

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peer-reviewed | Open Access

Echoes of Identity: Language Among Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands

Mai Hồ Xuân*

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Van Hien University, 665-667-669, Điện Biên Phủ Street, Ward 1;
District 3, Hồ Chí Minh City, Viet Nam

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 12-Oct-24

REVISED: 06-May-25

ACCEPTED: 12-May-25

PUBLISHED: 30-Jun-25

*Corresponding Author

Mai Hồ Xuân

E-mail: xuanmainam@yahoo.com

Citation: Mai Hồ Xuân (2025). Echoes of Identity: Language Among Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands. Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res. 7 (1), 60–74. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2025.v7.n1.id1289.p60>



ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study investigates how ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam use their mother tongues alongside Vietnamese, and explores the reasons behind their language choices. It also examines differences in language proficiency between generations. **Methods:** Data were collected from 882 participants between 2014 and 2016, including 252 ethnic adults and 630 students (280 high school and 350 secondary school pupils) representing seven ethnic groups: Ede, Jarai, Churu, K'ho, Bahnar, Mạ, and Mnong. That means, every year I survey 294 people, specifically: 42 people/1 ethnic; 36 adults/1 ethnic, 12 adults/1 year; 40 high school students/1 ethnic and 36 secondary school students/1 ethnic. This number is large enough to represent. The study employed comparative and contrastive methods to analyze language use patterns across age groups. **Results:** Findings reveal significant variation in the use of mother tongues and Vietnamese between older and younger generations. Older participants predominantly use their ethnic languages, while younger generations show increased use of Vietnamese. The data indicate a generational shift in language preference and proficiency. **Discussion:** The results highlight the ongoing risk of language loss among ethnic minorities due to the dominance of Vietnamese, especially among youth. This shift threatens the preservation of ethnic languages and cultural identity. The study underscores the need for targeted government policies to support and protect these minority languages. **Conclusions:** Ethnic minority languages in Vietnam's Central Highlands face challenges from generational language shifts favoring Vietnamese. Immediate and specific governmental actions are necessary to safeguard these languages and maintain cultural diversity..

Keywords: Keywords: ethnic; language ability; mother language; Vietnamese language ability..

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's Central Highlands, also known as the Highland region in central Vietnam, is characterized by a rich and unique history. The area is home to over forty distinct ethnic minority groups, including the Bahnar, Ede, Raglai, K'ho, Care, Mnong, Churu, Ma, Xedang, Hre, Katu, Khomu, Ta Oi, Xinhmun, Gie-Triêng and Rơnă. These ethnic groups are classified into two major language

families prevalent in Southeast Asia: Austroasiatic and Austronesian (or Melayopolynesian). Additionally, a third group belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, which includes languages such as Hani, Phu La, La Hu, Lo Lo, Cong and Sila. These groups primarily migrated from the mountains of Northwest Vietnam starting in the 1980s and 1990s. The region's linguistic diversity is accompanied by complex sociolinguistic dynamics, particularly the

increasing influence of Vietnamese, the national language (Phuc, 1992; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

This study aims to: (a) present a comprehensive picture of language use among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands; (b) analyze intergenerational differences in the use of mother tongues and Vietnamese; and (c) identify risks to the vitality of ethnic languages and recommend policy measures for their protection.

1. Linguistic Landscape of the Central Highlands

1.1 Linguistic Diversity

The Central Highlands of Vietnam, often referred to simply as the Highlands, possess a unique and complex historical and cultural background. This region is home to over forty ethnic minority groups, including Bahnar, Ede, Raglai, K'ho, Care, Mnong, Churu, Mạ, Xedang, Hre, Katu, Khomu, Ta Oi, Xinhmun, Gie-Triêng, and Rơnă, among others (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Phuc, 1992). These ethnic groups speak languages that primarily belong to two major language families prevalent in Southeast Asia: Austroasiatic and Austronesian (also known as Malayo-Polynesian). A third linguistic group present in the region belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family (sometimes referred to as the Tibeto-Burman family by linguists), which includes languages such as Hani, Phu La, La Hu, Lo Lo, Cong, and Sila (Institute of Linguistics, 1984). Most speakers of these Sino-Tibetan languages migrated from the mountainous Northwest of Vietnam during the 1980s and 1990s, indicating that their presence in the Central Highlands is relatively recent and that linguistic contact and interference processes are still in early stages.

It is noteworthy that three languages—Mạ, K'ho, and Churu—belong to two different language families but are geographically co-located in Lam Dong Province in the Eastern Highlands (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). This proximity provides a favorable context for comparative and contrastive linguistic analysis. Some linguistic theories propose that several languages in the region share common origins or roots; for example, Mạ and K'ho, as well as Cham (the ethnonym for the Cham people) with Raglai, Ede, and Jrai (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

Several of these languages exhibit lexical similarities, particularly in vocabulary overlap, with estimates ranging from 2.5% to 4% shared vocabulary among languages in this area. This lexical closeness has generated debates regarding their origins. For instance, ethnic groups such as Bahnar, Cham, and Chru; Chru and Raglai; or Raglai and K'ho sometimes consider one another as branches of the

same language family, though opinions differ. Vietnamese linguists generally attribute these similarities to language contact phenomena rather than genetic relationships. Consequently, it is challenging to definitively identify which languages are original, which have borrowed from others, and the directionality of such borrowings. I concur with this perspective and reject any claims that one language is a dialect or branch of another; rather, these similarities result from language interference due to close geographic and social proximity among ethnic groups.

Other hypotheses suggest relationships between Cham, Raglai, and Churu, as well as between Raglai and K'ho. When considering only semantic fields, word structure, or phonetic patterns, these hypotheses appear plausible. However, these theories lack robust scientific evidence and are therefore unconvincing.

I question these hypotheses for several reasons. First, lexical similarity in meaning or structure does not necessarily imply a genetic relationship between languages. For example, Vietnamese contains many borrowed words from Chinese, yet Vietnamese is classified within the Austroasiatic family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. Second, phonetic similarities alone are insufficient to establish linguistic relatedness, as similar phonetic shells can be found across unrelated languages worldwide.

1.2 The Phenomenon of Lexical Borrowing

As briefly mentioned above, lexical borrowing among languages in the Central Highlands is a widespread phenomenon, particularly the borrowing of Vietnamese words by ethnic minority languages. This phenomenon is especially prevalent among younger generations. In many ethnic groups, over two-thirds of the vocabulary used by young people consists of borrowed Vietnamese words. When expressing ideas for which their mother tongues lack sufficient terms, speakers often resort to Vietnamese vocabulary, even when equivalent terms exist in their native languages. This practice has led to a bilingual situation within communities.

Previous surveys indicate that the lexicon of ethnic minority languages in the Central Highlands decreases by approximately 1% to 1.5% every ten years, demonstrating a gradual loss of native vocabulary. This trend suggests that minority communities are increasingly unable to fully master their mother tongues and are unintentionally creating bilingual societies. More alarmingly, this process accelerates the disappearance of ethnic languages beyond the natural rate of language attrition.

A characteristic feature of lexical borrowing in these communities is the retention of the original Vietnamese word form, but with pronunciation adapted to the

phonetic system of the mother tongue. For example, an Ede speaker might say “Hôm nay trời nắng dữ dội” (literally “Today the sun is fiercely shining”) instead of using a native expression, or a Bahnar speaker might say “Con tôi hok giỏi” instead of the native equivalents for “học” (to study) and “giỏi” (excellent). This phenomenon is an example of negative phonetic transfer, which affects pronunciation but does not extend to grammatical structures.

Interestingly, such phonetic transfer does not occur when ethnic minorities communicate with each other in their respective languages, possibly because community members acquire these languages from early childhood, allowing for more natural phonetic integration. Linguists studying the vocabulary of ethnic languages such as Raglai have noted difficulty in determining the origin of many words, but they can clearly identify Vietnamese borrowings within the lexicon.

Generally, during the borrowing process, ethnic groups in the Central Highlands modify the phonetic shell of Vietnamese words, either raising or lowering the tone or accent, rarely preserving the original Vietnamese pronunciation intact. This reflects the imposition of native phonetic patterns onto borrowed Vietnamese vocabulary without reciprocal influence.

1.3 Threats to Languages in the Central Highlands

Languages with large speaker populations, such as Ede, Jrai, Cham, and Bahnar, face relatively slow and less immediate risks of language loss. However, languages with small populations-sometimes numbering only a few dozen or hundreds of speakers-such as Gie Trieng, Churu, and Raglai, face urgent threats of extinction.

The primary risks include systematic vocabulary loss and phonetic changes, but the most critical concern is the inability of younger generations to speak their mother tongues. The causes of these risks can be broadly categorized into three factors: the impact of language education, pressure from the dominant state language, and cultural characteristics of the communities.

1.3.1 Impact of Language Education and State Language Pressure

Language education plays a decisive role in the development and preservation of ethnic minority languages. In Vietnam, children attending school must become proficient in Vietnamese. Consequently, bilingualism becomes necessary, but Vietnamese is used more frequently and, in more contexts, than the mother tongue. This results in the mother tongue being relegated to a secondary status. As a result, younger generations often have better proficiency in Vietnamese than in their native languages, accelerating language shift and loss.

The dominance of Vietnamese as the state language further exacerbates this trend. All ethnic minorities must use Vietnamese for interethnic communication and access to education and knowledge. This reduces opportunities and time for young people, especially those working in public sectors, to use their mother tongues, causing a gradual narrowing of the functional domains of ethnic languages.

1.3.2 Cultural Factors

Cultural traits such as reticence, reluctance to communicate openly even within communities, and a tendency toward quietness limit the development of languages in the Central Highlands. Languages that exist only within community boundaries face significant challenges in expanding and developing.

1.3.3 Written Language and Script Preservation

Regarding written language, many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, including Ede, Cham, Bahnar, Raglai, K'ho, and Mạ, historically had their own scripts. Currently, however, only the Cham script remains in active use, primarily preserved in religious texts such as the Bible. Recently, the Cham script has been incorporated into school textbooks for ethnic Cham children, offering hope for its preservation.

Scripts of other ethnic minorities have been lost completely. Despite government efforts to revive these scripts, success has been limited. Thus, the Cham script remains the sole surviving traditional writing system in the Central Highlands.

Overall, both spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands face numerous risks and challenges.

1.4 Word Borrowing Phenomenon

As discussed earlier, the phenomenon of lexical borrowing among languages in the Central Highlands is widespread. This section focuses specifically on the borrowing of Vietnamese words by ethnic minority languages, examining the extent, scope, forms, and functional use of such borrowings. The incorporation of Vietnamese vocabulary into the languages of ethnic minorities is pervasive and increasingly prominent among younger generations. In several ethnic groups, over two-thirds of the vocabulary used by youth consists of borrowed Vietnamese words.

In everyday communication, when speakers find their mother tongue insufficient to express certain ideas, they resort to borrowing from Vietnamese. Notably, even when equivalent words exist in their native languages, speakers often prefer the Vietnamese terms, thereby fostering a bilingual environment within

their communities. This trend is reflected in previous surveys, which indicate a loss of approximately 1% to 1.5% of the ethnic vocabulary every decade. This decline suggests that minority communities in the Central Highlands are gradually losing proficiency in their mother tongues, inadvertently creating bilingual societies. More concerning is that the younger generation accelerates the attrition of their native languages at a rate exceeding natural language change.

The characteristics of lexical borrowing among these ethnic minorities typically involve adopting the original Vietnamese word forms but pronouncing them according to the phonological rules of their mother tongues. For example, an Ede speaker might say “Hôm nay trời nắng dữ dội” instead of an equivalent native expression meaning “It is fiercely sunny today.” Similarly, a Bahnar speaker might say “Con tôi học giỏi,” borrowing the Vietnamese words “học” (to study) and “giỏi” (very good) but adapting their pronunciation. This phenomenon exemplifies negative phonetic transfer. It is important to note that this negative transfer affects phonetics but does not extend to grammatical structures. Interestingly, this phenomenon does not occur when speakers use other ethnic minority languages, likely because community interaction from early childhood fosters native phonetic competence in those languages.

This explains why linguists studying the vocabulary of certain ethnic groups, such as the Raglai, often find many words of unclear origin alongside clearly identifiable Vietnamese borrowings. Generally, during the borrowing process, ethnic groups in the Central Highlands modify the phonetic features of Vietnamese words—either raising or lowering the tone—rarely preserving the original Vietnamese pronunciation. This reflects the imposition of native phonological patterns onto Vietnamese loanwords, without reciprocal influence.

1.5 Threats to Languages in the Central Highlands

Languages with large speaker populations, such as Ede, Jarai, Cham, and Bahnar, face relatively slow and less immediate risks of language loss. However, languages spoken by small populations—sometimes only a few dozen or hundreds of speakers—such as Gie Trieng, Churu, and Raglai, are under urgent threat of extinction.

The principal risks include systematic vocabulary loss and phonetic changes. More critically, younger generations are increasingly unable to speak their mother tongues. Several factors contribute to these risks, which are discussed below.

1.5.1 Spoken Language

Three main factors contribute to the decline of ethnic minority languages in the Central Highlands:

the impact of language education, pressure from the dominant state language, and cultural characteristics within communities.

Language education significantly influences language development nationally and among ethnic minorities. In Vietnam, children are required to acquire proficiency in Vietnamese through formal schooling. Consequently, bilingualism emerges, but the conditions favor frequent and dominant use of Vietnamese over mother tongues. This results in the gradual marginalization of ethnic languages, as younger generations become more proficient in Vietnamese than in their native languages. When these children replace their parents' generation, the mother tongue has already suffered substantial loss.

The dominance of Vietnamese as the state language further pressures ethnic minority languages. Vietnamese is essential for interethnic communication and access to knowledge, especially for young people working in public sectors. This reduces opportunities and contexts for using mother tongues, which consequently narrow in scope and functional domains.

Cultural factors within ethnic communities also limit language development. Traits such as reticence, reluctance to communicate openly—even within the community—and a preference for quietness restrict language use. As a result, ethnic languages are primarily maintained only within community boundaries, limiting their vitality and expansion. Languages confined to internal community use face significant challenges to sustainable development.

1.5.2 Written Language

Regarding written language, all ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands—such as Ede, Cham, Bahnar, Raglai, K'ho, and Mạ—historically possessed their own scripts. Currently, however, only the Cham script remains actively used. It survives mainly in religious texts, such as the Bible, and has recently been incorporated into educational materials for Cham children, offering promising prospects for preservation.

In contrast, the scripts of other ethnic groups have been lost entirely. Despite government efforts over many years to revive these writing systems, success has been limited. Thus, the Cham script stands as the sole surviving indigenous writing system in the Central Highlands.

1.5.3 Conclusion

In summary, ethnic minority languages in Vietnam's Central Highlands face significant challenges both in spoken and written forms. The widespread borrowing of Vietnamese vocabulary, generational language shifts, limited functional domains, and the loss of indigenous scripts collectively threaten the survival of these

languages. Without targeted and sustained efforts to promote bilingual education, script revitalization, and community engagement, many of these languages risk rapid decline and potential extinction.

1.6. Characteristics of the Research Subjects

1.6.1 The First Group: K'ho, Bahnar, Mạ, and Mnong

According to various sources, including the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019), the Bahnar population is approximately 227,716 individuals. They primarily reside in the provinces of Gia Lai (151,000), Kontum (60,000), Binh Dinh (18,175), Phu Yen (4,145), and Daklak (500). Since Binh Dinh and Phu Yen are coastal provinces, they are excluded from the scope of this study. The primary language spoken by this group is Bahnar, which includes several dialects such as Bahnar Jolang (considered the mainstream dialect, mainly spoken in An Khe and Kontum), Bahnar Golar, Bahnar Tolo, Bahnar Alakong, and Bahnar Krem (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Phuc, 1985; Banker, 1960). Notably, Bahnar was the first ethnic group in the Central Highlands to have a Latin-based writing system developed by the French colonial administration (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). Most Bahnar individuals are multilingual, often speaking additional local languages.

The K'ho ethnic group numbers approximately 166,112 persons (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993), with the majority concentrated in Lam Dong province (145,665 persons, representing 87.7% of the K'ho population in Vietnam). The K'ho consist of various subgroups, including K'ho Sre, K'ho Chil, K'ho Nộp, K'ho Lạch, K'ho String, and K'ho Cơ Don. Smaller K'ho populations are found in Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Dong Nai provinces, and Ho Chi Minh City, though these are relatively minor in number (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). The K'ho language is the primary language of this group and historically had a written form developed first by the French and later adapted by American linguists (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

The Mạ ethnic group comprises approximately 41,500 individuals, predominantly residing in Lam Dong province (about 40,000 persons, over 72% of the Mạ population in Vietnam), with smaller populations in Dak Nong (6,456) and Dong Nai (2,436). Minor Mạ communities also exist in Binh Phuoc and Ho Chi Minh City but in very limited numbers (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). The Mạ language is their mother tongue; however, several studies suggest that Mạ may be a dialect of K'ho (Institute of Linguistics,

1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Phuc, 1992).

The Mnong population is estimated at 102,000 persons, primarily distributed across Daklak (41,000), Dak Nong (40,000), Lam Dong (9,099), Binh Phuoc (8,599), and Quang Nam (13,685), with smaller communities scattered elsewhere (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). The Mnong language consists of several dialects, including Mnong Central (Mnong Đibri, Mnong Bunâr, Mnong Budang), Mnong East (Mnong Gar, Mnong Kuanh, Mnong Rolom), and Mnong South (Mnong Budip, Mnong Busre) (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

1.6.2 The Second Group: Ede, Jrai, and Churu

The Ede ethnic group numbers approximately 420,000 individuals, making it the second-largest indigenous population in the Central Highlands. While Ede communities exist internationally-in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, the United States, Canada, France, Finland, and Sweden-the majority reside in Vietnam, particularly in Daklak province (approximately 300,000 persons, 90.1% of the Ede population in Vietnam), as well as in Phu Yen (20,905), Dak Nong (5,271), and Khanh Hoa (3,396) (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

The Ede have several subgroups with distinct geographic distributions: Ede Kpă primarily inhabit Buon Ma Thuot city and districts such as Krong Ana, Krong Pak, and Cư Mgar; Ede Adham reside in Krong Buk, Cư Mgar, Buon Ho town, Krong Nang, and parts of Ea H'leo province; Ede Mdhur are concentrated in Mdrak district (Dak Lak) and along the Hinh River in Phu Yen province; Ede Bih, the most ancient subgroup, retains unique linguistic features; and Ede Krung mainly live in Ea H'leo and Krong Buk districts of Dak Lak (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). Despite phonetic differences, these dialects share the core Ede language (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

The Jrai (also spelled Jarai or Giarai) are an indigenous group numbering approximately 450,000 individuals, predominantly residing in Gia Lai province (about 380,000 persons, 90.5% of the Jrai population in Vietnam), with smaller populations in Kontum (20,606) and northern Dak Lak (16,129) (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). The Jrai language includes several dialects such as Jrai Chor, Jrai Mothur, Jrai Hodrung (Hobao), Jrai Tobuan, and Jrai Saudi (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). Some linguistic theories propose that Jrai is related to the Cham language family, though this remains contested (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

Churu, also known as Cado, Kodu, or P'ngong-Care, is a smaller ethnic group of approximately 20,000 individuals, mainly concentrated in Lam Dong province (18,631 persons, 96.5% of the Churu population in Vietnam), with minor populations in Ninh Thuan (521) and Ho Chi Minh City (58) (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). Churu is their primary language; many older Churu individuals are also proficient in Bahnar and Raglai languages, which belong to the first group (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Phuc, D.V.; 1985). Linguistic studies suggest a historical relationship between Churu and Cham languages (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

1.7 Language Contact, Interference, and Generational Language Proficiency in the Central Highlands

An intriguing sociolinguistic phenomenon in the Central Highlands is the mutual intelligibility and language contact among ethnic groups. For example, within the first group, K'ho speakers can communicate with Bahnar speakers using the Bahnar language with relative ease, and vice versa. Similarly, Mạ and Mnong speakers often converse in the Mnong language, with reciprocal comprehension. These interactions typically occur in daily contexts such as discussing weather, agriculture, livestock, and education. Notably, economic topics such as price fluctuations are rarely discussed in these interethnic conversations, which may reflect cultural communication norms among Central Highland ethnic minorities (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Duong, 1990; Thu, 1985).

This phenomenon results from extensive language contact and interference, leading to the creation of hybrid vocabularies, especially among younger generations who frequently use borrowed terms from neighboring languages. Older generations, having less exposure to other languages, experience more difficulty in cross-ethnic communication, which contributes to generational differences in language use and social awareness (Institute of Linguistics, 1984).

In contrast, the second group (Ede, Jrai, and Churu) exhibits limited language interference despite geographic overlap. Few individuals from these groups speak other ethnic languages fluently, but younger members generally have strong proficiency in Vietnamese. Interestingly, older Churu individuals often speak Bahnar and Raglai languages, suggesting historical multilingualism (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993). The question arises as to why first-group ethnicities demonstrate greater interethnic language

use than the second group, a topic warranting further investigation.

Among younger generations across all ethnic groups, there is a clear trend toward greater use of Vietnamese at the expense of mother tongue proficiency. Many young people lack sufficient vocabulary in their native languages to express themselves fully, leading them to incorporate Vietnamese words in daily communication. This bilingualism facilitates access to education and socio-economic development but raises concerns about the gradual erosion of ethnic languages (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

The generational divide is marked: individuals over 45 years old typically have limited Vietnamese proficiency but maintain strong command of their mother tongues and neighbouring ethnic languages. Conversely, those under 25 years old are fluent in Vietnamese but often have limited ability to use their native languages or communicate with other ethnic groups in their mother tongues. This linguistic gap results in communication challenges between generations and within communities (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

Language contact among older adults is generally restricted to practical, everyday topics such as farming activities and weather. Their communication tends to be brief, consisting mainly of questions and answers with simple sentence structures, reflecting cultural norms of concise expression. In contrast, younger individuals engage in more elaborate conversations, discussing careers, relationships, sports, and political or economic issues, reflecting broader social exposure and education. This divergence underscores the shifting linguistic landscape and cultural priorities within ethnic communities (Tue, 1992; Cậ, 1984a).

2. METHODS

2.1. Scope of Survey and Research

This section outlines the scope of the survey and research conducted for this study, detailing the rationale behind the selection of ethnic groups and participant demographics.

2.2. Ethnic Group Selection

As noted in Section 1.1, the Central Highlands region is characterized by three primary language families: Austroasiatic, Austronesian, and Sino-Tibetan. However, this study focused exclusively on the Austroasiatic and Austronesian language families. The Sino-Tibetan family was excluded for two principal reasons: first, these languages have been present in the region for only a few decades. Second, and more critically, the population

of each ethnic group within the Sino-Tibetan family, particularly within the surveyed age groups, is limited to a few dozen to a few hundred individuals. This small sample size would render the survey results statistically unreliable.

Therefore, this study surveyed the language proficiency of seven ethnic minority groups native to the region: Ede, Jarai, Churu, K'ho, Bahnar, Mạ, and Mnong. These groups were selected based on the following criteria: (a) larger population sizes compared to other local ethnic groups; (b) representation of the two major Southeast Asian language families (Austroasiatic and Austronesian), providing a comprehensive representation of the Highland linguistic landscape; and (c) long-term presence, stable livelihoods, concentrated settlements, and broad geographical distribution within the Central Highlands (Institute of Linguistics, 1984; Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993).

The Tibeto-Burman language family was not included because it met only one of the aforementioned criteria (linguistic representation), whereas the selected groups met multiple criteria, ensuring a more robust and representative sample.

2.3. Participant Demographics

The survey focused on four distinct groups to capture a range of language proficiency levels and usage patterns across generations:

- **Group 1:** Secondary and high school pupils, chosen for their comprehensive education and standardized Vietnamese language skills. This group served as a benchmark for assessing Vietnamese proficiency relative to other demographics.
- **Group 2:** Individuals aged 18–35, selected for their academic attainment, competence in their mother tongue, and active engagement with the broader community.
- **Group 3:** Individuals aged 36–45, representing a demographic less frequently exposed to routine Vietnamese usage, thereby providing a perspective on the stability of mother tongue proficiency.
- **Group 4:** Individuals over 45, among whom more than 95% primarily use their mother tongue within their community, making them ideal for assessing baseline mother tongue proficiency.

For Groups 2, 3, and 4, the survey focused specifically on farmers not affiliated with any social organization. Within each age group, four individuals (two males and two females) were selected from each ethnic group and geographical area, resulting in 36 participants per ethnic group across three areas (urban/market and two rural

locations). The total sample size for these groups was 252 individuals (252 survey forms).

Pupil selection did not prioritize gender balance due to demographic disparities across ethnic groups. Surveys were conducted in two locations (schools): one rural and one urban boarding school (each province in the Highland region has one boarding school).

• High School Pupils:

- Rural school: 5 pupils/ethnic group/grade x 3 grades = 15 pupils x 7 ethnic groups = 105 pupils (+35 Kinh pupils for comparison).
- Boarding school: 5 pupils/ethnic group/grade x 3 grades = 15 pupils x 7 ethnic groups = 105 pupils (+35 Kinh pupils for comparison).
- Total: 210 pupils + 70 Kinh pupils (for comparison) = 280 pupils.

• Secondary School Pupils:

- Rural school: 5 pupils/ethnic group/grade x 4 grades = 20 pupils x 7 ethnic groups = 140 pupils.
- Boarding school: 5 pupils/ethnic group/grade x 4 grades = 20 pupils x 7 ethnic groups = 140 pupils.
- Total: 280 pupils + 70 Kinh pupils (for comparison) = 350 pupils.

Pupils were selected randomly. The survey assessed writing skills through sentence construction and essay composition tasks. Specific survey questions and prompts are detailed in the results table (**Table 3a. and Table 3.b**).

2.4. Temporal Scope

This study presents findings from surveys conducted between 2014 and 2016. Data collection from pupils occurred exclusively during the second semester of the 2014, 2015, and 2016 academic years. This period was chosen to coincide with semester examinations, ensuring that pupils had recently reviewed and consolidated their knowledge of subjects, including Vietnamese, thus providing an accurate assessment of their Vietnamese language proficiency.

2.5. Spatial Scope

The spatial scope of this study encompassed five provinces in the Central Highlands: Kontum, Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, and Lâm Đồng.

- **Pupils:** Surveys were conducted at two types of schools: a boarding school and a regular school.
- **Adult Participants:** Surveys were conducted in both urban and rural areas characterized by significant ethnic minority populations. Specifically:

- Kontum Province: Bahnar ethnic group, including Kontum city and Đắk Hà district.
- Gia Lai Province: Jrai ethnic group, including Pleiku city and Chư Sê district.
- Đắk Lắk Province: Êđê ethnic group, including Buôn Mê Thuột city and Krongbuk district.
- Đắk Nông Province: Mnông ethnic group, including Đắk Min town and Đắk Glong district.
- Lâm Đồng Province: Mạ, Churu, and K'ho ethnic groups, including Đà Lạt city and Đơn Dương district.

2.6. Research Purpose and Questions

2.7 Background and Rationale

This study examines the linguistic reality of ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands, where communities must navigate between their mother tongues and Vietnamese, the official state language. The proficiency levels in Vietnamese significantly impact these communities' educational outcomes, social integration, and access to public services. Simultaneously, the maintenance of ethnic languages faces challenges across generations, raising concerns about cultural preservation and identity.

2.8 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Assess the current status of Vietnamese language proficiency among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands
2. Identify factors influencing language acquisition and maintenance patterns
3. Examine intergenerational differences in both Vietnamese and mother tongue usage
4. Analyze the educational implications of language proficiency gaps
5. Develop recommendations for language policy and educational interventions

2.9 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the current patterns of Vietnamese language proficiency among ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands?
2. What factors contribute to disparities in Vietnamese language acquisition among different ethnic groups?
3. How do proficiency levels in Vietnamese and mother tongues differ across generations within the same ethnic communities?
4. What are the educational implications of these language proficiency patterns?

5. What strategies might effectively support both Vietnamese language acquisition and mother tongue preservation?

3. Significance

The findings from this research will contribute significantly to educational policy development, particularly in designing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogical approaches for ethnic minority students. Additionally, the results will inform social development initiatives and language preservation efforts in the Central Highlands region, supporting both integration and cultural identity maintenance.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. General Approach

This study adopts a multi-disciplinary and multi-approach methodology, integrating perspectives from language and culture, language and sociology, language and geography, language and psychology, language and religion, language and belief systems, as well as language and educational psychology. Rather than addressing these relationships in isolation, the study examines how they intersect with key linguistic phenomena, such as lexical borrowing.

Several research questions guided this inquiry: Why do ethnic minority speakers borrow words from Vietnamese when equivalent terms exist in their mother tongues? How does ethnic minority culture influence language use? Why do ethnic minority individuals tend to express themselves succinctly, often using short sentences and limited verbal communication? Why are older ethnic minority members proficient in neighbouring minority languages but reluctant to adopt Vietnamese? Conversely, why do younger generations demonstrate greater proficiency in Vietnamese than in their mother tongues, frequently incorporating Vietnamese vocabulary even when their native languages remain in use? These questions collectively form the foundation of the research methodology employed in this article.

4.2. Specialized Methods

4.2.1. Linguistic Assessment Framework

A central methodological challenge was determining appropriate standards for measuring and evaluating individual and community language proficiency. Globally recognized frameworks were reviewed to assess their applicability and reliability for this study.

Primarily, this research relied on the "Language Ability Framework with Six Proficiency Levels for Vietnam," issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (2019), and the Common European Framework of Reference

for Languages (CEFR). However, both frameworks have limitations in this context.

First, the CEFR is designed to assess foreign learners of European languages and does not evaluate Vietnamese language proficiency. Second, CEFR targets learners who study a foreign language as an additional language, whereas the participants in this study are ethnic minorities required to learn Vietnamese as the national language. Third, CEFR assessments typically require certification by local authorities, which is not applicable in this context.

Despite these limitations, CEFR was referenced for its assessment methods-particularly its focus on four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), proficiency levels, linguistic components (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar), and assessment formats (written tests, oral interviews).

Similarly, the Vietnamese “Language Ability Framework with Six Proficiency Levels” was consulted as a simulated adaptation of CEFR. Although this framework is officially recognized in Vietnam, it is primarily designed for assessing Vietnamese as a foreign language, not for evaluating the Vietnamese proficiency of ethnic minority learners whose native language differs. Therefore, this framework was used only as a partial reference.

4.2.2. Linguistic Methods

The study employed descriptive linguistic methods alongside comparative and contrastive analyses. Descriptive methods were applied primarily to survey data from pupils, focusing on semantic analysis and textual examination. The comparative-contrastive method was the principal approach, used to contrast language proficiency and usage patterns among ethnic minority pupils in the Central Highlands with educational program requirements, as well as to compare Vietnamese language proficiency between ethnic minority and Kinh pupils, and to analyze differences between mother tongues and Vietnamese.

I think a general approach can answer the reason why the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands borrowing language, especially Vietnamese. However, this method cannot answer everything, explain everything. Meanwhile, the specialized approach can only solve linguistic, i.e. internal, so it cannot satisfy the problems raised.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The research employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Primary data collection involved several complementary methods:

First, I collected comprehensive data through systematic observation, structured interviews, photographic documentation, and analysis of academic performance records of ethnic minority students at boarding schools. The research design incorporated both strategic and in-depth qualitative interviews. Language proficiency was assessed by analyzing language errors among ethnic minority pupils compared to their Kinh classmates in the same grade, establishing a comparative baseline. Similar comparative assessments were conducted to evaluate mother tongue proficiency.

For the remaining three participant groups, data collection proceeded through structured questionnaires supplemented by strategic and qualitative interviews. A comparative analysis of Vietnamese language ability versus mother tongue proficiency was conducted to quantify and assess linguistic competence gaps.

The research framework was informed by established language ability assessment models and official government documentation regarding Vietnamese language education and universal language policies for ethnic minorities. Provincial Department of Education and Training reports provided additional contextual data for comparative analysis of Vietnamese language teaching and learning outcomes among ethnic minority pupils.

Following data collection, all information was systematically classified and processed using SPSS software for statistical analysis. This facilitated quantitative analysis and descriptive statistics, providing precise numerical data to support subsequent analytical processes.

How to do on SPSS: SPSS software is designed to include variables (from 0% to 100%). Based on the answer results (yes-no; good-fair-average-under average) of each subject (age, ethnic, education, gender); when these numbers coincide with the number of people surveyed (882 people), the results are considered valid.

6.2. Sampling and Ethical Considerations

Participant selection for all four research groups followed purposive sampling techniques as outlined in section 3.1. Individual questioning was conducted by trained research associates using smartphone audio recording for accuracy. For literate participants, questionnaires were administered with appropriate guidance for completion. For non-literate participants, research associates provided comprehensive preliminary instructions, clearly articulating the research purpose and intended use of survey data.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed; after being informed of the research objectives, participants who declined participation were respectfully excluded,

and additional participants were recruited to maintain the target sample size (252 survey forms, as specified in section 3.2). All collected data underwent rigorous verification and validation procedures before analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability of conclusions.

The questionnaire instrument incorporated both qualitative and quantitative items to capture the full spectrum of language use patterns and proficiency levels.

3. RESULTS

The comparative indicates that there are differences on language ability between generations, gender, age, condition for live, especially education level and impact of living environment. From this, the government must find the ways to protect ethnic languages but must improve Vietnamese language at those communities.

3. Survey Questions and Results

3.1 Qualitative Questions

3.1.1 Interviews with Farmers (Groups of 2, 3, and 4)

Five qualitative questions were posed in random interviews to 15 farmers from the three groups mentioned above, focusing on their attitudes toward their mother tongue:

1. **What is your reaction to the decline of your children's proficiency in their mother tongue compared to their Vietnamese?**
 - Sad: 13 respondents (86.7%)
 - Indifferent: 2 respondents (13.3%)
 - No opinion: 0 respondents (0%)
2. **How do you perceive your children's frequent use of Vietnamese in sentences while their mother tongue is still spoken?**
 - Sad: 2 respondents (13.3%)
 - Indifferent: 7 respondents (46.7%)
 - No opinion: 8 respondents (53.3%)
3. **Do you believe that the current state of your children's mother tongue use could lead to the loss or extinction of your ethnic language in the future?**
 - Possibly: 3 respondents (20%)
 - No concern: 9 respondents (60%)
 - No opinion: 3 respondents (20%)
4. **In your opinion, how can the mother tongue be preserved?**
 - By teaching children their mother tongue: 5 respondents (33.3%)
 - No opinion: 10 respondents (66.7%)
5. **Within your family, do you encourage or require your children to speak the ethnic language?**
 - Yes: 8 respondents (53.3%)

- Occasionally: 5 respondents (33.3%)
- Never: 2 respondents (13.3%)

3.1.2 Interviews with Pupils

Five qualitative questions were asked in random interviews with 15 secondary and high school pupils regarding their attitudes toward their mother tongue:

1. **Which language do you prefer to speak: Vietnamese or your mother tongue?**
 - Mother tongue: 6 respondents (40%)
 - Vietnamese: 8 respondents (53.3%)
 - No opinion: 1 respondent (6.6%)
2. **Which language do you speak better: your mother tongue or Vietnamese?**
 - Mother tongue: 7 respondents (46.7%)
 - Vietnamese: 8 respondents (53.3%)
 - Both equally: 0 respondents (0%)
3. **Which language is easier to learn: Vietnamese or English?**
 - Vietnamese: 15 respondents (100%)
 - English: 0 respondents (0%)
 - No opinion: 0 respondents (0%)
4. **If given a choice, would you prefer to learn English or your mother tongue?**
 - Mother tongue: 4 respondents (26.7%)
 - English: 2 respondents (13.3%)
 - Both: 3 respondents (20%)
 - No opinion: 6 respondents (40%)
5. **At home, do you speak your mother tongue more often than Vietnamese?**
 - Mother tongue: 5 respondents (33.3%)
 - Vietnamese: 5 respondents (33.3%)
 - Both equally: 5 respondents (33.3%)

3.2 Quantitative Questions

Survey Question 1: *Which language do you speak better: your mother tongue or Vietnamese (Kinh)?*

The table below presents the number of pupils at boarding schools and individuals living in urban areas who reported greater proficiency in Vietnamese (Kinh) compared to their mother tongue.

This section provides a detailed overview of participants' language preferences, attitudes, and self-assessed proficiencies, highlighting generational and contextual differences in language use.

4. DISCUSSION

Comment 1:

- People (including pupils and others) living in urban areas use Vietnamese more proficiently.

Table 1a. Proficiency in Vietnamese (Kinh) of boarding school compared to their mother tongue.

Object	Gender	Ethnic													
		Êđê		Churu		Jrai		Bahnar		Mnông		Mạ		K'ho	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Secondary school		13	65%	11	55%	13	65%	11	55%	14	70%	10	50%	12	60%
High school		20	100%	15	75%	17	85%	20	100%	20	100%	13	75%	16	80%
Group 2 (18-35 years old)	Male	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%
	Female	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%
Group 3 (36-45 years old)	Male	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Female	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Group 4 (over 45 years old)	Male	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%
	Female	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 1b: Number of pupils in groups 2, 3, and 4 in rural areas who answered 'Better in Vietnamese (Kinh).

Object	Gender	Ethnic													
		Êđê		Churu		Jrai		Bahnar		Mnông		Mạ		K'ho	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Secondary school		10	50%	7	35%	6	30%	10	50%	8	40%	6	30%	7	35%
High school		11	55%	11	55%	16	80%	13	65%	6	30%	18	90%	10	50%
Group 2 (18-35 years old)	Male	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Female	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Group 3 (36-45 years old)	Male	0	0%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Female	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Group 4 (over 45 years old)	Male	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Female	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Source: Author, 2025

Table 2a. The number of pupils often use their mother tongue.

Object	Ethnic													
	Êđê		Churu		Jrai		Bahnar		Mnông		Mạ		K'ho	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Secondary school	12	60%	13	65%	13	65%	10	50%	12	60%	13	65%	11	55%
High school	15	75%	20	100%	16	80%	14	70%	20	100%	18	90%	16	80%

Source: Author, 2025

- Group 1 is more cohesive than the other three groups, and although they are at a higher grade level, their use of their mother tongue is limited.
- Group 2 uses their mother tongue less frequently than Groups 3 and 4.
- Group 4 demonstrates very limited proficiency in Vietnamese. However, as will be shown in the results of Survey 5b, this group also does not use their mother tongue effectively.

Survey 2 (for pupils):

Survey Question 3: Why did you use the Vietnamese language to communicate with your ethnic friends when all of you were in the same room? The results are:

Comment 2:

Based on the results of Surveys 2 and 3, even in the most favorable conditions (i.e., when interacting only with members of their own ethnic group), ethnic minority pupils are not able to fully use their mother tongue due to a lack of sufficient vocabulary.

Survey Question 4:

The question asked was: "Can you use Vietnamese letters to write the names of ethnic minority items found in your room?"

The results are as follows:

Survey Question 5a

I analyzed errors from 280 Vietnamese language tests taken by secondary school pupils and 210 tests taken

Table 2b. The reason boarding school use the Vietnamese language.

Contents	Secondary school		High school	
<i>Do not know how to express the ideas (/have no enough words)</i>	280 pupils	100%	210 pupils	100%
<i>Other reasons (do not like, fear of others know the content of communication ...)</i>	83 pupils	29,6%	202 pupils	96,1%

Source: Author, 2025

Table 3a. An ability on use Vietnamese letters to write the names of ethnic minority

Object	Yes		No	
<i>Secondary school</i>	11/280 pupils	3,9%	269 pupils	96,1%
<i>High school</i>	15/210 pupils	7,1%	195 pupils	92,9%

Source: Author, 2025

Table 3b. Compare the results

• **Secondary school:**

Types of errors	Ethnic (ethnic pupils' error/Kinh's)						
	Êđê /Kinh	Churu /Kinh	Jrai /Kinh	Bahnar /Kinh	Mnông /Kinh	Mạ /Kinh	K'ho /Kinh
<i>Express</i>	18/12	20/14	17/11	18/15	19/9	19/8	16/8
<i>Grammar</i>	14/9	15/7	11/7	14/9	14/8	11/11	9/8
<i>spelling/pronounce</i>	12/4	14/4	16/13	15/5	11/4	10/5	12/4
<i>Use words</i>	8/6	9/4	7/3	8/5	9/6	8/5	9/7

* **High school**

Types of error	Ethnic (ethnic pupils' error/Kinh's)						
	Êđê /Kinh	Churu /Kinh	Jrai /Kinh	Bahnar /Kinh	Mnông /Kinh	Mạ/Kinh	K'ho/Kinh
<i>Express</i>	7/2	9/2	5/4	5/5	4/4	6/0	8/1
<i>Grammar</i>	5/5	4/3	4/4	6/4	4/2	5/3	6/4
<i>spelling/pronounce</i>	2/	2/2	3/2	4/3	3/2	1/1	1/1
<i>Use words</i>	6/6	6/6	5/2	4/3	3/1	6/2	4/1

Source: Author, 2025

by high school pupils, comparing the results with those from equivalent tests administered to Kinh students. The findings are as follows:

Comment 3:

Based on the results from Surveys 1, 2, and 3, it would be logical to expect that all pupils from ethnic minority groups in the Highlands would have a fairly good command of Vietnamese. However, the findings revealed the opposite.

Moreover, their proficiency in their mother tongue was also found to be insufficient. (III)

Survey Question 5b:

5.b1. (Interviews with four farmers—one from each ethnic group in rural areas, regardless of gender)

Participants were asked: "Have you ever attended ceremonies or community activities in your village? Did you fully understand their meanings?"

The results are as follows:

Comment 4: Most ethnic minority individuals living in rural areas did not fully understand the content of community activities. This was largely because the topics discussed in these meetings were often practical, modern, and closely related to contemporary life. However, older participants often lacked the vocabulary necessary to fully comprehend or articulate these topics. (This can be compared with the results presented below.)

The following are the results from surveys conducted in urban areas.

Comment 5:

There was a notable difference between ethnic minority individuals living in urban versus rural areas in terms of their understanding of community activities. Overall, ethnic minorities residing in urban areas demonstrated a higher level of comprehension compared

Table 4a. Interviews resultGroup 2 (18-35 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	2	2	1	1	1	0
A half	2	2	2	2	2	2
Under a half	0	0	1	1	1	2

Group 3 (36-45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	0	0	1	1	0	0
A half	3	3	2	2	2	2
Under a half	1	1	1	1	2	2

Group 4 (over 45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	0	0	0	0	0	0
A half	2	1	1	0	0	0
Under a half	2	3	3	4	4	4

Source: Author, 2025

Table 4b. Older participants knowledge the content of community activitiesGroup 2 (18-35 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	3	3	3	3
A half	0	0	1	1	1	1
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 3 (36-45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	4	4	3	3
A half	0	0	0	0	1	1
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 4 (over 45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	4	4	4	4
A half	0	0	0	0	0	0
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Author, 2025

to those in rural settings (see comparison with the results above).

5.b2 (Interview with 4 farmers (1 ethnic minority group, rural area; gender not specified):

Survey Question: “Have you often attended Kinh ceremonies or activities? If so, did you understand the meaning of these ceremonies?”

Table 5: Watching television news and understandGroup 2 (18-35 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	3	3	3	2	2
A half	0	1	1	1	2	2
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 3 (36-45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	2	3	3	2	2	2
A half	2	1	1	2	2	2
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 4 (over 45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	2	1	2	2	2	2
A half	2	2	1	2	2	1
Under a half	0	1	1	0	0	1

Source: Author, 2025

Table 6: The results of the survey conducted in urban areasGroup 2 (18-35 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	4	4	4	4
A half	0	0	0	0	0	0
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 3 (36-45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	4	4	4	4
A half	0	0	0	0	0	0
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group 4 (over 45 years old)

Degree of Understanding	Êđê	Churu	Jrai	Bahnar	Mnông	Mạ
All	4	4	4	4	4	4
A half	0	0	0	0	0	0
Under a half	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Author, 2025

Result: 100% of respondents answered “No,” citing that they “did not understand anything.”

5.b3. (Interview with 4 farmers (1 ethnic minority group, rural area; gender not specified):

Survey Question: “Have you ever watched television news programs in Vietnamese? If yes, did you understand the content?”

Result:

The data presented below summarizes findings from surveys conducted in rural areas.

The following presents the results of the survey conducted in urban areas.

Comment 6:

- Survey 5b indicated that individuals aged 18 to over 45, both male and female, from seven ethnic minority groups in the Highlands demonstrated very limited proficiency in both Vietnamese and their respective mother tongues. This suggests that they are unable to effectively use language as a tool for community development or to access and utilize general or scientific knowledge (see IV).
- Based on observations (I), (II), (III), and (IV), I offer the following comments:
 - The majority of ethnic minority individuals in the Highlands exhibited limited proficiency in both Vietnamese and their native languages.
 - There is a significant disparity in language ability between different age groups, especially between group 4 (individuals over 45 years old) and group 1 (pupils).
 - The transmission of knowledge and experience between generations within these ethnic communities is severely hindered, contributing to the erosion of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage.
 - A notable difference in language proficiency was observed between individuals living in rural areas and those in urban areas.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals several critical findings regarding the language abilities and intergenerational language dynamics among ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

First, the overall language proficiency of most ethnic minority groups, especially among the younger generation, is notably limited. Young people in these communities generally exhibit weak command of both their mother tongues and Vietnamese, which constrains their linguistic competence (Cận, 1984a; Institute of Linguistics, 1984).

Second, there exists a significant generational gap in linguistic ability between the youth and their parents. This disparity often results in communication difficulties within families and communities, potentially leading to social conflicts and weakening cultural cohesion (Tue, 1992; Thư, 1985).

Third, although pupils tend to have the highest proficiency in Vietnamese compared to other groups,

their competence remains at an average level. Consequently, their ability to use Vietnamese effectively as a medium for acquiring knowledge and engaging in communication is limited. This limitation poses particular challenges in academic contexts, where insufficient language mastery hinders the absorption of scientific and technical information (Liều, 2014; Ngọc, 1992).

Finally, the Vietnamese government is urged to implement policies aimed at protecting and revitalizing ethnic minority languages. Without timely and effective intervention, many minority languages in the Central Highlands face the risk of extinction within the coming decades (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Phúc, 1985a).

The impact of this article is very specific: the government is forced to have appropriate policies aimed at practical reform: changing a method of teaching and learning language and changing a programmes for ethnic minority pupils, changing teachers' methods and their attitudes, etc.

In the future, I will continue researching the languages of ethnic minorities in this area. First, I will study the extent of Vietnamese and English influence on these minority languages, particularly among the younger generation. Second, I will examine the relationship between the Êđê language (spoken in the highlands) and one of the Austronesian languages.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the editors and editorial staff of JHSSR for their assistance during publication period.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Hồ Xuân Mai was born in Cambodia in 1967. He earned his B.A. from the University of Ho Chi Minh in 1991, his M.A. from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University (Ho Chi Minh City) in 1999, and his Ph.D. from the Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, in 2007.



affiliated with the Graduate Department of Linguistics at the Southern Institute of Social Sciences. As of 2025, he is serving as a Professor of Linguistics at Văn Hiến University. His primary research interests include linguistics and the interrelationship between language and culture. He is also a member of the Institute of Linguistics, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Dr. Hồ Xuân Mai

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Van Hien University of Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

Email: xuanmainam@yahoo.com

He began his teaching career in secondary education in Đồng Tháp, Vietnam, in 1991. Since 2007, he has been