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## WRITING CAPACITY OF ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN VIETNAM

Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy<sup>1</sup> and Tran Thi Ngoc<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hanoi National University of Education, Viet Nam

<sup>2</sup>University of Education - Thai Nguyen University, Viet Nam

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper presents the research results on the writing capacity of ethnic minority students at primary schools in Vietnam. The research results on the writing capacity of ethnic minority students at 4 primary schools of two provinces in the northwestern mountainous region of Vietnam are illustrated by specific mistakes in the essays of students belonging to four ethnic minorities including the Mong, Thai, Kho Mu and Dao. Specific researches on the thinking characteristics in writing activities and the measures to develop writing capacity for ethnic minority primary school students have been analyzed by the authors based on the survey results on language activities of students and the theoretical achievements in psychology, language education and writing capacity development for students. The scientific proposals have been experimented and verified for students, and initially had the changes after impacted. The research problem still has a lot of gaps and should continue to be developed in the next researches.

**KEYWORDS:** writing capacity, thinking, primary school students, ethnic minorities, Vietnam.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority primary school students in difficult areas of Vietnam are limited in expressing sentences, building paragraphs and essays. There is often a diversity of culture and language in the areas where many ethnic minorities live. In daily communication, ethnic minority students mainly use their native language. Most students use Vietnamese as the second language. Because there are very few activities in contact with Vietnamese language every day, it is impossible to create the demand for them to communicate in Vietnamese. They face a lot of difficulties in expressing sentences because writing requires them to have plenty of Vietnamese vocabulary from real life and linguistic thinking ability in expressing. The content and method to practice Vietnamese language thinking skills when expressing sentences for them are few and ineffective. Research achievements in second language education for ethnic minority primary school students often focus on the problems such as spelling correction, word usage, vocabulary expansion, vocative, and communication capacity. However, there are not many researches on writing capacity.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

To implement this study, we used the method of retrospective documentation to study documents related to the writing competence of ethnic minority students at primary school level in Vietnam. In addition, we use survey method to investigate the writing situation of ethnic minority students at primary school level in Vietnam through specific areas, using observation method to see the impact of positive educational measures and content of supporting Vietnamese language teaching for ethnic minority students in writing.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Current situation of writing capacity of ethnic minority students at primary schools in Vietnam

Vietnam has 53 ethnic minorities and one ethnic majority (Kinh/ Vietnamese people). Among them, the Vietnamese people account for the highest percentage of the population (87.34%). The population of 35 ethnic minorities is less than 15% of the total population, 5 ethnic groups have below 500 people (Si la, Pu Peo, Ro Mam, O Du, Brau), in which the Brau only has 95 people. Education for ethnic minority students still has many problems without effective solutions. The gap in training quality between Kinh primary school students and ethnic minority primary school students in the past has been wide, but now this gap is even wider when the society develops.

Thanh Minh Primary School and Secondary School, Dien Bien Phu City, Dien Bien Province is an inter-level school directly under the city but located in a disadvantaged commune. The school's students are mainly ethnic minorities. The whole school has 154 ethnic minority students, accounting for 99.7%. The Grade 3 has 42 students who are all ethnic minorities. Among them, there are 33 students of Thai ethnic group, 05 students of Kho Mu ethnic group and 04 students of Mong ethnic group. All 42 students use their mother tongue in daily communication and use Vietnamese as their second language. When writing, they often make the following mistakes:

Order	Common mistakes in Writing	Hmong	Thai	Khmu/Khamu
1	Spelling mistakes	<i>năm = năng... yháng = thắg mẹ em = mẹ eng năm học = năng học</i>	<i>làm= đàm... trường = chường vui = bui, tiếp = tếp đi làm = li đàm</i>	Misusing or missing diacritics
2	Using wrong words	<i>mạnh dạn = mạnh dạng</i>		<i>Trong lớp = trông lấp</i>

3	Grammatical mistakes in writing sentences	<i>Hôm nay tôi đi học = tôi đi học hông nài</i>	<i>Sáng chủ nhật em và mẹ đi chợ = em và mẹ đi chợ sáng chủ nhật</i>	<i>Em rất yêu quý mọi người trong lớp = mọi người chong lớp yêu kí</i>
4	Sentences with unclear meaning	<i>Trồng cây và trường của em có một.</i>	<i>Một nhà hai tâm và em.</i>	<i>Hàng ngày em thường cùng các bạn.</i>
5	Using wrong punctuation marks	Using wrong punctuation marks, especially period and comma. Some students even do not punctuate in whole paragraphs.	Using wrong punctuation marks, especially period and comma. Some students even do not punctuate in whole paragraph.	Using wrong punctuation marks, especially period and comma. Some students even do not punctuate in whole paragraph.
6	Lack of connection between sentences	Do not know how to connect sentences	Do not know how to connect sentences	Do not know how to connect sentences

Because the articulation characteristics of the mother tongue of each ethnic group are different, the students of different ethnic groups have different writing mistakes. The way they pronounce is the way they write, which leads to wrong words and wrong meanings. Mong students often pronounce and write wrong syllables, Thai students often pronounce and write wrong beginning consonants, while Kho Mu students often pronounce and write wrong tones. Regarding the mistakes such as writing incorrectly grammatical sentences, writing sentences with unclear meaning and no linking words, students of all three ethnic groups have made mistakes due to Vietnamese language thinking.

When surveying at three primary schools in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, also located in the Northwest region of Vietnam, we have found that Sa Pa 1 and Sa Pa 2 primary schools have 100% of students from the Mong ethnic group. Ta Phin primary school has students from the Mong and Dao ethnic groups, of which the students are mainly from the Mong. In the 54 essays of 3rd grade students of these three schools, the handwriting of many students is more evenly rounded; however, they still make many mistakes.

Order	Common mistakes in Writing	Hmong	Yao
1	Spelling mistakes	Missing word strokes, mispositioning letters, using wrong consonants and syllables, disobeying the capitalization rules. <i>sắt vụn = xát vụn</i> <i>một hôm = một hôn</i> <i>vút rác bừa bãi = vút bừa bãi</i> <i>các chú = các trú</i> <i>dọn rác = rọn gác</i> <i>hài lòng = hài làng</i> <i>nhắc bạn = nhắt bạn</i> <i>đi sớm = đi xươn</i> <i>quyết lớp = quyết lóp</i>	<i>trèo cây = chèo cây</i> <i>trả lời = trả nời</i> <i>nhặt rác = nhạc giác</i> <i>quét sân = quyết sàn</i> <i>ăn xong = ăn song</i> <i>nên = lên</i> <i>xuống sân = suống sàn</i> <i>được sạch = thược sạch</i> <i>mức nước = muốc nước</i>
2	Using wrong words	<i>nhặt = nhắt</i> <i>quét rác = quát giác</i>	<i>khuyên bạn = khuy bạn</i> <i>vút rác = vút dát</i> <i>ra về = da về</i> <i>sắp gậy = xấp khây</i>
3	Iterating words, missing words	<i>Và bạn ấy và các bạn khác cũng đã xuống</i>	
4	Using spoken/oral language	<i>Nhé</i>	
5	Grammatical mistakes in writing sentences	<i>Để lớp trường sạch và đẹp</i> <i>Còn cùng các bạn nhạc cọ, nhạc dác, quyết sân Chông hoa.</i>	<i>Để giúp cho môi thật sạch trường rất đẹp.</i>
6	Sentences with unclear meaning	<i>Một nhà hai tầng và em</i>	<i>Kết quả của em giắt tốt. Suy nghĩ. Tình cảm của em thấy rất vui.</i>
7	Using wrong punctuation marks	Using wrong punctuation marks, especially period and comma. Some students even do not punctuate in whole paragraphs.	Using wrong punctuation marks, especially period and comma. Some students even do not punctuate in whole paragraph.
8	Lack of connection between sentences	Do not know how to connect sentences	Do not know how to connect sentences

9	Not separating direct speeches from narrative sentences	...vào thùng rác các chị bảo cảm ơn em nhé vì đã...	
10	Inapposite paragraph breaks	Some students have this mistake	
11	Inadequate number of sentences required in the paragraph	Some students can write no more than two sentences	Missing a few sentences

Students make many types of mistakes in an essay. For example, the essay of Giang Ba Canh at Sa Pa 1 Primary School, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province with the title: “Write a short paragraph (from 7 to 10 sentences) about your good job to contribute to environmental protection”:

*Một hôm em được mẹ và bố cho đi ở công viên ở đó có rất nhiều trò vui nào là đu quay nào là tàu lượn vào trong kia thì thấy các anh chị ăn những đồ vật ăn trong thì các chị vứt rác bừa bãi ra nơi công cộng em thấy thế chạy ra liền bảo các chị không lên vứt ra nơi công cộng như thế nhờ đâu người khác nhìn thấy thì lại phải nhặt thì tội nghiệp cho họ làm từ đầu các chị tỏ ra không đồng ý và không hài lòng nhưng rồi các chị cũng đồng ý và đứng dậy nhặt các ăn vặt của mình rút vào thùng rác các chị bảo cảm ơn em nhé vì đã nhất bọn chị không lên vứt rác ra nơi công cộng. (One day, my mother and father took me to the park. There were a lot of fun games such as ferris wheel and roller coaster. When I went inside, I saw some boys and girls threw the trash out in public places after finishing their snacks. I ran out immediately to remind them not to throw the trash out in public places like that because if someone else saw it, they had to pick it up, so it was a pity for them. At first, they showed their disagreement and dissatisfaction, but then they also agreed and stood up to pick up their snacks and throw them in the trash bin. They said: “Thank you for reminding us not to throw the trash out in public places”).*

Thus, the whole paragraph has only one dot at the end of the paragraph. Canh does not know how to break sentences, how to use punctuation marks and linking words. The beginning consonants and syllables of many words are incorrectly written. And there are still mistakes about word repetition. Canh’s paragraph has content and vocabulary and he has expressed what he observed and felt from life. This shows that ethnic minority students have their own observation and feeling ability and their own thinking; especially, they have deep associations and feelings when thinking about the people who have to pick garbage that they are very pitiful.

Observing the educational method of the three schools in Sa Pa district with the inter-level school of Thanh Minh commune, Dien Bien Phu city, we find the effects of the positive educational measures, the contents of supplementary Vietnamese teaching for ethnic minority students, and the uniformity of teaching methods, efforts, dedication and responsibility of teachers in schools are very great; however,

the weaknesses in students' ability to use Vietnamese are only partially improved. Education of the national language as a second language for ethnic minority students in multicultural environments is in need of more impacts of national policies. Currently, the Government has had a lot of policies for education in the specially-difficult mountainous regions, but it is still insufficient and lacks solutions in association with the development of a modern educational environment and job opportunities for ethnic minority students living in localities.

### **3.2. Thinking characteristics in writing activities**

When writing, students must undergo a complex thinking process. Analyzing from a psychological perspective, writing capacity includes: symbolic competence, outline-making competence and linguistic competence. The symbolic competence is that the writer perceives objects objectively through the senses, then reflects directly on the human brain, and the brain reproduces new impressions. On the basis of symbolic images, the brain conducts analysis by emotional experience, synthesizes and selects the content, thinks and arranges the outline, and constructs the structure of essay. In writing, outline-making competence is considered as the core competence. From the thought and felt symbols and contents, the brain simultaneously explains, selects words to create sentences, refine, correct words, and express ideas. Language can only be plentiful when there are symbols and careful thinking of outline-making. Therefore, it is necessary to spend a lot of time carefully and surely practicing each competence in accordance with the thinking process of language and word production for students, especially ethnic minority students who must think in their second language.

The outstanding characteristics of writing capacity are the language expressing ability and the logical thinking ability. To have symbols to express language, students need the ability to observe and perceive things. Students also need to have the skills of observing things and phenomena in the surrounding life, know how to feel, think about characteristics, explain the meaning, associate, and imagine many aspects of real life. When students have a product of thinking with plenty of writing materials, they can apply many different forms of expression, use written language, and know how to correct their writing properly.

Previously, primary school students only needed to read and write fluently, that is to read correctly and quickly, write correctly and quickly. However, nowadays, the capacity development requires students to read and understand the content and form of text, know how to relate, compare and connect with non-textual knowledge and their real life, and also write accurately, clearly, express their thoughts and feelings, and know how to write good and flexible sentences. Writing is an activity to train and develop students' comprehensive competencies, and is a means to effectively develop imagination, cognitive capacity, and to foster ethics and deep feelings.

### **3.3. Measures of thinking practice in writing activities for ethnic minority students at primary schools in Vietnam**

#### **3.3.1. Use of visual thinking to develop Vietnamese language for students**



The thinking characteristic of ethnic minority primary school students is visual thinking. They are in contact with the outside world, mainly the nature and life in remote mountainous areas with few people living, through their eyes. Therefore, they observe and perceive the life visually. Ethnic minorities, especially the Mong people, live sparsely in the high mountains where there is only the sound of mountains, forests and animals. Perhaps that is why the Mong people speak very little and very slowly, leading to very slow thinking because they have little communication. However, they will naturally and honestly say what they see and what they think. This is an advantage to encourage the development of language thinking for them. Grasping this characteristic, we need to create a communication environment for them to talk about what they observe. Increase games and extracurricular activities for students to read words based on pictures and videos about familiar things in their lives. Begin to pronounce words correctly, write those words correctly, and then speak, write sentences and paragraphs. Reading and writing must go together. Students must write immediately what they read, what they think and feel while reading. Spend a lot of time for students to interact with friends and teachers about reading topics.

To prepare for a writing topic, teachers should guide students how to observe and feel about writing objects from many weeks before writing activities. Visual thinking is trained through the system of questions, and expressing the answers into complete sentences. When they observe the animal they intend to describe, they answer the following questions by themselves: What is that animal? Whose animal is this? Where does it live? What are its characteristics? Do you like that animal? Why? What did you do to give love to that animal? etc... Because the object and writing thinking of each student are not the same, it is necessary to have sincere feelings, try to express clearly their special observations and feelings about nature, society, and human life. Encourage them to observe life from many perspectives, discover the plenty and colors of life, grasp the characteristics of things, try to express their creative thoughts. Guide them to base on the focus of expression, choose the most appropriate expression; present the content in the before-and-after sequence, apply association and imagination to make their content lively and abundant; have awareness of completely independent writing, pay attention to the writing process, collect information, consider the logic of their essay, correct and complete their essay. Teachers also create students the habit of self-correcting after writing. When correcting, they will increase the perception of words, grammar, common rhetorical measures, more fluent writing. At the same time, organize for them to exchange their papers with others, correct them together, share their feelings, understandings and explanations of topic.

### **3.3.2. Use of Internet and multimodal text to practice writing skills**

The ethnic minority primary school students are less likely to listen and speak in Vietnamese. To increase their language contact, they need more listening and interaction activities with Vietnamese cartoons, stories and games on the internet. Currently, primary schools in disadvantaged areas only have about 20 computers per school, many communes only have about 10 computers. Annually, because of no funding to repair, each school only has few computers that can be used. They have very little chance to learn on computers, and projectors in the classrooms are not available. Therefore, to

create the best learning conditions for ethnic minority primary school students to learn the national language and culture, develop themselves and contribute to the local development in the future, the government should have more policies to invest in education in mountainous areas.

Children, especially the ethnic minority students, often like vivid images. Therefore, if teachers use the sample texts with illustrations, students will learn how to express what in the pictures into words. Then teachers use the pictures and questions to suggest students write each sentence for that paragraph and essay. Practice many times so that they are confident and know how to think, then teachers ask them for self-visualizing, imagining and writing an essay only using Vietnamese language.

### **3.3.3. Increase and diversification of writing activities in a learning week**

Ethnic minority students learn Vietnamese as a second language, so it is necessary to increase the amount of time for improvement of language skills such as Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. Compared to the Kinh primary school students, ethnic minority primary school students take double time to learn their second language. Because they only start to study Vietnamese speaking and writing at school. On the contrary, Kinh students can speak and listen to Vietnamese and only practice Vietnamese writing and reading, so they will write faster, read faster and understand faster other subjects. In the current program, some localities have actively built the learning contents to supplement Vietnamese skills for ethnic minority students but there is not enough time and content for reading and writing, especially essay writing. There is time for writing but no time for observing, collecting information, writing materials, and thinking way when expressing sentences. And especially, there is very little time for correcting essay, there is almost no time to discuss essay. Meanwhile, other countries pay great attention to the fact that students share their essays with each other, can evaluate and correct essays with each other. For students in each region, depending on their ability to use Vietnamese, the localities need to set specific requirements on the appropriate amount of time for activities to improve language skills for students, especially writing skills.

In addition to the class time, teachers can encourage students to write about what they observe and feel from daily life to create them habit, need and confidence in writing. Enhance the practical experience activities, flexibly use the forms of regular assessment to develop students' competences.

## **CONCLUSION**

National language education for ethnic minority primary school students has a special importance. If no proper concern, the education quality in mountainous area will not make a difference in culture, resources and socio-economy. The Vietnamese language is a tool for ethnic minority students to think, perceive and develop themselves. Writing is the activity that brings a lot of opportunities to train and develop competences for ethnic minority students. They already have healthy feelings for nature, mountains and forests, and have deep feelings for life. They need teachers to arouse, encourage and guide them to express naturally as their own innermost feeling. And we will nurture them to be poets, writers and scientists to preserve and develop the literature of ethnic minorities, Vietnamese literature



and culture, and promote the cultural identity of Vietnam for integration and development with the world. Living in the developed city, we must think about the disadvantages of the people who keep the lands and forests in the high mountains and the remote border areas. In those lands, perhaps the children need the spacious and modern learning condition and learning environment, and also need the transferred and applied scientific researches rather than the clothes, so that they can enjoy a developmental education like the plains.

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