

The Comparative Study of Bilingualism in East and Southeast Asia

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Abstract: The comparative study of bilingualism in East (Taiwan) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam) includes two interrelated investigations. This study provides valuable insights into the processes of language and literacy development among children from minority groups and examine patterns of language acquisition within school-age populations in bilingual communities. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of how bilingualism affects educational outcomes in these distinct cultural and linguistic contexts. Study A involved in-depth interviews with 62 Vietnamese immigrant participants and aimed to explore their language learning experiences and related issues of adaptation to Taiwanese culture. Study B, which was located in the Thái-speaking district of Bá Thước in Thanh Hóa province, involved fieldwork that primarily focused on the development of bilingual children in first grade. In the Chinese-speaking community of Taiwan, evidence suggests that immigrant parents make significant progress in the second language learning of Chinese. In turn, first generation children appear to be making progress that is parallel to that of their Chinese native-speaking peers. Similarly, in the Thái-speaking communities, progress in mastering the national language, Vietnamese, as a second language is comparable to that in Vietnamese-speaking communities (Kinh monolingual children).

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1. Introduction and Literature Review

Today, the East Asian region, along with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, provides a broad illustration of bilingualism, a phenomenon significantly influenced by centuries of population movement (Chen 2010). Li and Lee (2006) examined the diverse manifestations of bilingualism across East Asian nations and regions, where the linguistic context is characterized by the coexistence of national

languages alongside regional dialects and minority languages. Park (2017) presented the challenges faced by Southeast Asian marriage-migrant women in supporting their children's heritage language development in South Korea. Due to societal pressures, their children, born to Korean fathers and Vietnamese or Cambodian mothers, often abandon their heritage languages in favour of Korean, which is viewed as crucial for their educational and social success. This study highlights the powerful influence of societal norms on bilingualism in a predominantly monolingual society.

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Modern Vietnamese has evolved through centuries of contact, interaction, and the process of Vietnamization, with significant influence from Chinese languages (Alves 2020; Sidwell & Alves 2021). Within the same course of historical time, the Tai family of languages forms part of the other major relationship of linguistic contact with Vietnamese. A shared vocabulary and parallel grammar patterns attest to the cultural contact (Francis 2023). In a similar way, as in the case of the linguistic relationship between the Chinese family of languages and Vietnamese, the contact with the Tai family has been close and long-standing (Kelley 2013). The great migration, beginning in ancient times, of Tai peoples from present-day southern China resulted in the permanent settlement of large populations of Tai-language speakers. For example, in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) with Tai as the national language, and in Guangxi represented by the Zhuang people, which numbers 15 million speakers (Chamberlain 2016; Kelley 2013). The respective Vietnamese northern and northwestern border provinces are home to the same language communities.

The theoretical framework of the present Chinese-Vietnamese study draws from previous research on child bilingual development (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams 2013). The fundamental advance in the understanding of language learning was the rejection of early theories that perceived language interaction as potentially causing serious learning problems or conflictive interference. At the same time, interesting differences in information and language processing between bilinguals and monolinguals have been studied (King and Fogle 2006; Piller and Gerber 2021). Separation of the

languages typically occurs naturally at an early age, without deliberate attention on the part of the bilingual child (Brandeker and Thordardottir 2013). For older child learners and adults learning a second language (L2), a different kind of separation occurs between the first language (L1), and the new L2 (Kapa and Colombo 2013).

An important related concept is the distinction in the developmental tendencies comparing L1 and L2. In the case of L2, on average, development seems to be more uneven and diversified. In this sense, language acquisition theorists generally agree that mastery of the L1 is a natural and unconscious development (Saito 2024).

There are two possible outcomes of bilingual development. While in monolingual development, the single first language advances without any obstacle or significant delay (aside from cases of true language impairment), the same cannot be assumed in all cases of bilingual development for both languages (Meisel 2017; Hoff 2021). The two possible outcomes are:

- 1) A scenario of balanced development of two first languages (2L1) might appear during the preschool years as an acquisition outcome (Francis 2011; Arubaiy 2023).

- 2) Consistent with the same theoretical and research-based models, there is the potential for attrition in either one of the L1's (Yeh et al. 2015; Kim and Kim 2022). That is, for normally developing children, there is the possibility of attrition in one or the other, but not both.

This study provides a better understanding of why some individuals or groups of children develop balanced bilingualism (1), while others experience language attrition (2) in different situations of language contact. In the language

assessment methods described in the present study, this idea is fundamental in that the score that children attain should reflect a balance between the two languages. The case of children or adults scoring below expectations in both languages suggests the possibility of language impairment. On a related note, in the assessment of vocabulary knowledge, it is recommended to measure word knowledge in both languages (Schleppegrell 2001).

In some ways, similar to the L1-L2 difference, is the distinction between:

- basic linguistic competence acquired naturally and spontaneously, and
- uses of language that involve additional learning, as in the case of literacy and specific school-related academic language skills (Phạm and Snow 2021).

All normally developing children attain basic linguistic competence that is evenly distributed among their peers. The mother tongue among children is mastered in an equivalent and comparable way in the community of speakers of the language. However, literacy and academic-like language ability do not generally show this kind of constancy, even among individuals who have attended primary and secondary school (Cat 2020). The distinction between the natural development of the mother tongue and literacy learning also applies to adult learners (Hasselgreen 2005). Prior experience and early acquired skills during preschool also make a difference in how rapidly and successfully first grade children learn reading and writing. Native-speaker mother tongue competence is acquired naturally, not systematically taught.

This theoretical foundation has guided the study in both of its phases: Study A and Study B. While the circumstances of second language (L2) learners in the studies in two

communities are different in a number of important ways, the basic research fundamentals outlined in this section apply to both situations.

2. Methods

2.1. The comparative bilingual study in East and Southeast Asia

The comparative bilingualism study in East and Southeast Asia encompasses two interrelated studies: Study A, which examines language contact between Vietnamese and Chinese within the Taiwanese community, and Study B, which explores bilingualism between Vietnamese and Thái within the Thái-speaking community.¹ While certain aspects of the language contact situations differ, the most fundamental elements are consistent across both studies. One such commonality, and the primary focus of this research, is the process of language learning. In both communities the parent generation faces the challenge of learning a second language, which is the national language of the country. Equally, their children face the same task as they enter the school system. As a result, the research question informing this study is: How successful are parents in mastering the national language, and are their children able to catch up to their classmates during the elementary grades?

2.2. The experience of language learning by immigrants

In Study A, the main topic of interviews with immigrants from Vietnam focused on

¹ When referring to the Tai family of languages at the regional level, including from neighbouring countries and other provinces of Vietnam, the customary spelling is “Tai”. In the localities where the study is active, such as Thanh Hóa province, the local variant of the language is spelled as “Thái”.

their progress in learning Mandarin Chinese as a second language (including the Chinese characters), and how their children advanced in both learning the Chinese language and the Chinese writing system in school. The methodological approach of Study A consisted of face-to-face interviews based on a set of questions applied uniformly to all participants. This procedure facilitated the comparison of responses and reflections between two groups of immigrants:

- seventeen Vietnamese women in intermarriages and their children, and
- a separate group of twenty-eight bilingual Chinese-speaking Vietnamese immigrants who established independent families in the East Asia region.

The structured interviews also facilitated the gathering of specific information (e.g. about literacy learning background and languages acquired as a child) consistently from all participants. However, the research study explicitly recognises the limitations of self-report data based on perception and memory. Participants' understanding of their own learning processes, for example, must be corroborated by subsequent research of a different kind that takes samples of performance reflecting actual attainment of new ability. Interview data, nevertheless, is useful for proposing a framework for formulating testable hypotheses for future investigation. See Appendix 1 for examples of the topics and questions informing Study A.

2.3. Measurement of the development of bilingual ability

In Study B, research methods shifted to interviews with both parents and teachers, alongside the direct assessment of bilingual speaking ability of children. While the

interviews were important for gathering necessary information about language use in the home and at school, the main objective of the study required direct assessment, which in this case was the evaluation of bilingual ability among first grade students, aged 6 years. The assessment results from each of the 47 child participants was then compared with the specific questions asked during the 47 parent interviews regarding what language children speak at home (what language or languages each child knows). The report by each parent coincided with the score that each child attained on the assessment, in that all children know both Vietnamese and Thái. There was no variation in knowledge of Vietnamese, and a moderate variation in knowledge of Thái.

The design of the assessment instrument emphasises the sampling of basic conversational ability of young children that reliably reflects their basic linguistic competence. Given that test items were embedded in a dialogue between adult and child with the support of contextual information (in the form of a series of five illustrations that tell a short story as shared in Appendix 2), it was expected that responses would reveal this linguistic competence (Hasselgreen 2005). It was also predicted that they would reveal this knowledge of language with high validity, based on previous research on child language assessment going back many years, for example, the Bilingual Syntax Measure (Burt et al. 1980). The primary estimate of validity in the case of the Vietnam study is the correlation between:

- The score attained by the child on the assessment (all parents signed the consent form for their son or daughter and all children agreed to the assessment)

- The testimony of the child's parent in response to the questions: What languages does your son or daughter know? What language is spoken at home in the presence of your children? In what language, or languages, do you speak to your son or daughter?

- The testimony of teachers in response to the questions: What languages do students speak in class? What language is spoken mostly in the playground? The response of teachers to this question is compared to fieldwork observation by the Principal Investigator for language use in the playground and in class. Even if there is a difference in observed behaviour between teacher and fieldwork investigator, this information is important to take into account.

The evaluation instrument seeks to make available a non-technical method for surveying children's knowledge of two languages and for better understanding bilingual development in general (Bonifacci et al. 2020). The dialogue between the adult and the first-grade student is conducted twice, by two separate teachers, each of whom is a native speaker of either Vietnamese or Thái language. The Vietnamese language section is preceded by a Greetings Conversation of six questions. Similarly, the Thái language section is preceded by the same Greetings Conversation, but in Thái. As the illustrations in Appendix 2 indicate, the narrative pattern of the stories is parallel. Evaluation and analysis of children's responses will provide an estimate of bilingual ability by highlighting:

- Equal ability in both languages
- Native speaker ability in Vietnamese, early L2 learner ability in Thái
- Native speaker ability in Thái, early second language learner ability in Vietnamese

- Monolingual native speaker ability in Vietnamese or Thái.

The first question that the assessment can potentially answer is to confirm or disconfirm the observation of progress in second language learning of the national language in districts along the international border with China, Laos, and Cambodia.

3. Results

3.1. *Bilingualism study A: Second language learning and literacy*

In the series of interviews conducted for Study A, a comparison was made between the language learning experiences of two groups of adult Vietnamese immigrants: monolingual Vietnamese speakers and bilingual individuals proficient in both native Vietnamese and Cantonese. For the reasons mentioned in the previous sections, today, immigrants to the Taiwanese community from Vietnam encounter customs and expectations in their new country that are familiar to them (Yu 2014). The numerous points of mutual understanding between Chinese and Vietnamese culture, often implicit, are an important factor that favours social integration (Lay 2010). In many ways, the language of the host country (featuring a shared lexicon, its tonal system, and grammar), that they learn as a second language (L2) is not that unfamiliar to speakers of Vietnamese. The widespread observation is that there exists an important degree of affinity, both culturally and linguistically. The bilingual Chinese-speaking people from Vietnam, and overseas Chinese peoples from other countries in Southeast Asia, who migrate to East Asia, learn about differences in the new local culture that they also already

understand (Lay 2010). Their task is to then learn another language of the Chinese family of languages, Mandarin, and how it aligns with the characters they had typically learned as children.

For the monolingual Vietnamese language speakers (Group 1, the transnational spouses), from their self-report testimony, learning Mandarin presented itself as a task that progressed naturally and successfully for most or all practical purposes. On average, within five years or less, the mothers had attained satisfactory ability for conversational interactions in the different domains of community language use. Immersion in the L2 occurs from television, daily conversations with in-laws and other family members, with their own young children and from evening language classes, followed up on the beginner Mandarin classes transnational brides take advantage of from the intake centre in Vietnam while they await the processing of their visa. Needless to say, the bilingual Cantonese and Vietnamese speaking immigrants (Group 2) made even more rapid progress, as well as superior ultimate attainment in learning Mandarin. A significant factor that facilitated language learning was their previous mastery of literacy, not only of Vietnamese writing but also of the Chinese characters (usually learned via Cantonese).

Under the category of learning the Chinese characters is where the most interesting difference between the two groups of Vietnamese immigrants appeared. For most learners of Group 1 (the monolingual Vietnamese-speaking mothers), learning to read and write in Chinese turned out to be a long-term challenge, even though they were all literate in Vietnamese prior to arrival (average Grade 7 completion). In contrast, and

predictably, for the Cantonese speaking immigrants of Group 2, literacy learning in East Asia turned out to be simply an extension of their already attained Chinese literacy mastered in Vietnam as children. The ‘extension’ consisted of learning Mandarin and aligning the characters to the new Chinese language. As mentioned above, Mandarin learning for Group 2 was also much more rapid and complete. All of these results were predictable. However, it is important to point out and reflect upon from the perspective of language and educational policy that supports immigrants from different backgrounds.

The most interesting aspect of the experience of Group 2 was their reflection on the difference in learning the characters via Cantonese versus learning them via Mandarin. The reflection that the Cantonese speaking bilingual learners shared with us was what we call advanced language awareness. This awareness consisted of the ability to detect the difference in the learning process between Chinese literacy learning via Cantonese and via Mandarin. There appeared to be what the informants claimed to be a ‘closer match’ between the script and the language for Mandarin, closer than for Cantonese. According to Group 2, the characters encode Mandarin (‘write what is said’) much better, more consistently, than in the case of Cantonese².

Based on self-reporting from the participants in Group 1 and Group 2, the study presented at the following working hypothesis for future research: that under present conditions, only the Chinese

² The Overseas Chinese immigrants from Vietnam usually spoke Minnanyu, Hakka, or Cantonese as their first language. Cantonese, in almost all cases, was also the lingua franca and language of instruction in Vietnamese bilingual schools or after school tutoring classes. This Chinese-language instruction emphasised learning Chinese characters.

Vietnamese and other overseas Chinese immigrant populations will attain, uniformly and universally, full Chinese literacy. We present this tentative prediction as the *adult-immigrant-Chinese-literacy-learning hypothesis*.

The interest of the study in L2 Chinese literacy for immigrants and then for first-generation (G1) children is related to a broader question of literacy learning. The comparison among different immigrant learner groups highlights an important research question regarding the factor of previous knowledge. Tentatively, based on a limited sample of interview data, and subject to verification, this factor appears significant. That is, some groups of immigrant learners appear better prepared for the task of L2 Chinese literacy learning than others.

As has been proposed by investigators, that Chinese literacy learning, even for native speakers, involves a steeper learning curve in comparison, for example, to alphabetic writing systems. The 'steeper learning curve' query now takes on a new dimension. As mentioned above, the proposal for future research in the area of L2 literacy is that there is a significant impact of previous knowledge, linguistic and cultural. This favourable previous knowledge factor may result in differing success rates across the total L2 learner population that encompasses all immigrants. The key ingredient of literacy and related learning is language awareness. Better understanding of such learning imbalances will require a full review of the existing research literature, then a focus on addressing the relevant educational policy questions that follow.

First-generation children from the Chinese Vietnamese immigrant population (Group 2) will easily attain grade level

parity in Chinese literacy with native local children almost from the very beginning. The first-generation children born to the Vietnamese mothers (Group 1) will either show early, first-grade parity or will catch up by 5th grade in Chinese literacy. This prediction is based on our tentative corroboration of the 'favourable conditions' assessment of the national school system. This suggests that, generally, for children of Vietnamese immigrant mothers, their integration into the instructional programme of elementary school is largely typical and uneventful. This was also the conclusion from interviews in the present study with G1 young people (N=17), children of Vietnamese mothers, who recalled their experience from elementary school. A contributing positive factor for this group of G1 children regarding learning the characters is that from birth they typically form part of a literate Chinese speaking extended family. In our first study, the author presented the *literacy catch up by the 5th grade hypothesis* for G1 children of transnational mothers from Vietnam, keeping in mind that any large-scale testing of the hypothesis will control for Socio-Economic Status (SES).

The concluding prediction regarding this research question, therefore, suggests a different, less favourable scenario (not drastically, but on average measurably), for G1 children from other immigrant cohorts (immigrants that are monolingual native English speaking, non-overseas Chinese from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, United States, etc.). Noting that Yang (2018) is a point of reference for general discussion around language learning issues. Many children from this group will of course attain equivalent to native local children literacy skills in Chinese on schedule, but that on average their ultimate

attainment will not match that of G1 children from Vietnamese or overseas Chinese families. The following comment reported by one of the study participants is representative of the shift toward use of Chinese by immigrant parents when speaking to children, ‘But mom, here, Mandarin is enough’. We present the above-mentioned tentative prediction as the *first-generation child literacy learning hypothesis*. If G1 children remain in country to become adult native citizens, their (G2) children, across all groups of immigrants, will most likely attain parity with native speaking children.

3.2. The language-related social integration of Vietnamese immigrants

A sharp difference in regard to one detail of adaptation to the Taiwanese society is worthy of mention. While the international marriage immigrants (Group 1) initially formed part of an extended the Taiwanese family, the Cantonese speaking immigrants, who arrived as refugees, almost always found a spouse from the same overseas Chinese population, usually also from Vietnam. However, language-related integration into the new culture appears to proceed at the same rate (Esik 2020). Their children learn the national language from neighbouring children and in school, transitioning rapidly, even encouraging their parents to adopt Mandarin as the language spoken at home (Li and Chuk 2015; Yang et al. 2020). The consistent suggestion from interviews with Vietnamese parents and their children was that successive waves of G1 children entering the educational system may become the most reliable layer of the larger young generation that drives forward the language shift to Mandarin across all layers of society.

The data from the current study on the question of G1 children’s ability and predisposition toward learning and maintaining their immigrant parents’ national language is limited, as is the case generally in the professional literature. Based on the interviews, the only tentative indication for an advantage for any subgroup might be related to the parents’ ability to return frequently to Vietnam, accompanied by their children, for family visits. In general, however, the expected tendency is that only a minority of G1 will actually maintain the language of their mother country, which is the general rule internationally, notable exceptions aside. It is important to clarify that the G1 young people interviewed by the study in Study A generally came from a select population, skewed toward high integrative and instrumental motivation for studying Vietnamese language and culture (Chen 2011; Zhang and Roberts 2019).

3.3. Proposals for future research: Study A

The study of demographic trends of a declining native-born population, the principal fuel that will drive immigration in the coming years, presents a new language and literacy scenario for the Chinese speaking community (Liu et al. 2016; Ferrer and Lin 2024). If future studies show that the adult immigrant Chinese literacy learning hypothesis is correct, the resulting imbalance poses an important question of language and literacy teaching on a national scale (Sandel et al. 2006). The foreign-born population, as a percentage of the total population, will continue to grow. Specifically, the imbalance concerns a literacy learning gap between native local speakers of Chinese and adult immigrants who are L2 learners of Chinese. The majority of the latter probably do not

master literacy in Chinese even at a rudimentary level. Readers will recall that Chinese Vietnamese people and other overseas Chinese immigrants, who are often literate in Chinese upon arrival, do not belong to this category of ‘L2 learners’, even though in their new home, they usually learn Mandarin as a second language. This is because they are speakers of a closely related language of the Chinese family of languages and because their prior knowledge of the Chinese characters stands as a major advantage in learning Mandarin.

In general, regarding research methodology, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of self-report interview data, such as the data that Study A has depended on for the provisional analysis presented in this section. It is important to emphasize that the results of Study A are not yet complete. The present article is a progress report of the advances so far. Qualitative findings, of the kind reported in the previous section, serve as a tentative introduction to the research problem at hand and as a guide for proposing hypotheses that are plausible and deserve consideration in future research of a different kind. Research findings that can actually lend support to a hypothesis require data that is drawn from broad-based samples with a large N-size, and that are demonstrably representative. Open-ended self-report information from participants is useful for sketching out the general outline of a research problem. However, subsequent empirical work needs to also include direct assessment that can confirm or disconfirm indirect self-report data. This consideration, of course, in no way implies that interview procedures of the qualitative kind cannot provide objective findings for scientific analysis.

3.4. The bilingual study B: First language acquisition and second language learning

During the study of the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrants in the Chinese speaking community, the study saw the need to focus more deliberately on bilingual development. This change to a new emphasis was more feasibly accomplished by returning to communities in Vietnam. While the study began to place more emphasis on the actual learning processes, the overall research objectives remain the same.

The study took notice of an important recent social transformation, which was the extension of public education to rural minority language speaking communities with the resulting expansion of second language learning of the national language. This learning advance has resulted in new community level contexts of bilingual development that scientific approaches to the study of language are called upon now to prioritise (Tran et al., 2023). Incidentally, in the northwestern region, bordering Lao PDR, interviews with the parents indicated that the recent expansion of educational services has resulted in virtual universal basic literacy development among young adults.

The study has taken the first steps in the design and pilot testing of an assessment of bilingual ability for young children entering first grade. Im et al. (2019) provide detailed insights into these areas. The Thái-speaking community of Bá Thước district within the border province Thanh Hóa has been selected for systematic study. Local educators were asked about the advance of the national language among kindergarten children, and its impact on the development of the Thái language, which had until recently been confirmed as the fully acquired mother tongue across the five and

six-year-old cohort. One objective of the study was to gather evidence for the purpose of confirming or disconfirming this insight.

In this study, the Bilingual Assessment of Child Language (Thai-Vietnamese version) was designed to differentiate between customary language use or preference in specific contexts and actual linguistic competence in each language. Based on two narrative sequences, one in Thái and one in Vietnamese, represented by five illustrations each, ten associated questions for each story elicit descriptions from the child about each scene. For each language, the ten Story Section test items follow a conversational Greetings Section of six questions. Each version consists of sixteen questions designed in two separate forms: one in Vietnamese, administered by a Vietnamese teacher, and the other by a team of two Thai-Vietnamese bilingual educators. Returning, for a moment, to the bilingual context of Study A, the same question about minority language preservation or replacement has been the topic of discussion for many years. Among the Aboriginal communities, observers have called attention to the shift³ to Chinese in almost every language community within the child and young adult population. Likewise, in the case not of a minority language, but of a language of the Chinese family of languages that is still spoken or understood by the majority of local Taiwanese community, Southern Min, direct measurement of actual listening and speaking ability by children would supplement the findings of related studies (Lai 2017). Likewise, a standardised assessment of a representative sample of the Hakka language from different age

groups would provide reliable data for research on language change (Chan 2013; Vollmann and Soon 2022).

4. Discussion

The overall findings of Study A led to the proposal of three hypotheses in Section 3 that follow from both the theoretical framework and literature review outlined in Section 1 and the results of interviews with immigrants and their first-generation children. Even though all three hypotheses are based on tentative data that require further confirming research evidence, they are presented in this study because previous research on bilingualism and literacy allows them to be considered as plausible. The three hypotheses that the Results section proposed for further research are the following: (i), (ii), and (iii).

(i) For adult immigrants to the Chinese speaking community from different countries: The *adult-immigrant-Chinese-literacy-learning hypothesis*.

Because of the steep learning curve for learning Chinese characters in general, only adult immigrants to the Chinese speaking community who come from overseas Chinese populations will uniformly, as a group, find the full transition to reading and writing the characters via Mandarin feasible. There will, of course, be a large number of individual exceptions.

(ii) Specifically, for first-generation children born in the Chinese speaking community of Vietnamese transnational brides: The *literacy-catch-up-by-5th-grade hypothesis*.

Interviews with G1 children of Vietnamese immigrants suggested that even if during the first three years of elementary school, they fall behind their peers in

³ Importantly, the bilingual development outcomes of attrition in this study are not about the condition of language impairment (Tang 2011; Hertel et al. 2022)

learning Chinese characters, this group of children will generally recover from the delay before the transition to middle school. The interesting research question remains: Is the hypothetically more rapid learning of Chinese in this case also a factor that results in a greater tendency to forget the Vietnamese language that the children may have acquired from their mother prior to first grade?

(iii) For first-generation children of overseas Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese transnational brides: The *first-generation-child-literacy-learning hypothesis*.

This hypothesis (iii) extends the specific hypothesis of (ii) to consider a comparison with other immigrant populations. The G1 children of overseas Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants might be able to

count on a modest advantage in elementary and middle school because their parents were able to attain L2 Chinese ability (in Mandarin) more rapidly, on average, than other immigrant groups. For example, if on average, Vietnamese speaking mothers learn Chinese with greater facility than English speaking mothers, this difference might result in a relative advantage for the children of the former.

Turning now to Study B in Vietnam, readers will recall that the main focus of fieldwork is on the language development of young children that in addition, applied a method of direct assessment. This approach follows from the two possible outcomes of bilingualism outlined in Section 1. Table 1 below captures the research subjects who are participating in this study.

Table 1: *Research participants*

The participants from the Taiwanese community	
17 immigrant mothers	All speak Mandarin as L2, very wide variation in Chinese literacy. All mothers preserved native Vietnamese ability.
17 children of immigrant mothers	12 natives' speakers of Mandarin (learning Vietnamese as adults), 5 are bilingual from early childhood.
28 Cantonese Vietnamese bilingual adult immigrants	Today, all are proficient speakers of Mandarin, 100% literate in Chinese, equal to native Taiwanese adults. Children of parents all speak Mandarin as L1 from childhood.
Vietnam participants	
95 children	48 monolingual Vietnamese, 47 bilinguals Thái-Vietnamese.
95 parents	All are proficient speakers of Vietnamese and are literate.

There appears to be from initial results, no inherent or underlying disadvantage for bilingual children who learn Vietnamese as an early second language. Our first observations in Thái speaking communities of Bá Thước district and results of interviews with local educators suggest that, during the preschool and kindergarten years, child L2 learning of Vietnamese has

progressed rapidly. Parents are Thái language speakers and also appear to have a complete mastery of Vietnamese in addition to literacy in the national language. For example, all 95 parents interviewed during the home-language use questionnaire chose to answer the questions in writing, showing evidence of satisfactory reading and writing ability, including good spelling, in the

national official script. Forthcoming analysis of the assessment results, after reliability and validity have been confirmed, will address other questions of the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2. In particular, the analysis will attempt to account for the significant advance of Vietnamese as a second language that the results of the study have so far revealed.

5. Conclusion

In addition to the examples discussed in the previous sections, the initial responses of children to the Vietnamese language assessment in particular are consistent with the two outcomes of bilingualism proposed in the theoretical background. Within the group of first graders, the inability to respond to a conversational-type interview based on illustrations of a story, due to a possible language or related psychological impairment, was rare. The percentage of non-response or inappropriate response was, in fact, lower than what is often cited in previous research internationally. Out of a total possible sample of 96 first graders, 95 gave an intelligible response to all questions (note that an intelligible response would not always receive full credit). That is, the completeness index for 95 children was 100%. One child (1.04% of the original 96 first graders) was not able to engage completely in the story dialogue with the adult evaluator. This result strongly supports the two outcomes of bilingualism proposal of Section 1.

Regarding study A, the question regarding adult immigrants' preservation of their first language, Vietnamese, while living in their new home. For adult participants in Study A, a pattern of responses was noted that are also consistent

with the two outcomes of the bilingualism proposal. Of the international brides (N=17), when asked which language they would prefer for the interview, all indicated Vietnamese. In addition, it was evident that all of the mothers had preserved complete native-speaker ability in Vietnamese, their first language. Likewise, for the Cantonese-Vietnamese immigrants, all chose the option of the Vietnamese language for the interview, also evidencing full native-speaker ability, with no sign of attrition. The children of immigrant mothers (N=17) evidenced native speaker ability of Chinese (12), or Vietnamese and advanced L2 Chinese (5).

Returning to the theoretical background, regarding the plausibility of the three proposed hypotheses for further research, the tentative results indicate an important degree of overall consistency. The three hypotheses are about literacy learning, an outcome that in general is not universally attained at the same level by all learners as pointed out in the theoretical background section. The results, so far suggest that there will be variation from one group of immigrant learners to another regarding the mastery of Chinese character literacy, depending on the important factor of previous knowledge.

The study will conduct further analysis of the interviews and language assessments, now mainly from the fieldwork in Vietnam, which will either confirm or call into question aspects of the bilingual development theoretical framework presented in this paper.

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Competing Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview topics and questions

Mothers

1. Experiences living in Taiwan during the first year as a beginning learner, especially opportunities for language study and methods of self-teaching.
2. Learning resources from television and radio. Informal self-assessment of listening and speaking ability in Chinese, after 1 year, 2 years, and after 5 years. Reading signs, labels, announcements and newspaper headlines. Self-assessment of writing ability.
3. Persons who helped in adjusting to life in the new country. Evidence of different motivating factors for second language learning.
4. Speaking to children before beginning elementary school – in Vietnamese? in Chinese? During the school years, in which language?
5. Frequency of travel back to Vietnam to visit family with children. Would you like that your son(s) or daughter(s) learn to speak Vietnamese? Why should they learn Vietnamese?

Students

1. Reasons for deciding to study Vietnamese, and general questions related to motivation.
2. Informal self-assessment of progress, in comparison to class expectations and classmates' progress. Prior to university, when did you start learning Vietnamese? Opportunities to practice speaking Vietnamese outside of class and visits to Vietnam. Self-evaluation of competence in the target language prior to enrolment in the college program: "fluent speaker"- "beginning vocabulary only, no grammar"- "no knowledge of Vietnamese at all."
3. Childhood recollections regarding speaking in Chinese or in Vietnamese with your mother. Progress in learning Chinese as a young child?
4. Interesting memories about the experience of bilingualism at home and in the community.
5. Recollections from school years regarding attitudes of other children who may or may not have known about your bilingual family. Were you able to keep up with rest of the class in your studies? Do you remember, was your level of Chinese the same as that of all the other children?

APPENDIX 2

Bilingual assessment of child language

Figure 1: *Thái-language section (Chicken Story)*



Figure 1 depicts the chicken story, which is used to assess the language ability of 6-year-old children in Thái.

Figure 2: *Vietnamese-language section (Dog story).*

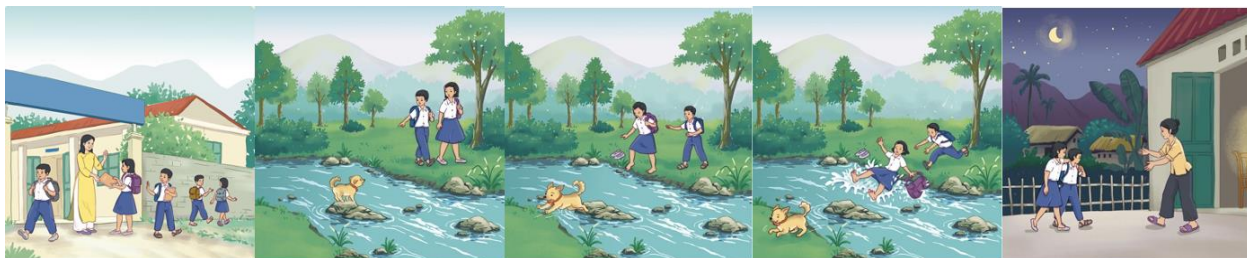


Figure 2 depicts the dog story, which is used to assess the abilities of 6-year-old children in Vietnamese.