTBBE scored higher than the comparison group in four areas; and
- a significant difference between the two groups was identified in arranging pictures.

Figure 3 shows the assessment results of MTBBE students and comparison group students in the same five areas in Vietnamese. Again, students who participated in the MTBBE scored higher than the comparison group in all five areas, thus highlighting the overall educational strength of the MTBBE approach.

The comparison affirms that MTBBE has been effective not only in teaching ethnic minority children to develop their communication and cognitive skills, but also improving their Vietnamese language abilities.

The one-year implementation review also revealed that teachers themselves were more confident in applying MTBBE after the programme's intensive capacity building efforts. Furthermore, awareness



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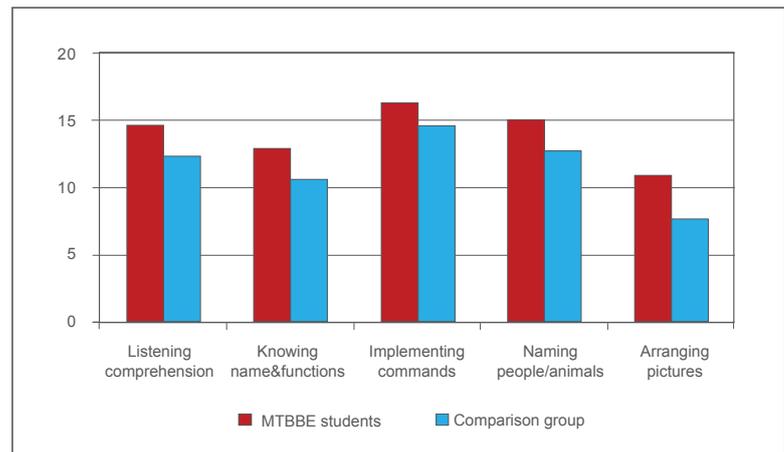
and commitment of counterparts at central and local levels on the principles of MTBBE had been increased. Participation in MTBBE by different departments within MOET, as well as collaboration between MOET departments had also been enhanced as a result of the Ministry's commitment to ensure the action research is successful.

Lessons learned

The one-year implementation review identified the following lessons learned:

- MOET's commitment and leadership has been instrumental for the smooth implementation of the MTBBE Action Research.
- Support and engagement of the local authorities has significantly contributed to the successful roll-out and implementation of the programme in the provinces. Similarly, the active participation of students, teachers and school authorities in schools targeted by the programme has also been important.
- The facilitation of internationally recognised technical assistance has been effective to respond to some of the challenges of the programme.
- The geographical coverage of the programme encompassing three provinces in three regions far from each other provides a challenge for MOET to provide timely assistance. For this type of new initiative, the assessment of the institutional capacity of the implementing partner as well as of the supporting agency should be carried out during the design process and the development of a plan to address capacity building should be part of the programme.
- Development of teaching and learning materials has been a significant challenge, due to the shortage of skilled writers who can develop materials for MTBBE. In addition, the production of quality materials that illustrate and reflect each of the three ethnic minority group's distinct culture is time-consuming. More time needs to be allocated to the development of materials in order to ensure their quality.

Figure 3. Students performance - comparison between MTBBE students and non - MTBBE students in Vietnamese (points, 20 maximum)



Next steps

Building on the lessons identified in the one-year assessment, the programme will focus on the following key interventions in 2010-2011.

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- a) Continuation of the implementation of the action research with focus on:
 - Further training of teachers on MTBBE;
 - Further development of teaching and learning materials;
 - Review and modification of the materials that have been already developed based on the experiences to date
 - Strengthening management at the national, provincial and local school levels; and
 - Systematic monitoring and evaluation
- b) Documentation of experiences and lessons learnt after 2 years of implementation of the first cohort and 1 year of implementation for the second cohort;
- c) Partnership with other organisations that support bilingual education in the country to share experiences and resources; and
- d) Strengthening MOET's leadership and management capacity, and the inter-departmental coordination committee within MOET to carry out the Action Research successfully.

“The students involved in action research are more confident compared with the students in the comparison group. The environment in the action research classroom is more child-friendly than in the non-action research classrooms,” Teacher at one of the pilot preschool in Bac Ha district of Lao Cai province.



This Brief is prepared primarily based on the Information from the *Report on One-Year Implementation of the Action Research on Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education* by the Research Center for Ethnic Minority Education, Viet Nam Institute of Educational Sciences, MOET, at the Annual Review Workshop organized in Ha Noi in July 2009.



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“J’rai is the language we speak in our family and in the village. My husband and I cannot read or write. We are so proud that H’Nga is able to study in her own language. I do not believe H’Nga would have continued going to school if the lessons had been in Vietnamese, it would have been too difficult”

Mother of six-year-old H’Nga, who is participating in the Action Research on MTBBE, Gia Lai province. Although H’Nga was absent from school for one month due to illness, she managed to return successfully to her studies.



“The use of a language that children understand allows teachers to use more active and more effective teaching methods. Supporting mastery of the first language promotes the cognitive development needed to more easily learn a second language.”

World Bank, (2005) Education Notes: In their own language... Education for All.