

Applying the National Curriculum and Textbooks in Teaching Ethnic Minority Primary School Students in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: In the implementation of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, which focuses on developing students' qualities and competencies, primary school students from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam face numerous challenges. These include limited proficiency in Vietnamese, difficult socio-economic conditions, a lack of teaching resources, and multilingual learning environments. Therefore, the application of the national curriculum and textbooks requires flexibility and adaptation to the specific characteristics of the learners and local teaching conditions. This paper proposes several pedagogical orientations: integrating local cultural elements into learning activities; adjusting content and teaching methods toward differentiation and integration; enhancing the use of visual aids; and strengthening teacher capacity. These solutions aim to ensure equitable access to education and improve the quality of teaching and learning for ethnic minority students.

KEYWORDS: ethnic minority students, program, textbook, Vietnamese, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum, the effective application of the national curriculum and textbooks in teaching ethnic minority primary school students has become an urgent requirement. This student group differs significantly in terms of language, culture, and socio-economic conditions, which creates considerable challenges in accessing educational content—especially in Vietnamese, a key tool for acquiring knowledge in other subjects. Therefore, the application of the curriculum and textbooks must be carried out flexibly and appropriately, taking into account the specific characteristics of ethnic minority students. This approach aims to ensure equitable learning opportunities, foster the development of language competence, and enhance the overall quality of primary education in ethnic minority areas.

2. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Primary education in ethnic minority areas and the requirements of the new general education curriculum

The 2018 Vietnamese Language and Literature Curriculum marked a significant shift in the teaching of the subject in general and Vietnamese language instruction in particular. This curriculum adopts a modern, learner-centered approach aligned with advanced international educational trends in language education and curriculum development. It also serves as a foundation for the compilation of textbooks under a new model, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the quality and effectiveness of Vietnamese language teaching in general education.

The 2018 General Education Curriculum aims to shift the focus from knowledge transmission to the development of learners' qualities and competencies. This shift introduces new requirements for primary education as a whole and for primary education in ethnic minority areas in particular.

Firstly, the requirement to develop Vietnamese language proficiency as a tool for learning and communication has become increasingly urgent. In the new curriculum, Vietnamese is not only treated as a standalone subject but also serves as a means for students to access knowledge across other disciplines. Therefore, the teaching of Vietnamese as a second language for ethnic minority students must be systematically designed and implemented with flexibility. Additionally, it should be integrated with local culture and context while being aligned with learners' initial language proficiency levels.

Secondly, the new curriculum emphasizes both integration and differentiation, which requires teachers in ethnic minority areas to be capable of adapting content, teaching methods, and instructional formats. These adaptations must be suitable for multi-grade classrooms, mixed-ability groups, and the diverse linguistic and foundational competencies of students. This presents a significant challenge, especially given that many teachers have not received sufficient training in active learning methods, differentiated instruction, or competency-based teaching approaches.

Thirdly, the 2018 General Education Curriculum requires a shift in assessment practices—from evaluating memorized knowledge to assessing students' learning processes, application abilities, and personal qualities. This necessitates more flexible approaches to assessment in ethnic minority areas, emphasizing language use in context, reducing the pressure of formal examinations, and strengthening formative assessment through observation and feedback on individual student development. Such approaches must be responsive to the specific regional and cultural characteristics of these learning environments.

Fourthly, there is a critical need for strong collaboration among schools, families, and communities in the education of ethnic minority students. Creating a supportive and language-rich learning environment that both enhances Vietnamese language acquisition and preserves ethnic cultural identity is essential to fostering student engagement and motivation. Raising awareness among parents and community members is also vital so they can actively support schools by ensuring students attend regularly, arrive on time, and maintain a positive attitude toward learning.

Primary education in ethnic minority areas plays a pivotal role in the broader process of socio-economic development, contributing to the reduction of regional disparities and the promotion of equitable access to education. In the context of implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum, meeting the demands of educational reform is not solely the responsibility of schools but requires the coordinated efforts of the entire political and social system. Tailored policies, adequate resource allocation, and effective support programs are crucial for supporting ethnic minority students. Such comprehensive approaches enable students to learn in high-quality, equitable environments that respond to their individual and community-specific developmental needs.

2.2. Challenges and barriers faced by ethnic minority students in learning Vietnamese

Primary education in ethnic minority areas is an integral part of the national primary education system. However, due to specific geographical, demographic, and cultural conditions, primary education in these regions exhibits distinctive characteristics that warrant particular attention.

2.2.1. Natural, economic, and social conditions

Ethnic minority and mountainous regions of Vietnam possess unique natural, economic, and social features that significantly influence the organization and effectiveness of teaching and learning. Rugged terrain, divided by steep mountains and deep streams, along with underdeveloped transportation infrastructure and sparsely populated communities, severely limits students' access to education. Harsh climatic conditions, unpredictable weather patterns, and frequent natural disasters—especially during the rainy or winter seasons—result in low school attendance rates and negatively affect students' health and study time. Many students must walk long distances to school due to limited road infrastructure, which diminishes their physical energy and reduces learning efficiency.

Economically, most households rely on subsistence farming and forestry. Poverty, especially during pre-harvest periods, often compels students to leave school temporarily to support their families, disrupting their learning continuity. Low levels of adult education, limited awareness of the value of education, and the persistence of certain outdated customs also serve as significant barriers. In isolated sub-regions where ethnic minority communities reside in linguistic enclaves, students often have limited proficiency in Vietnamese. This requires teachers to adopt flexible, context-sensitive pedagogical strategies tailored to multi-grade classrooms and satellite schools, in order to improve teaching effectiveness and ensure student retention.

2.2.2. Language use in communication among ethnic minority students

In the implementation of the primary education curriculum in ethnic minority areas, language emerges as one of the most significant challenges. Ethnic minority students predominantly use their mother tongue in familial and community settings, while Vietnamese—their second language—serves as the official medium for learning and communication in school. This linguistic gap presents a substantial barrier, directly impacting students' ability to acquire knowledge and develop comprehensively.

The natural multilingual environment in ethnic minority regions fosters habits of non-standard language use among students, such as speaking in fragmented sentences, disjointed expression, and incoherent communication—even when interacting with teachers. In this context, despite its status as the national language, Vietnamese has yet to become the primary means of communication for many ethnic minority students. As a result, a considerable number of students entering Grade 1 have little to no proficiency in Vietnamese.

Additionally, the team of school administrators and primary teachers working in ethnic minority regions is composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds—some are local teachers, while others are assigned from lowland areas. This diversity leads to disparities in professional qualifications, pedagogical competence, and adaptability to the specific educational context. Such differences directly influence the professional development process and create both advantages and challenges in the management and organization of teaching activities. This is especially evident in the teaching of Vietnamese, which serves as a foundational subject and the primary tool for students' access to knowledge.

At the institutional level, most provinces with large ethnic minority populations have dedicated units for ethnic education, though the names and organizational structures of these units vary by locality. At the district level, each Department of Education and Training typically assigns one or two staff members to oversee this area. However, due to administrative streamlining policies,

many localities have merged specialized units into broader departments, resulting in a reduced number of experts in this field. This situation presents difficulties in managing and effectively implementing educational policies and programs tailored to the needs of ethnic minority students at the primary level.

2.3. Learning Requirements in the Curriculum That Are Difficult for Ethnic Minority Students to Attain

The 2018 General Education Curriculum of Vietnam focuses on developing students' qualities and language competencies, emphasizing the formation and advancement of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Learning goals are clearly articulated across three main strands—Reading, Writing, and Speaking—Listening—with explicit criteria that align with the psychological characteristics and language acquisition abilities of primary school students. However, in practice, particularly in ethnic minority regions, many of the expected learning outcomes for these language skills become barriers for ethnic minority students. For instance, consider the Vietnamese language curriculum for Grade 3:

a. Reading Skills

By Grade 3, students are expected to achieve a reading fluency of approximately 70–80 words per minute, with appropriate pauses and expressive intonation. However, ethnic minority students often struggle with Vietnamese pronunciation due to the influence of their mother tongue, frequently mispronouncing consonants, syllables, or tones. Their reading speed tends to be slow, vocabulary is limited, and skills in silent reading and note-taking remain underdeveloped.

In literary text comprehension, students are required to identify content, characterize figures, recognize artistic imagery, and connect emotionally with the text. Yet, ethnic minority students are often unaccustomed to thinking in Vietnamese, making it difficult for them to grasp implied meanings, comparisons, and associations. Cultural elements in the text—such as place names or customs unfamiliar to them—further hinder comprehension.

For informational texts, students are expected to interpret content through images, data, and formal document structures. However, ethnic minority learners often lack familiarity with academic language and the structure of such texts. They also face challenges in identifying key information and analyzing content effectively.

b. Writing Skills

Students are expected to write with correct spelling, legible handwriting, and a writing speed of 65–70 characters per 15 minutes. However, due to inaccurate pronunciation, ethnic minority students frequently make spelling errors, especially with phonetically similar consonant pairs (e.g., l/n, ch/tr). Their handwriting often lacks consistency and tends to be slow. When composing paragraphs, their expression is usually simple, sentences are fragmented or awkward, and the use of connectors and expressive language is limited. They also struggle with outlining ideas and correcting grammatical errors in their writing.

c. Speaking and Listening Skills

Students are required to speak clearly, confidently, and express emotions. However, ethnic minority students are often hesitant to speak in Vietnamese, mispronounce words, and lack sufficient vocabulary. In listening activities, they find it difficult to keep up with the speaking pace of teachers and peers, and often fail to grasp the intended content. In interactive communication, they have not yet developed coherent conversational skills and are unfamiliar with hypothetical or simulated scenarios, such as making a phone call. These challenges create significant barriers to practicing effective communication in Vietnamese.

2.3. Strategies for Implementing the Curriculum and Textbooks in Teaching Vietnamese to Ethnic Minority Grade 3 Students

The current Vietnamese Language and Literature curriculum and primary school textbooks reflect the general educational standard of Vietnamese students while aligning with regional and international benchmarks. After years of piloting and revision, the curriculum has been increasingly refined to suit the target learner population. Practical evaluations indicate that students are generally able to acquire the content effectively, teachers can deliver lessons efficiently, and the new textbooks are markedly improved compared to previous versions.

However, in reality—as has always been the case—no single curriculum can fully meet the needs of all learners. Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country, with 54 recognized ethnic groups, 53 of which are minorities, collectively accounting for approximately 13% of the national population. The new primary curriculum and textbooks are largely tailored to students representing the remaining 87%—those who are native Vietnamese speakers and live in more socioeconomically developed contexts.

While it is neither feasible nor advisable to lower the overall developmental goals of the national curriculum to accommodate a minority group, it is equally unacceptable to neglect the educational needs of these students. Therefore, it is imperative to identify and implement targeted strategies and approaches that enable ethnic minority students in remote and mountainous areas to access and succeed in the new curriculum and textbook framework.

2.3.1. Adapting Learning Objectives and Curriculum Content to Suit Learners (An Illustrative Analysis of Reading Skills in the Grade 3 Vietnamese Language Curriculum)

Standard Level (As specified in the official curriculum)	Adjusted Requirements (For Grade 3 Ethnic Minority Students)
READING TECHNIQUES	
1. Read accurately and begin to read expressively descriptive passages, stories, and poems at a speed of approximately 70–80 words per minute. Know how to pause at punctuation marks or line breaks in poetry.. 2. Read with appropriate intonation when assigned a role in a dialogue with two or three characters 3. Begin to distinguish between character dialogue and narrator's voice to apply suitable intonation. 4. Read silently at a faster pace than in Grade 2 5. Identify the passage being read. 6. Take brief notes on key content using a reading log or notebook.	1. Read most words correctly in familiar texts; read at a pace of approximately 60–70 words per minute. Pause appropriately at punctuation marks or with teacher guidance. 2. Begin to vary voice to distinguish between characters in a dialogue; may require teacher modeling or illustrative guidance. 3. Identify character and narrator lines through changes in reading intonation; may need visual support such as underlining, color-coding, or icons. 4. Begin to read silently with eye movement; able to grasp the main idea of a paragraph after reading. 5. Able to locate and mark the current reading position following instructions or a sample. 6. Write down simple main ideas (1–2 points) in a reading log or notebook, using teacher prompts or templates.
Reading Comprehension	
Literary Texts	
Comprehending Content 1. Identify key details and main ideas; understand implicit meanings in the text through basic inference. 2. Determine the main idea of each paragraph using guiding questions. 3. Understand the author's message through suggestions and clues in the text. Comprehending Form 1. Recognize gestures and actions of characters through specific words in the text. 2. Identify time, setting, and sequence of events in a story. 3. Recognize rhyme and simile as literary devices in poetry. 4. Comment on appearance, gestures, and actions of characters in comics or animated films. Relating, Comparing, Connecting 1. Choose a character from a learned or read text and express feelings and thoughts about that character. 2. Choose a character or setting from a learned or read text and describe or draw that character or place. Extended Reading 1. Read at least 35 literary texts in a school year, with genre and length comparable to studied texts 2. Memorize at least six poems, poetic passages, or prose excerpts, each about 30–45 words in length.	Comprehending Content 1. Identify certain details and main ideas using guiding questions; comprehend simple implicit meanings with support (e.g., prompts, illustrations). 2. Identify the main idea of each paragraph with support from questions and specific examples. 3. Comprehend the author's main message or intent with teacher guidance and illustrative examples. Comprehending Form 1. Identify character gestures and actions through language, images, or expressions, with visual or verbal support. 2. Determine time, place, and event order using direct prompts. 3. Identify rhyme and simile in poetry through specific examples and guided explanations. 4. Offer comments on characters' appearance, gestures, and actions in comics, based on illustrations and open-ended questions. Relating, Comparing, Connecting 1. Express personal feelings and thoughts about a character from a studied text with teacher prompts and guidance. 2. Describe (orally or through drawing) a character or setting from a read story using illustrations or provided outlines. Extended Reading 1. Read a minimum of 25 literary texts during the school year, with comparable genre and length; formats may include picture books, audiobooks, newspapers, etc. 2. Memorize at least four poems, poetic passages, or prose excerpts (30–45 words each), with support through images and rhythm-based practice.

2.3.2. Adapting Instructional Texts in Textbooks

The General Education Curriculum emphasizes the openness of textbooks and encourages teachers to flexibly adjust and develop instructional texts to suit the needs of their learners. Given the disparities in vocabulary, Vietnamese language proficiency, and reading comprehension skills across regions—especially among ethnic minority students—careful text selection is crucial. Choosing

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texts that are familiar with students' living environments and local cultures enhances comprehension, receptivity, and the effective application of knowledge.

Text adaptation is not limited to replacing one text with another; it is a dynamic process through which teachers select, modify, or design new texts aligned with lesson objectives and learner characteristics. This process enables teachers to implement competency-based teaching more flexibly and responsively.

Example 1: Reading text "*Remembering the First Day of School*" (excerpt from the memoir of writer Thanh Tinh) is a well-crafted, emotionally rich literary text included in the Grade 3 curriculum. However, ethnic minority students require careful consideration when using such materials. Teachers must analyze the content to identify potentially inappropriate elements and adapt them to be more accessible, relatable, and student-friendly for these learners.

(1) The sentence "*Lòng tôi lại nao nức những kỉ niệm mơn man của buổi tựu trường*" ("My heart stirs again with the tender memories of the first day of school") is lengthy and filled with abstract emotions. Lexical terms such as "nao nức" (heart-stirring) and "mơn man" (lingering) are difficult to grasp for students with limited Vietnamese vocabulary.

(2) Sentences such as "*...cảm giác nảy nở trong lòng tôi như mấy cánh hoa tươi mỉm cười giữa bầu trời quang đãng*" ("...the feeling blooming in my heart was like fresh petals smiling beneath the clear sky") and "*Họ như con chim con đứng bên bờ tổ, nhìn quãng trời rộng muốn bay, nhưng còn ngập ngừng, e sợ*" ("They were like fledglings standing at the edge of the nest, gazing at the vast sky, wishing to fly but hesitating with fear") contain rich figurative language, including metaphors and similes that express subtle emotional states. Ethnic minority students, unfamiliar with such literary expression, often struggle to interpret these abstract comparisons.

(3) The complex sentence structures, with multiple embedded clauses and layers of meaning, combined with expressive language and rhetorical devices, may obscure the intended meaning. This diminishes both reading comprehension and the ability to reconstruct the content effectively.

To ensure that ethnic minority students can understand and engage with this reading text, teachers may employ various strategies, such as:

(1) Simplifying long and complex sentences into shorter, clearer ones. (For example, the original sentence "*Lòng tôi lại nao nức những kỉ niệm mơn man của buổi tựu trường*" ("My heart stirs again with the tender memories of the first day of school") can be adapted to "*Lòng tôi lại thấy vui và nhớ về ngày đầu tiên đi học*" ("I felt happy again and remembered my first day at school").

(2) Explaining or replacing difficult vocabulary such as "nao nức" (heart-stirring), "mơn man" (lingering), and "quang đãng" (open and airy) with simpler, more accessible synonyms like "vui" (happy), "nhẹ nhàng" (gentle), or "trong xanh" (clear blue).

While text adaptations may affect artistic value, pedagogical considerations should take priority to ensure ethnic minority students can comprehend and access content appropriate to their abilities.

2.3.3. Adapting Questions and Exercises in Textbooks

During instruction, if teachers identify tasks, exercises, or instructional texts that are challenging, culturally unfamiliar to students, or impractical given the difficult conditions in ethnic minority or mountainous areas, they may replace or modify the content with more relatable and contextually relevant alternatives.

Example 1: In the lesson "I am thrifty", students are given the following tasks:

(1) Identify words that refer to the parts of objects used to store savings (Vocabulary and Sentence Practice)



(2) Tell a story to your classmates about how you raised a piggy bank (Storytelling)

(3) Write a short paragraph narrating your experience of raising a piggy bank (Writing Task 2)

Ethnic minority students, particularly those living in remote areas, may have never seen or used a piggy bank and are often unfamiliar with the concept of saving money in this form. Many of their families face economic hardship, and students typically do not have decision-making power over financial matters. Therefore, tasks such as "tell a story" or "write a paragraph about raising a piggy bank," which are based on experiences the students have never had or find unfamiliar, are impractical. Students may feel confused and unsure how to begin. In such cases, it is more appropriate to substitute the topic with something more relatable, such as saving water or electricity.

To make the learning task more accessible, teachers can also simplify open-ended questions in reading exercises by converting them into multiple-choice format. For ethnic minority learners, the response options not only function as answer choices but also serve as prompts that guide students' thinking, analysis, and reasoning toward the correct response.

2.3.4. Flexible Use of Visual Methods and Instructional Aids

Ethnic minority students—particularly at the primary level—often face difficulties in acquiring knowledge through abstract language. Their limited Vietnamese proficiency makes it challenging to understand grammatical concepts, texts, or lesson content when presented solely through spoken or written language. In this context, the use of dynamic visual methods and supporting instructional aids becomes essential for enhancing comprehension, fostering active learning, and promoting long-term retention.

Visual tools such as pictures, models, real objects, and video clips enable students to concretely visualize lesson content, especially in descriptive or narrative texts. Visuals help reduce linguistic pressure, allowing students to infer meaning from images rather than translating each word.

For example, in the reading text “The last runner”, students may struggle to understand terms like “ambulance” (xe cứu thương) or “finish line” (vạch đích). Some students may ask: “What is an ambulance?”, “What does finish line mean?” To clarify, teachers should provide visual support: an ambulance is a specialized vehicle used to transport injured or ill individuals to the hospital, equipped with medical personnel and emergency equipment; a finish line is the marked end point of a race, commonly seen in running competitions.



Teaching methods are closely tied to the use of instructional aids; however, in ethnic minority and mountainous regions, limited physical resources pose significant challenges to meeting curricular requirements. In the absence of alternative teaching tools, teachers must flexibly adapt their instructional approaches. Ethnic minority students often possess rich real-life experience due to early involvement in labor activities—this experiential knowledge is a valuable asset that can support their learning. Teachers should draw on these lived experiences to create meaningful connections that enhance comprehension. However, doing so effectively requires that teachers receive appropriate professional development tailored to the specific needs of this learner population.

3. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the national curriculum and textbooks in teaching ethnic minority primary school students requires flexible adaptations tailored to learners’ linguistic, cultural, and cognitive characteristics. This paper has highlighted the challenges and difficulties encountered during the instructional process. To address these issues, several approaches have been proposed. These include adapting the curriculum and textbooks to regional and learner-specific contexts, as well as designing learning activities aligned with local conditions. Additionally, the approaches involve increasing the use of visual aids and instructional materials and selecting content appropriate to the Vietnamese language proficiency of ethnic minority students. Finally, strengthening teachers' capacity for differentiated instruction is emphasized as a key component.

These measures aim to enhance the feasibility of curriculum delivery and ensure equitable access to the new general education curriculum for ethnic minority learners. They also represent a necessary direction for improving the quality and effectiveness of education in ethnic minority areas in the current context.

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