



“Parents and families play an important role in supporting the language learning of their children”

Good afternoon everyone! My name is **Lê Văn Phúc**. I live in Vietnam and I speak Vietnamese and English. I am also learning to speak Spanish. Currently, I am working as a programme coordinator for VVOB Vietnam. Before, I worked for 10 years in different international development organizations in Vietnam. My work focused mainly on improving access to quality education for the most vulnerable children in disadvantaged areas, including children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities.

The most meaningful experience to understand more about multilingualism was the implementation of a community-based bilingual education programme for ethnic minority children in North Vietnam. During the implementation of this project, I worked in the Meo Vac district, Ha Giang province. In this area, more than 85% of the population are ethnic minority people who have their own language. Children only speak H'Mong, their home language. However, when they go to school, they have to use Vietnamese, the school instruction language of Vietnam, to communicate with their teachers. Not many teachers can use the children's home language because they are mobilized from lowland areas. Teachers cannot speak the local language and have limited knowledge of the children's culture. A language barrier between the teachers and children in the classroom arises. Children and teachers cannot understand each other and the interaction in the classroom is limited. This leads to low learning outcomes and quite often children drop out of school.

In order to address this language barrier, we have implemented interventions to support teachers to find out ways to teach ethnic minority children. The professional development of teachers focused on how to work with ethnic minority children, how to create a safe and friendly learning environment, and how to adapt the national curriculum to fit with the local context. Furthermore, we emphasized the role of parents in children's language learning. Parents were encouraged to participate in parents-teachers associations to learn how to support children's learning at home and in school: they were taught how to play games, read books, and tell stories. The parents also rotated to go to their children's schools to support teachers as a teaching assistant. The teaching assistant helps teachers to prepare lessons using local materials present in the living environment of the children. As a result, children were more interested in the lessons. Parents were encouraged to support their children in developing language related to daily life. Many parents were also reassured to see their children being happy in school and learning.

Vietnam is a diverse society with 54 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, each having their own language and culture. Most of them live in remote and economically disadvantaged areas. It is estimated that in total 108 languages are spoken in the country. This has created a language barrier for many ethnic minority children who have limited or, in some cases, no understanding of Vietnamese when they enrol in the formal education system. It is a big challenge to promote multilingualism in Vietnam. However, language diversity should be seen as an opportunity rather than a barrier. For instance, learning a second or a third language stimulates the brain development of children.

In short, I strongly believe that parents and families play an important role in supporting the language learning of their children. When schools and families work together, children can learn languages better, be more confident and engaged with their school work, behave better, and have better social skills. This is not only applicable for children from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam but for all families around the world.