



The role of literary familiarization activities in bilingual education for 3–6-Year-Old children in ethnic minority areas of Vietnam

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Abstract - This article focuses on addressing the question: How can language barriers be minimized and the effectiveness of bilingual education for children aged 3–6 in ethnic minority regions be enhanced through activities that introduce children to literary works? The study combines language development theory with a practical survey of 120 teachers using questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations; data were quantitatively analyzed using mean scores based on a 3-point Likert scale. The results indicate that language barriers have the strongest impact on the psychological factors contributing to the “silent crisis” ($M = 2.55$ points) and code-mixing ($M = 2.40$ points). Meanwhile, organizing activities to introduce children to literary works faces challenges due to a scarcity of bilingual materials ($M = 2.55$ points) and teachers’ limited proficiency in minority languages ($M = 2.42$ points). To address these barriers, the study proposes a three-pronged approach: localizing bilingual digital materials, implementing flexible code-switching combined with native-speaking teaching assistants, and innovating multi-sensory interactive dialogue. The study concludes that activities introducing children to literary works linked to local cultural codes serve as the most natural and effective bridge in bilingual education. These findings provide a crucial practical foundation for administrative levels to formulate policies regarding specialized learning materials and personnel for early childhood education in highland regions.

Key Words: Bilingual education, literary works, ethnic minority children, language barriers, pedagogical approaches

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the national education system, early childhood education plays a foundational role in the comprehensive physical, cognitive, and linguistic development of children. For children in ethnic minority regions, the period from ages 3 to 6 is a pivotal stage when children begin transitioning from a purely native-language communication environment at home to a formal educational environment using Vietnamese at preschool. In reality, accessing and using a second language before the first language is fully developed causes children to experience significant linguistic and cultural shocks (Schwartz, M., & Shaul, Y., 2013). This significant language barrier has had and continues to have

many direct consequences on children’s school life: it limits their ability to communicate with teachers and peers, hinders their ability to absorb knowledge across various academic areas (cognitive, aesthetic, and physical development), and consequently reduces their self-confidence and impedes their social and community integration from an early age.

In the face of these unique challenges, modern educational trends in Vietnam and around the world are shifting strongly toward the adoption of a bilingual education model based on the mother tongue. This approach is considered the most strategic and humane solution, aligned with the psychological and physiological characteristics of children from ethnic minority groups. Bilingual education not only creates a conducive environment for children to develop their Vietnamese language skills—the core tool for communication and learning in subsequent educational levels—but also respects, preserves, and promotes the value of their mother tongue. Maintaining two languages in parallel helps children maintain a connection to their cultural roots (Schwartz, M., & Palviainen, A., 2016), fosters a sense of security and confidence, and lays a solid foundation for future multilingual thinking (Cummins, 2000).

Among the various approaches to language development for preschoolers, activities involving exposure to literary works offer unique advantages, serving as a natural “bridge” in bilingual education. The essence of literature lies in its high emotional and imaginative nature; through stories, poems, folk songs, and nursery rhymes, language ceases to be dry rules and instead comes alive, rich in rhythm and imagery. This activity creates a natural communicative context (Vygotsky, 1978), encouraging children to listen, understand, and respond voluntarily. In particular, folk literature or stories featuring local cultural elements resonate deeply with the lives of children from ethnic minority communities. When familiar cultural symbols are presented in both languages, children can easily absorb Vietnamese vocabulary and sentence structures based on their existing cognitive framework in their native language, facilitating a smooth and stress-free language transition.

Based on these reasons, this paper focuses on researching and analyzing the role of familiarizing children with literary works in bilingual education for children aged 3 to 6 in ethnic minority regions. Based on an assessment of the current situation and a clarification of the theoretical

foundation, the paper aims to propose practical pedagogical measures to enhance the quality of language development, support ethnic minority children in learning Vietnamese effectively while preserving their ethnic cultural identity.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

To achieve the stated research objectives, this study employs a combination of theoretical and empirical research methods to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the analytical results.

- Theoretical research methods: The author collects, analyzes, synthesizes, and systematizes scientific sources, including: policy documents from the Party and the State regarding education for ethnic minority communities; domestic and international research studies on mother-tongue-based bilingual education; and specialized literature on methods for introducing preschool children to literary works.

- The practical research methods include: (i) A questionnaire-based survey to assess perceptions, frequency of use, and the key advantages and challenges of applying literature to bilingual development for children. (ii) In-depth interviews with administrators and key teachers at preschool sites in highland areas to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of language barriers, the interaction between schools and families in maintaining the mother tongue, as well as their wishes and suggestions regarding bilingual literary materials. (iii) Pedagogical observation method: We directly observed and documented lessons introducing literary works (storytelling, poetry reading, and role-playing games). The observation process focused on the following criteria: children's behavioral expressions and interest levels when engaging with the works; how teachers alternated and used the two languages (Vietnamese and the mother tongue) during the lesson; and the effectiveness of visual aids.

- Data analysis method: All information collected from the field is categorized, filtered, and processed using supporting software tools.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Theoretical framework for bilingual education for preschool children

3.1.1. The concept of bilingual education

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003), bilingual education is defined as "the use of two or more languages as a medium of instruction in the education system." UNESCO emphasizes that this model typically combines the national language (or a globally prevalent language) with the learner's mother tongue to ensure equal access to knowledge and respect for cultural diversity. From the perspective of applied linguistics and early childhood education, Baker (2011) argues that bilingual education is not simply the teaching of two languages as separate subjects, but rather "an

educational system in which two languages are used to teach various subjects in the curriculum, with the aim of fostering children's comprehensive development in terms of language, cognitive, and emotional skills." Baker also points out that for children from minority groups, the most ideal bilingual model is the developmental bilingual education model, which helps children acquire a new language while enriching their native language.

Based on an analysis of the above perspectives, within the scope of this study, we define: "*Bilingual education for preschool children in ethnic minority areas is an organized pedagogical process in which the mother tongue and Vietnamese are used flexibly and systematically as tools for organizing educational activities*". This approach not only aims to help children strengthen their Vietnamese language skills to prepare for first grade but also respects and preserves their mother tongue, fosters a sense of security, and maximizes the children's cognitive potential during the "golden period" of language development.

Bilingual education in the preschool stage does not aim to force children to become fluent in both languages like native speakers, but rather seeks to facilitate a smooth language transition, helping children "lay the foundation" for parallel thinking across both linguistic systems (Bialystok, E., 2018).

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3.1.2. Characteristics of Language Acquisition in Children Aged 3–6

Psychologists and linguists have identified the period from ages 3 to 6 as the "golden period" for language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). At this age, children's brains exhibit high plasticity, with optimal abilities for imitating phonetics and sensitivity to auditory cues.

However, the language acquisition mechanisms of children aged 3–6 have the following distinctive characteristics: Children do not acquire vocabulary or syntactic structures through abstract grammatical rules, but rather through what they directly see, hear, and perceive within their own cognitive framework. Children's language develops most strongly when they are placed in real-life communication situations, role-playing games, or when they have an intrinsic need to express their emotions and desires. For children from ethnic minority groups, the phonological system, vocabulary, and cognitive structures of their first language (L1) have already been established. When exposed to Vietnamese (L2), children tend to transfer these structures or use code-mixing (Ellis, 2015). Therefore, the process of acquiring L2 requires a gentle, natural environment, avoiding imposition or overly strict correction that might cause children to develop a fear of or reluctance toward communication.

3.1.3. Characteristics of literary works familiarization activities in a bilingual context

Activities designed to familiarize children with literary works (poetry, stories, folk songs, and nursery rhymes) are not merely an art subject but a powerful tool for bilingual development due to three core characteristics:

First, literary works for preschoolers are always rich in imagery, rhythm, and color. Difficult and abstract words in Vietnamese, when incorporated into poems or stories, become associated with specific characters. The combination of captivating rhythm and vivid imagery strongly stimulates children's senses. When children's emotions are evoked (joy, sadness, love, and dislike alongside the characters), psychological barriers to a second language are automatically broken down, helping children memorize Vietnamese vocabulary naturally and sustainably.

Second, unlike typical vocabulary-building lessons, literature provides children with a "living context." Through listening to stories, discussing characters, or participating in role-playing games, children are placed in natural, highly interactive communication situations. Children learn how to use language to express their thoughts: when to use gentle words and when to speak with a strong voice. In a bilingual setting, teachers can switch languages flexibly (telling stories in the child's native language to ensure understanding, then transitioning to Vietnamese), creating a pressure-free communication environment that stimulates children's desire to speak and respond.

Folklore (fairy tales, folk songs, and nursery rhymes) and stories written for children in mountainous regions all contain the indigenous "cultural codes" of ethnic groups. For children from ethnic minority groups, images of stilt houses, terraced fields, the sound of the khèn (a traditional flute), or traditional embroidered clothing in these works are symbols that are deeply familiar in their daily lives. This cultural familiarity helps children easily grasp the content of the works without feeling alienated. When exposed to these familiar cultural values in both their native language and Vietnamese, children will quickly establish semantic connections between the two languages, fostering harmonious bilingual development grounded in respect for their cultural roots.

3.2. The current state of bilingual education for preschool children in ethnic minority areas through literary works

We conducted a survey of 120 preschool teachers currently teaching classes for 3- to 6-year-olds in the provinces of Tuyên Quang, Thái Nguyên, and Lạng Sơn—provinces with significant ethnic minority populations in Vietnam. The scale was designed with three levels corresponding to scores from 1 to 3:

Level 1 (1 point) – Minor impact: Children exhibit some barriers but can quickly self-adjust or do not disrupt learning or communication activities.

Level 2 (2 points) – Moderate impact: The child faces significant difficulties and requires active intervention and assistance from the teacher to complete the activity.

Level 3 (3 points) - Severe impact: The child is completely passive, isolated, or unable to participate in educational activities.

The average score is used to determine the overall level of impact: from 1.00 to less than 1.67: Mild impact; from 1.67 to less than 2.34: Moderate impact; from 2.34 to 3.00: Severe impact. The results of a survey of 120 teachers are summarized in Table 1:

Table -1: Current status of language barriers among ethnic minority children in preschool

Manifestations of language barriers	Level of impact			Average	Overall assessment
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3		
The child is shy, fearful, silent, or communicates only through gestures when she asks	12	30	78	2.55	Significant impact
Children tend to intersperse words from their native language into their Vietnamese sentences	18	36	66	2.40	Significant impact
The child does not understand or understands very little of the commands and instructions in Vietnamese	24	38	58	2.28	Moderate impact
Children are unable to express their personal needs (hunger, thirst, toileting, etc.) in Vietnamese	31	48	48	2.18	Moderate impact

Based on the quantitative results in the table above, psychological and communication barriers had the highest mean score (2.55 points) and were classified as having a "Strong" impact. As many as 78 out of 120 surveyed teachers confirmed that the initial language barrier created immense psychological pressure, causing children to fall into a state of "silent crisis," feeling fearful and withdrawing in response to the teacher's questions.

The phenomenon of children mixing languages also scored very high (2.40 points), falling into the "Strong Impact" category, with 66 teachers noting a severe level of impact. Children tend to impose the cognitive structures of L1 onto L2, leading to disorganized word usage. Although barriers related to understanding verbal instructions (2.28 points) and expressing personal needs (2.14 points) fall within the moderate impact range, the number of children facing difficulties at levels 2 and 3 still constitutes an overwhelming majority.

This reality confirms that without an emotionally rich and relatable medium like literature to "soften" the language transition process, children will find it very difficult to overcome this crisis and integrate into school life.

Upon examining the current state of organizing activities to introduce literary works in a bilingual approach at preschool, we observed (Table 2)

Table -2: Survey results on the current state of organizing activities to introduce literary works in a bilingual approach at preschool

Key shortcomings and challenges	Level			Average Score	Overall level of inadequacy
	Few shortcomings (1 point)	Moderate shortcoming (2 points)	Very inadequate (3 points)		
The scarcity and lack of consistency in the bilingual literary corpus	11	32	77	2.55	Very serious
Barriers related to teachers' proficiency in ethnic minority languages	15	40	65	2.42	Very serious
The teaching method is still somewhat rigid and one-sided (read the example—repeat).	26	45	49	2.19	Serious

Based on the quantitative data from the table above, along with the results of pedagogical observations of 15 activities designed to introduce children to literary works in preschool settings and in-depth interviews with teachers, we have found that these activities have not yet fully fulfilled their role as a “bilingual bridge.” As many as 84.2% of teachers reported that they rely almost entirely on textbooks and picture books from the national Early Childhood Education Curriculum. These works are mostly written purely in Vietnamese and are heavily set in urban or lowland contexts, lacking the “cultural codes” familiar to children in mountainous regions. Children must not only understand a new concept but also learn the corresponding Vietnamese vocabulary, doubling the difficulty of comprehension.

In-depth interview results show that only about 31.5% of indigenous teachers or Kinh teachers are proficient in the local language. This disparity in language proficiency—teachers are not fluent in the students’ language, and students are not fluent in the teachers’ language—makes it very difficult to switch between languages when telling stories or reading poetry. Consequently, teachers primarily rely on a mechanical “read-and-translate” method rather than creating a natural communicative context. Activities that foster imagination and emotional development, such as role-playing and creative dialogue, are reduced. Children memorize works mechanically without deeply understanding the meaning of words, leading to limited comprehension in both quality and quantity.

3.3. Pedagogical measures to enhance the effectiveness of bilingual education through activities that introduce children to literary works

Based on the existing issues analyzed and quantified in the current status section, we propose several pedagogical measures designed in a phased approach, ranging from preparing “materials” (language resources), enhancing “instructor competence” (teachers), to “improving organizational techniques” (methods).

Measure 1: Localize and compile a system of bilingual literary materials linked to the local “cultural code”

Objective: To thoroughly address the limitations and lack of relevance in the current corpus. To create a collection of relatable stories and poetry that helps children activate their existing cognitive frameworks in their first language (L1) to more easily acquire Vietnamese (L2).

Content: Collect, select, and translate local folk literature (fairy tales, folk songs, and nursery rhymes); simultaneously

adapt literary works in the standard curriculum by incorporating symbols and imagery that reflect the “cultural codes” of children in mountainous regions.

Procedure:

Step 1 (Collection and bilingual adaptation): Teachers actively collaborate with respected community members, folk artists, and parents in the village to record and transcribe the children’s stories and nursery rhymes in their ethnic language. They then translate these into Vietnamese in a bilingual side-by-side format, ensuring that the cultural essence and rhythm of the works are preserved.

Step 2 (Replacing symbols): For works in the national preschool curriculum, teachers proactively replace unfamiliar urban images with equivalent symbols from highland regions (e.g., replacing images of “high-rise buildings, trains” with “stilt houses, water buffalo, terraced fields”).

Step 3 (Designing visual learning materials): Adapt these works into large-format bilingual picture books or design a digital resource library (audiobooks, short animated videos) with QR codes. During activities, teachers have children view the illustrations while listening to the corresponding audio in both languages simultaneously, allowing them to build semantic connections on their own.

Strategy 2: Flexibly applying code-switching techniques in combination with the use of “local teaching assistants”

Objective: To address the limitations of Kinh teachers’ proficiency in ethnic minority languages. To reduce psychological pressure on children and create a safe communication environment.

Content: Use the native language (L1) as a cognitive anchor to guide, explain, and clarify the meaning of Vietnamese vocabulary and sentence structures (L2) while introducing children to literary works.

Implementation:

Step 1 (Code-switching storytelling): When introducing a new story, during the first telling, the teacher uses only the children’s native language (or plays a native-language audio recording) to ensure the children fully understand the plot, character traits, and emotional tone of the work.

Step 2 (Gradual language transition): In subsequent storytelling sessions, the teacher gradually increases the proportion of Vietnamese used. When difficult or abstract Vietnamese keywords appear, the teacher immediately uses the code-switching technique: first saying the Vietnamese word, then inserting the equivalent term in the child’s native language to explain its meaning, and finally repeating it in Vietnamese.

Step 3 (Collaboration with local teaching assistants): The school proactively arranges “teaching pairs” (Kinh teachers working with local teachers or support staff). This teaching assistant sits with the children, observes, and promptly uses L1 to support and explain to children with very weak L2 skills during discussions about the text.

Measure 3: Innovating dialogue and interaction methods based on multisensory experiential contexts

Objective: To completely eliminate one-way, rote, and imposed teaching methods. To stimulate children's intrinsic motivation to use language to express their emotions and thoughts through dynamic literary experiential activities.

Content: Design open-ended dialogue questions, organize role-playing activities, and integrate language-based movement games aligned with the rhythm of literary works.

How to do it:

Step 1 (Conversation prompted by visual context): The teacher uses visual aids (flat puppets, hand puppets, dioramas) to ask questions that stimulate thinking and emotions (e.g., "If you were Rabbit, would you let the Wolf into your house? Why?"). The teacher accepts and encourages children to respond in any form: Vietnamese, their native language, or a mix of languages. The teacher then acts as a "standardizer," repeating the child's response as a complete Vietnamese sentence and encouraging the child to repeat it.

Step 2 (Organizing role-play and character immersion): Adapt the story into short skits. The teacher guides the children in taking on the roles of the characters. The staged setting requires the children to place themselves in the characters' real-life communication situations, prompting them to actively speak in Vietnamese to interact with their fellow actors, thereby making Vietnamese a language of practical action.

Step 3 (Rhythmic Movement Games): For poetry, folk songs, and nursery rhymes, the teacher organizes activities where children read while participating in folk games and gross motor movements (clapping, stomping, hopping in rhythm). The combination of the poem's rhythm and the body's rhythmic movements helps children memorize the phonetic structure of Vietnamese in a fun, natural way without feeling constrained or forced to learn.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Through theoretical research and field surveys at preschool schools in ethnic minority regions, this study draws the following key conclusions:

Activities designed to introduce children to literary works possess outstanding characteristics in terms of imagery, emotional resonance, and natural communication. When integrated with local "cultural codes," literature serves as a seamless "bridge," helping ethnic minority children transition their thinking and develop bilingualism (native language—L1 and Vietnamese—L2) naturally, thereby minimizing school-related psychological crises.

The results of the quantitative survey clearly highlighted the children's significant language barriers, particularly shyness, selective mutism (2.55 points), and code-mixing (2.40 points). Meanwhile, the organization of literary activities faced major challenges related to the scarcity of bilingual materials (2.55 points), limitations in teachers'

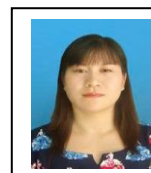
proficiency in ethnic minority languages (2.42 points), and one-sided teaching methods (2.19 points).

The proposed system of three pedagogical solutions (including: localization of learning materials; application of code-switching techniques in collaboration with local teaching assistants; and innovation in multi-sensory interactive methods) is rigorously structured according to the pedagogical model (objectives – content – implementation). These are systemic, interconnected solutions aimed at comprehensively addressing current shortcomings to enhance the quality of mother-tongue-based bilingual education.

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