Programme Brief

Action Research on Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education:
Achieving Quality, Equitable Education.

1. BACKGROUND

Education in Viet Nam continues to improve in terms of access, retention and completion rates of students in basic education. However, disparities still remain with several groups underperforming, particularly among those from poor, remote areas and most often those from ethnic minority groups who comprise approximately 13 per cent of the total population. The literacy rate among ethnic minorities is 90 per cent as compared to that of the Kinh majority of 96 per cent. Within the education system, striking disparities are evidenced in terms of learning outcomes between Kinh and ethnic minorities in Vietnamese and Mathematics (Table 1). The Government is now focusing on ensuring the provision of quality education that is relevant to learners. One of the main challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the classroom is the language barrier due to Vietnamese being the official language of instruction, which prevents those who do not speak the language from fully engaging in learning.

Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) approaches have been proven internationally to support ethnic minority education. According to the World Bank, by engaging students in learning in their first language, positive results for ethnic minority students’ learning and for the education sector are shown in terms of increased

The State shall enable ethnic minority people to learn their spoken and written languages in order to preserve and develop their ethnic cultural identity...


Table 1: Disparities in learning outcomes in Primary Grade 5 Vietnamese and Mathematics by percentage

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vietnamese *</th>
<th>Mathematics **</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Ethnic Minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching standards</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near standards</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below standards</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For Vietnamese: 23 to 40 points = reaching standards, 19 - 23 points near standards, 0 - 19 points below standard  
**For Mathematics 25 to 40 points = reaching standards, 20 - 25 points near standards, 0 - 20 points below standard


access and equity, improved learning outcomes, reduced repetition and dropout rates, sociocultural benefits and lower overall costs. The use of local languages also ensures that the knowledge children bring to school is used as a basis for further learning. Education for ethnic minority students in their mother tongues is an effective step in overcoming existing and growing disparities in Viet Nam and is a means to ensure quality, inclusive and equitable education for all.

To support ethnic minority students in Viet Nam to have access to quality learning opportunities, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has been undertaking Action Research on MTBBE with the support of UNICEF since 2008 in three provinces - Lao Cai, Gia Lai and Tra Vinh - with three respective ethnic minority languages, namely Mong, Jrai and Khmer. Action Research on MTBBEE is currently in its third year of implementation.

2. ACTION RESEARCH ON MTBBE

2.1. Overall Objectives and Expected Results:

The objectives of the Action Research are to:

- Implement a valid and feasible design of bilingual education in ethnic minority languages and Vietnamese in pre-school and primary schools; and
- Contribute to the development of policies and practices, including legal frameworks, that will promote the use and development of ethnic minority languages as a means for improving access, quality and equity of education and other social services

MTBBE Action Research aims to achieve the following results:

- A detailed study design including methodology and assessment of children’s learning outcomes;
- Understanding and support for MTBBE on the part of policymakers, education managers, education professionals, and local communities;
- The development of appropriate teaching, learning and advocacy materials in ethnic minority languages;
- Professional development for teachers through pre-service orientation and ongoing in-service support;
- Understanding of Action Research and MTBBE methodology on the part of education managers, teachers, teaching assistants and student teachers;
- Successful implementation of MTBBE measured through assessment of children’s improved learning outcomes;
- A contextually-relevant and sustainable policy for ethnic minority language use and MTBBE education developed.

The Action Research MTBBE Approach in Viet Nam:

- **Pre-school to Primary Grade 2:** Mother tongues used as the language of instruction with Vietnamese taught as a subject.
- **Grade 3 to Grade 5:** Vietnamese is introduced along with mother tongues as a language of instruction
- **Grade 5 onwards:** Students have developed bilingualism and biliteracy and overcome the language barrier

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2 The World Bank (2005) In their own language-Education for
3 a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the MOET and UNICEF in August 2007 on the Action Research.
3. PROGRESS TO DATE 2008-2010:

3.1 General achievements during the implementation period 2008-2010 include:

- The development of curricula for pre-school and primary Grades 1 to 5 with education experts and local community participation.
- Teaching and learning materials for preschool and grades 1 and 2 produced in each of the three ethnic minority languages of Mong, Jrai and Khmer.
- 163 preschool and primary teachers and education managers in three provinces received training on mother tongue literacy.
- Regular teacher training workshops involving 149 teachers and education managers were conducted to improve awareness on MTBBE methodology including the MTBBE approach, child-centred teaching methodologies and training on the creation of teaching and learning aids using local materials.
- 149 teachers and education managers from the national, provincial and district levels of the education sector trained on the principles of Action Research and bilingual methodology in order for the project to be implemented effectively.

3.2 Results from the second year of implementation of MTBBE during the 2009-2010 School Year

3.2.1 Primary Grade 1 Academic Performance of Cohort 1

Assessments were carried out in three areas: Mother Tongues, Vietnamese and Mathematics for Grade 1 MTBBE students after the 2009-2010 school year, in each of the three provinces. The assessments were undertaken independently by the Primary Education Department. For Mother Tongues, students were assessed in both oral and written tests. For Vietnamese, as students had yet to learn reading and writing skills, an oral assessment was undertaken. The mathematics assessment was carried out in each pilot school and for the purpose of comparison one group of non-MTBBE students was assessed in each school. As the mathematics MTBBE curriculum is identical to the national one, it is a clear means...
of assessing the effectiveness of the MTBBE approach. Assessments were conducted in the areas of numeracy and calculation, geometric factors, quantity and solving mathematics problems in narrative form.

In terms of languages, students performed very well in both Mother Tongues and Vietnamese assessments, with 89 per cent of students meeting or surpassing the requirements in Vietnamese and 85 per cent achieving the same in Mother Tongue.

For mathematics, Table 2 outlines the combined results of the assessment from each of the three provinces. 68 per cent of MTBBE students achieved the level of 'excellent' as compared to only 28 percent of non-MTBBE students. It can be seen that almost all of the MTBBE students' scores met or surpassed the standards (combining the three levels of excellent, very good and good).

No MTBBE students failed the mathematics assessment whereas 10 per cent of non-MTBBE students failed.

These sharp differences between the two groups clearly indicate that the MTBBE approach has been instrumental in preparing the students to achieve better learning outcomes.

3.2.2 Pre-school Academic Performance of Cohort 2

The second cohort of pre-school students was assessed in both Mother Tongues and Vietnamese. For the purpose of comparison one class of students not participating in the Action Research in each of the same schools also selected for assessment. Assessments were undertaken by the Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education (RCEME) and involved oral assessments of students in both individual and group settings.

In Mother Tongues, three areas were assessed: listening comprehension, understanding concepts and understanding antonyms.

- In listening comprehension out of a highest possible score of 20 MTBBE students scored 16 while non- MTBBE students scored 13;
- In understanding concepts MTBBE students scored 17 out of 20 while non-MTBBE students scored 13 and;
- In understanding antonyms MTBBE students scored 16 out of 20 while non-MTBBE students scored 12.

These results are consistent with those from cohort 1 in 2008 - 2009 where MTBBE students out performed Non - MTBBE students in every area assessed.

In Table 2: Primary Grade 1 Mathematics Assessment Results by Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level Achieved</th>
<th>MTBBE Students</th>
<th>non-MTBBE Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent (86-100%)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good (66-85%)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good (50-65%)</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair (30-49%)</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail (0-29%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two cohorts of students have been involved in the Action Research, as follows:

1. The first cohort comprising of 262 students in 13 classes in 7 preschools commenced pre-school in the 2008-2009 school year, entered 14 classes in 8 primary schools in Grade 1 in the 2009-2010 school year and are currently in Primary Grade 2 as of the academic year 2010-2011.

2. The second cohort of 274 students in 13 classes in 7 preschools commenced pre-school in the 2009-2010 school year and have now entered 14 classes in 8 primary schools in Grade 1 for the academic year 2010 -2011.

The first and second cohorts are due to complete Grade 5 of primary school in 2014 and 2015, respectively.
For Vietnamese, both MTBBE and non-MTBBE students were assessed in five areas. As shown in Figure 1, MTBBE students performed dramatically better in all areas assessed, scoring the highest in listening comprehension with 17 out of a possible 20 as compared to non-MTBBE students’ score of 12. A significant difference is also seen in the areas of implementing commands and arranging pictures based on stories where MTBBE students scored 14 and 13 respectively, as compared to non-MTBBE students’ scores of 9 and 8.

These results for Vietnamese are consistent with those from the first cohort of MTBBE students assessed in 2008-2009 and clearly indicate the positive effect the MTBBE approach has on learning outcomes for ethnic minority students.

3.2.3 Voices from Schools and Local Communities

During the implementation period of 2008-2010, positive feedback was provided by children, teachers, education managers, parents and the wider local communities. For teachers and education managers, the opportunity for professional development on MTBBE approaches has been beneficial and given them increased confidence in their teaching abilities. In terms of education outcomes, teachers, principals and education managers have pointed to the improved performance of students in their ability to understand concepts and speak more confidently in class on a variety of topics in their mother tongues. Education professionals have also been impressed with MTBBE students’ grasp of Vietnamese in terms of listening comprehension, speaking and their level of vocabulary which far exceeds that of their non-MTBBE peers.

For parents and communities, there is great satisfaction to see the development of children’s literacy in their mother tongues; an opportunity which they themselves have never had, as well as the promotion of local culture and heritage as expressed through the use of their mother tongues. Children have expressed their enjoyment of classes and the various activities they are engaged in under the MTBBE approach as well as their confidence in their abilities in all subjects.

3.2.4 Expansion of the MTBBE Approach

In light of the positive results achieved after 2 years of implementation of the MTBBE in Lao Cai, the Provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET) developed in 2010 its provincial plan for the continuation and expansion of the MTBBE approach. While the 1st and 2nd cohorts of MTBBE students comprised of 5 classes in 3 districts, the
DOET has scaled up MTBBE to 12 classes of 214 students in 4 districts in the 2010-2011 school year.

From 2011 to 2015, each school year, a new group of 210 children aged five will enter the MTBBE classes. At the end of the 2015-2016 school year in Lao Cai, a total of 1,300 students will have been taught through the MTBBE approach in pre-school, followed by MTBBE primary education, providing a model to other provinces committed to improving ethnic minority children’s learning through a bilingual education approach.

For this plan, the Lao Cai DOET has estimated a budget of 8,000,000,000 VND (approximately 205,000 USD) is required. To date approximately 50 per cent of this has been secured and efforts are continuing to mobilise the remaining amount required.

"Children in this programme always enjoy going to school and at home they are more confident, and can talk about various interesting topics and sing songs in both languages...I just hope this project continues to be extended to all children in the commune."

(Tan Thi Gia - Chairwoman of Lao Chai Commune, Lao Cai)

3.2.5. Advocacy with the National Assembly

Two events took place in November 2010 which strengthened awareness and advocacy for MTBBE with the National Assembly:

• A delegation from Viet Nam comprised of high level officials from the Ethnic Council of the National Assembly, the Committee for Ethnic Minorities (CEM) and the MOET shared the MTBBE experience in Viet Nam with representatives from other countries at an International conference in Bangkok on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals which was well received.

• The MOET - UNICEF supported MTBBE experience and its results to date were also highlighted at a one day round table discussion with 100 participants, including 5 standing vice presidents and 22 members of the Ethnic Council of the National Assembly and 15 senior officers from the National Assembly Office, as a follow up activity of the conference. The event, organised in Ha Noi in collaboration with the MOET with support from UNICEF and Save the Children, focused on the issue of improving the quality of education for ethnic minority children through strengthening Vietnamese and mother tongue based bilingual education. A critical outcome of the event was the recognition that ethnic minority children learn best through their own mother tongues, and MTBBE approaches are an effective means of learning Vietnamese. Another important agreement made at the event was for the National Assembly will undertake regular visits to provinces and schools implementing MOET-UNICEF’s MTBBE to improve understanding and awareness of the approach.

4. LESSONS LEARNED

• The support and engagement of local authorities as well as from schools, teachers, parents and students has contributed to the continued success of the Action Research.

• Promoting diversified partnerships: Continuous awareness raising at all levels and the promotion of diversified partnerships from both the education and non-education sectors is required to ensure the proper implementation of the Action Research.

• Supporting institutional capacity of all related parties: Capacity building at all levels is required on an ongoing basis to ensure the quality of the implementation of the Action Research.
• Ensuring the quality and relevance of the teaching/learning materials: It is highly necessary to ensure that materials are developed with the assistance of local communities to reflect each distinct ethnic culture.

• Regular assessment of students’ learning outcomes and achievements: Accurate and regular assessments are key to successful implementation of the Action Research and allow for the identification of achievements and shortcomings in the design and implementation of the project.

5. NEXT STEPS

• Continuation of the implementation of the Action Research with a focus on (a) teacher training, (b) material development and revision, (c) monitoring and evaluation and (d) capacity building at the national, provincial, district and school levels.

• The design of MTBBE will be further refined and strengthened, so that other provinces and partner organisations can replicate the approach in other areas. Review of cost is also underway in order to inform the respective authorities of financial requirements and advocate for increased allocation to support the MTBBE approach. Scaling up of the approach in the provinces where the MTBBE programme has been implemented will be further promoted, so as to cover more classrooms and schools. Lao Cai, under its expansion plan, has already increased the number of pre-school classrooms where the MTBBE approach is applied from five classes to twelve for the 2010-2011 school year. This experience will be systematically documented and shared widely.

• The assessment mechanism within the Action Research will be reviewed and further strengthened to ensure the generation of high quality evidence based on student performance.

• Strengthening policy advocacy through knowledge sharing with a wide range of strategic partners and legal agencies, including the National Assembly, the Committee for Ethnic Minority (CEM) and the MOET to promote and scale up MTBBE. As a result of the roundtable discussion on improving the quality of ethnic minority education in November 2010:

  ○ Continuous joint monitoring will be undertaken by the MOET with the Ethnic Council of the National Assembly and CEM to schools implementing MTBBE, to gain greater support and further raise public awareness on the MTBBE approach; and

  ○ Experiences and lessons learnt from UNICEF and other International Development Partners in Viet Nam will be disseminated widely at all levels as well as information from other countries with experiences of MTBBE relevant for Viet Nam to increase awareness and support for MTBBE.

  ○ Study visits in 2011 by Government officials from other countries in the region to provinces and schools in Viet Nam to observe and learn from the MTBBE experience.

“ I have studied and highly appreciate this Programme. The department for Ethnic Minorities should actively monitor and support the Ethnic Minority Standing Committee to be updated regarding the programme’s progress and the potential of the Action Research on MTBBE.”

Mr. Kshor Phuoc, President of the Council for Ethnic Minorities (EM), National Assembly
This Programme Brief is the second produced by the MOET with support from UNICEF, outlining the approach and results after two years of implementation, particularly pre-school and primary Grade 1 assessment results from the 2009-2010 school year.

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