

Teaching English
ELT Research Papers

Teachers of English as agents of multilingualism in rural Vietnam

Melike Bulut Al Baba, Thi Phuong Dung Cao,
Dee Rutgers and Simon Borg

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Conceptualisation:	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims
Funding acquisition:	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication
Supervision/Project management:	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team
Project administration:	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution
Investigation:	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection
Writing (original draft):	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft
Writing (subsequent drafts):	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing subsequent drafts
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Visualisation:	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work

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Executive summary

The research project aimed to explore the challenges associated with teaching linguistic minorities in Vietnam, a demographic often identified in the literature as academically disadvantaged. The project was also motivated by a recognised global deficiency in teacher education programmes that equip educators to effectively teach linguistically diverse students.

Our previous engagement with teachers in rural Vietnam underscored that English language teachers often express a sense of unpreparedness when faced with the task of teaching linguistically diverse students. In light of these observations, we recognised the need for teacher training for multilingualism in this context, and posited that teachers of English can serve as catalysts for promoting multilingualism due to their nuanced understanding of language learning dynamics. To realise this vision, our project adopted a two-fold approach. First, we provided comprehensive training for English language teachers focused on multilingualism in education and on facilitating Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs). Second, English language teachers, with support of the research team and local teacher educators, took leadership in their local teaching context for collaboratively tackling the challenges associated with teaching multilingual students.

Throughout this multifaceted process, our research agenda served a dual purpose: a) to understand teachers' professional development needs in relation to the teaching of multilingual students; and b) to evaluate the impact of TAGs as a strategic bottom-up approach, led by teachers for teachers, to enhance professional engagement and foster ongoing learning and growth in the realm of multilingualism. English language teachers were empowered with leadership skills and opportunities to create a positive impact on their teaching community.

The project confirmed a widespread sense of teacher unpreparedness in addressing the needs of ethnic minority students, particularly in early grades where the language barrier is most pronounced. Teachers consistently cited no previous training in teaching in multilingual classrooms, and while many held or pursued minority language proficiency certificates, they did not routinely apply this knowledge pedagogically. Vietnamese (Kinh) remained the de facto instructional language, and the use of ethnic languages was generally discouraged, even in the absence of formal policy restrictions.

TAGs proved effective in fostering new understandings of multilingualism. Teachers moved from monolingual assumptions to recognising students' home languages as valuable learning tools. Some teachers reported concrete shifts in classroom practice, including the adoption of translanguaging – the practice of multilingual speakers using their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and learning (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016) – and increased student engagement. This transformation also had implications for teacher identity, with many ethnic minority teachers reporting greater pride and confidence in using their own languages professionally.

TAGs created space for meaningful peer learning. Teachers across disciplines reported increased collegial trust and openness, with some describing emotional as well as pedagogical benefits. These groups offered a rare opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue around language in education.

A central focus of the project was to examine whether female English teachers could act as leaders in promoting multilingual pedagogies. While gender was not found to be a barrier to leadership in these schools, many English language teachers lacked confidence in their capacity to lead pedagogically. Where English language teachers engaged actively with their leadership roles, their colleagues began to recognise their expertise. However, leadership remained fragile and uneven across the TAGs, with some English language teachers continuing to rely heavily on external facilitation.

Key enablers of TAG impact included the involvement of regional senior leaders, the provision of targeted training and resources, and sustained mentorship by in-country teacher educators. However, the implementation of TAGs was constrained by several barriers: entrenched language ideologies, misconceptions about national policy, time limitations, subject-specific constraints, the limitations of online-only formats, and a strong need for practical, context-relevant models of multilingual teaching.

These findings collectively highlight the importance of locally embedded, teacher-led professional development, underpinned by collaborative structures and responsive mentoring, to advance multilingual pedagogies in schools serving diverse student populations.

1

Introduction

This research seeks to address the pressing problem of inadequate teacher preparation in the context of education for linguistic minorities in Vietnam. According to Kosonen (2017), although approximately 108 languages are spoken in Vietnam, the government officially recognises only 54 ethnic groups. The majority of the population (87 per cent) speaks Vietnamese (Kinh), with the remainder consisting of various ethnolinguistic communities. While the 1992 Constitution designates Vietnamese as the national and official language, other policies nominally support the use of non-dominant languages (NDLs) in education. However, in practice, Vietnamese remains the primary language of instruction (LOI) across all education levels, and NDLs are generally only taught as subjects. The policy landscape is marked by inconsistencies and contradictions. The mismatch between the language of instruction and the community language is most pronounced in Vietnam's rural mountainous regions, where many linguistic minority groups reside.

Developed through an international collaboration between UK and Vietnamese researchers and teacher educators, the project explores the challenges faced by teachers, particularly in these rural areas, and proposes a transformative response. It investigates the potential of English language teachers to act as agents of multilingualism, equipped with a nuanced understanding of language learning dynamics. Central to these efforts are targeted teacher training and the establishment of collaborative Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs), designed both to identify the professional development needs of teachers in this domain, and to assess the effectiveness of this approach in promoting ongoing learning and growth for teachers regarding multilingualism. This research aims to pave the way for a more inclusive and effective education system in Vietnam, ultimately benefiting linguistic minorities and fostering a culturally responsive and enriching learning environment.





2

Literature review

In recent years, multilingualism has emerged as a critical area of focus within education systems worldwide, prompting a re-evaluation of long-standing monolingual practices. As classrooms become increasingly linguistically diverse, especially in contexts shaped by migration and minority language communities, the imperative to adopt more inclusive and linguistically responsive pedagogies has grown. This section explores key challenges and opportunities in shifting towards multilingual approaches to education, with particular attention to the Vietnamese context and the role of English language teachers as potential facilitators of change.

2.1 Towards multilingual approaches to education

The field of education has recently undergone a transformative shift towards embracing a multilingual perspective, acknowledging the linguistic diversity of learners, and challenging traditional norms surrounding language use in teaching and learning within multilingual classrooms (Meier, 2017). However, the prevalence of monolingual norms and a lack of guidance for educators pose challenges in translating these theoretical concepts into practical application.

Teachers often find themselves ill-equipped to teach or support linguistically diverse learners (Barros et al., 2021). While some initiatives have aimed to identify teacher competencies and advocate for innovative teacher education practices (e.g. European Commission, 2017; Messner et al., 2016), these endeavours often lack implementation at the national level. Bilingual education researchers have long called for specialised language training for all teachers (Cummins, 2007; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Referring to learners' linguistic repertoire is a common practice in language classrooms. For instance, using multilingual approaches has been identified as an element of the British Council *Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework for teachers* (British Council, 2015). Nevertheless, studies consistently reveal that teachers of other subjects frequently do not perceive themselves as responsible for language instruction (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Pettit, 2011).

Recent research in multilingual education shows that language underpins learning in every subject, not only in language classes. Guzula and Abdulatief (2024), for instance, illustrate how translanguaging in mathematics helps students interpret ideas, solve problems and engage more deeply with disciplinary content. Their findings highlight that subject learning is tied to the linguistic resources students use to make meaning. Linguistic inclusion is therefore crucial for equitable participation across all subjects.

Research demonstrates that mainstream monolingual teachers tend to view the 'home' languages of bi/multilingual students as impediments to learning (Pomphrey & Burley, 2009; Svalberg, 2016). The Vietnamese context mirrors these challenges, with earlier studies indicating that English language teachers face language barriers when instructing students from ethnic minorities, coupled with a deficiency in teacher training to prepare educators for teaching learners with diverse language backgrounds (Nguyen & Ha, 2023; Do & Nguyen, 2023). This is not only an issue of equal access to education but also about the protection of the linguistic heritage. According to Zein (2022, p. 94) while '41 of Vietnam's 109 languages are endangered and six others are dying, the question about preserving Vietnam's indigenous languages while promoting English persists'.

2.2 English language teachers as agents of multilingualism

Given the unique nature of additional language teaching and classroom dynamics, where language is a mediating tool for communication and action alongside the object of teaching (Ziegler, 2013), English language teachers possess the potential to become agents of multilingualism. We hypothesised that, with targeted training, English language teachers can build on their existing knowledge of language learning and acquisition, as well as their language awareness skills, to embed inclusive and linguistically responsive practices within their classrooms and school communities, and to actively foster multilingualism in their local contexts.

This belief is inspired by the teaching of English as an additional language literature, and is particularly supported by Spencer's (2023) case study of an international secondary school, which highlights how English language teachers, through structured collaboration with subject teachers, facilitated multilingual inclusion and helped mediate between institutional expectations and learners' diverse linguistic repertoires. Spencer's findings underline the capacity of English language teachers to serve as brokers of multilingualism – not only by addressing learners' language needs, but also by initiating pedagogical dialogue across disciplinary boundaries. These insights are especially relevant in the Vietnamese context, where English language teachers are often the most linguistically trained professionals in schools, and thus are well positioned to advocate for and implement practices that value and support students' home languages alongside English.

2.3 Teacher Activity Groups

To enact our vision of English teachers as agents of multilingualism, we implemented Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs) as our professional development approach (Borg et al., 2020), adapting the model to suit both the goals of multilingual pedagogy and the

realities of rural Vietnamese classrooms. We chose TAGs because they provide a collaborative structure through which teachers can investigate context-specific issues and co-construct solutions that are meaningful for their own practice. In alignment with Wenger's (2010) notion of communities of practice, TAGs create spaces for shared reflection, mutual support and situated peer learning, offering an alternative to traditional, top-down, transmission-oriented professional development. Policy and curriculum changes that are proposed without recognition and understanding of teachers' beliefs and practices are likely to be counterproductive and unlikely to be successful (Grassick, 2019). Hence, we aimed for a bottom-up change led by the teachers themselves.

TAGs have been used successfully in the Vietnamese context in other British Council projects, including the 'Developing teachers' capacities to teach English across modes, media, and language boundaries with creative and arts-based resources' project (creativepracticestl.wixsite.com/translanguaging/about-our-work). Although TAGs have been used in various international contexts and in Vietnam to encourage teacher-driven learning, their capacity to strengthen multilingual pedagogical practices has yet to be fully examined.

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3

Methodology

Building on the findings and arguments presented in the literature review, this section outlines the research design employed to explore how English language teachers in rural Vietnam can be supported to act as facilitators of multilingual pedagogy through collaborative professional development. Specifically, the methodology addresses the implementation and evaluation of TAGs as a model for fostering multilingual practices, and advancing female teacher leadership in under-resourced educational contexts.

3.1 Research questions

This project was supported by the British Council ELTRA funding call, which included a specific requirement to address gender equality. Hence, to complement our vision of English language teachers as agents of multilingualism, we incorporated an explicit agenda to tackle a related social issue: the lack of leadership opportunities for women. While Vietnam has made significant efforts to promote gender equality since the Vietnam War, barriers persist for women seeking leadership roles in various sectors of society (Hong, 2020). English language teaching is a profession largely dominated by women, yet we suspected leadership within the field might remain male-dominated or structurally limited. We designed this project as a leadership opportunity for female teachers to drive positive change in their communities with the aim of fostering long-term, practical shifts in gender power relations, roles and structural inequalities.

This project builds on an evolving body of research and practice that recognises the urgency of adopting multilingual approaches in education, particularly in linguistically and ethnically diverse contexts such as Vietnam. By leveraging the experience and potential of English language teachers, particularly women in the profession, we aimed to empower English language teachers to lead contextually grounded, socially responsive change. We recognised TAGs as a professional development tool and as a platform for promoting teacher agency, multilingual pedagogy and gender-inclusive leadership.

The guiding research questions of the project were as follows:

1. What are the professional development needs perceived by Vietnamese teachers concerning the teaching of multilingual students?
2. To what extent are TAGs an effective strategy for promoting a) teacher learning and b) female English language teacher leadership regarding multilingualism among Vietnamese teachers?

3.2 Context and participants

This study was conducted in two northern provinces of Vietnam, Lang Son and Son La, which are characterised by their high proportions of ethnic minority populations and challenging socio-economic conditions. These provinces serve diverse student populations, including Tay, Hmong, Nung, Dao, and San Chi communities. Many students in these regions speak minority languages at home and enter formal education with limited or no proficiency in Vietnamese (Kinh), the official language of instruction. Despite this linguistic diversity, mainstream teacher education in Vietnam offers minimal preparation on multilingual strategies or support for minority language learners.

To ensure local relevance and sustainability, the project brought together UK- and Vietnam-based researchers and teacher educators. Four Vietnam-based English language teacher educators collaborated with the research team in the design and delivery of the teacher training, and later, in mentoring the female English language teachers in running their TAGs and collecting data regarding the TAGs. These teacher educators were based at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University. The core research team provided the teacher educators with two training sessions, on multilingual education and TAGs as a professional development approach, to maintain alignment on key concepts and project objectives. The project also recruited research assistants from the same university to ensure all interviews could be undertaken in the local language.

A total of 45 teachers participated in the project, organised into 15 TAGs. Each TAG consisted of one female English language teacher and two subject teachers from the same school. Participants were recruited in collaboration with university partners and local Departments of Education and Training (DOETs). School leaders nominated female English language teachers to form triads with two subject teachers. While recruitment followed hierarchical structures, participation was voluntary and incentivised with an honorarium. The selection of only female English language teachers as TAG leaders aligned with the

project's goal of promoting women's leadership in education, addressing the broader issue of gender inequality in Vietnam (Hong, 2020).

3.3 Study phases

The study followed three main phases: preparation and needs analysis, implementation, and evaluation.

Phase 1

In the first phase, the research team first obtained ethical approvals from Sheffield Hallam University and sought alignment with ethical regulations in Vietnam. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including agreement on the purpose, duration, data usage and the right to withdraw. All data was anonymised and securely stored on university-protected servers. A memorandum of understanding, grounded in the Chatham House Rule, a principle that promotes open discussion while ensuring confidentiality, was co-constructed to foster collaboration, trust and respect within TAGs.

Once ethical clearance was obtained, the researchers conducted pre-implementation interviews with 15 female English language teachers and 15 subject teachers to identify their professional development needs, and understand current beliefs and practices around multilingualism. Findings informed the co-design of a six-hour 'Agents of Multilingualism' training programme, which was collaboratively developed with four local teacher educators. A team-building workshop was held with the local teacher educators, where we identified which existing knowledge we could draw on and which new content needed to be delivered. Then, the training content was designed with the consultation of the local teacher educators, and the *TAG Resource Book* co-designed with them.

While designing the *TAG Resource Book*, we reviewed materials from other multilingual contexts, including the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al., 2016) and other work on the importance and implementation of English language teacher and content teacher collaboration and collaborative teaching (e.g. Davison, 2006; Pavon-Vázquez & Méndez-García, 2017; Pham & Unaldi, 2022; Wassell et al., 2019). We shared the initial framework with the teacher educators and asked them to create context-specific activities for TAGs. These were further reviewed by the UK team.

TAG Resource Book

The *TAG Resource Book* provided a structure to follow for teachers. It was designed in English but was later translated to Vietnamese (Kinh) for the non-English subject teacher participants. It is

important to note that some external resources signposted in the *TAG Resource Book* were in English (i.e. some references, videos, etc.). Hence, translating the resource book has not provided full access to all the resources.

The TAG structure was designed to support a gradual progression from raising awareness to taking action. Each TAG followed a structured sequence of sessions, including 2 phases: a preparation phase where teachers engaged with background readings, videos or classroom tasks, and a collaborative meeting. The four TAG meetings were organised as follows:

- TAG1: Students' linguistic profiles and how they affect learning: Teachers explored the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their students and considered how these linguistic resources impact classroom engagement and learning outcomes.
- TAG2: Reflections on beliefs and practices about language use in the classroom: This session focused on examining personal and institutional beliefs about language and how these beliefs influence their teaching practice.
- TAG3: Multilingual teaching practices: Teachers were introduced to practical strategies to integrate students' home languages into everyday instruction, including translanguaging techniques.
- TAG4: Planning for continuing professional development: The final session guided teachers to create a professional development plan for sustained development in multilingual teaching.

Phase 2

The second phase involved preparing the teachers through the delivery of the 'Agents of Multilingualism' training programme to the 15 female English language teachers and the implementation of the intervention through the organisation of TAGs in teacher triads.

The 'Agents of Multilingualism' training

The teacher training programme consisted of two three-hour sessions focusing on 1) understanding the role of language in education and multilingual pedagogies; and 2) building facilitation skills for leading TAGs. Considering both topics were new input to the teachers, the training included some aspects of lecture-style delivery on key concepts of multilingual pedagogy and TAGs. However, there were also opportunities for small group discussions, reflection, and sharing teaching practice. Based on participant feedback, we noticed that the first session on multilingual pedagogy was found to be quite content-heavy by the teachers. Hence, we adapted the second session on the TAGs to be more

practical, and we also revisited some aspects of the first session to ensure key concepts were clarified before teachers were expected to share and explain these with colleagues.

The English language teachers were introduced to the *TAG Resource Book* before the second training session and invited to review it and provide feedback, some of which was incorporated into the final version of the book.

Implementation of TAGs

After the training, each English language teacher led four online TAG meetings with their school-based triads, scheduled fortnightly. Structured by the collaboratively designed *TAG Resource Book* and supported by local teacher educators, these meetings focused on addressing challenges of linguistic diversity in classrooms, sharing strategies, and reflecting on teaching practices.

Each TAG was monitored by a teacher educator. There were five teacher educators: the Vietnam-based project co-investigator and the four teacher educators recruited to the project. Each teacher educator monitored three TAGs. According to the teacher educators' records, all participants in each TAG attended all four meetings, except for one instance when a subject teacher in TAG9 was absent from Meeting 3 due to urgent work commitments. Most meetings were scheduled in the evenings or at weekends to accommodate the participants' busy work schedules. Each TAG meeting lasted approximately one hour. The English language teachers took the initiative in arranging the meetings, creating the meeting links, and informing the teacher educators to join. Although a few meetings had to be postponed due to unexpected conflicts in members' schedules, they were generally rescheduled within the same assigned week.

The original idea of having teacher educators in these meetings was for data collection reasons. They were supposed to record meetings, maintain reflective journals, and support the English language teachers in navigating TAG leadership. The required presence of teacher educators meant that these meetings were held online despite the fact that these teachers were based in the same school. During the fieldwork, the role of the teacher educators in TAGs evolved, and this will be discussed in greater detail in the Findings section.

Phase 3

In the third phase, researcher assistants conducted the post-implementation interviews. All the data, except for the TAG meeting audios, was then transcribed, translated and analysed. The TAG

meeting audios were analysed and shared in summary form with the UK-based research team. A thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used. Initial coding was deductively informed by the project's research questions, with additional themes identified inductively. Vietnamese research assistants and UK-based researchers conducted independent analyses before collaboratively finalising the coding framework. Gender was treated as a cross-cutting theme throughout the analysis, exploring how female leadership unfolded within TAGs and examining intersections with teachers' linguistic backgrounds, school settings and community contexts.

3.4 Data set

The data set collected and analysed for the study included:

- pre-implementation interviews with 15 English language teachers and 15 subject teachers to understand their existing beliefs, experiences and perceived needs related to multilingual teaching
- audio recordings of 60 TAG meetings (4 meetings per TAG group – numbered TAG1-a, TAG1-b, etc.)
- reflective journals and field notes maintained fortnightly by the English language teachers and teacher educators
- post-implementation interviews with 14 English language teachers (as one English teacher dropped out and the associated subject teachers joined another TAG) and 13 subject teachers (as the subject teachers in TAG5 and TAG11 were unable to arrange an interview due to time constraints) to understand whether there had been any changes to their perceptions and practices related to multilingual teaching.

For each TAG, teacher educators attended and wrote reflection notes assessing the effectiveness of the group. These reflections evaluated some key aspects such as level of collaboration among members, depth of discussion, length of the meetings, extent of teacher educators' intervention, evaluation of leadership roles within the group, and an overall assessment of growth. Among these, the richest data to answer the research questions was found to be in the pre- and post-intervention interviews and teacher educator journal entries.



4

Findings

The findings below are organised according to the study's research questions. First, we report on the professional development needs perceived by Vietnamese teachers regarding the teaching of multilingual students. We then present findings concerning the extent to which TAGs serve as an effective strategy for promoting teacher learning, and fostering female English teacher leadership on multilingualism among Vietnamese teachers. In this section, data is labelled using the following notation system: pre-intervention interview (Pre-I), post-intervention interview (Post-I), TAG group numbers, each initially consisting of one English language teacher and two other subject teachers (TAG1, TAG2, etc.), English language teacher (ELT), subject teacher (ST), and teacher educator (TE).

4.1 What are the professional development needs perceived by Vietnamese teachers concerning the teaching of multilingual students?

At the start of the project, we interviewed 15 English language teachers and 15 other subject teachers to explore their understanding of their teaching context and to identify their professional development needs for teaching in multilingual settings.

Our findings confirmed the initial assumption that teachers are largely unprepared to teach ethnic minority students, who often come from diverse linguistic backgrounds with little or no understanding of the national (and school) language. However, the majority of teachers noted that it was possible for teachers to receive proficiency certificates in minority languages. While most minority teachers reported holding certificates in their own languages, some Kinh teachers also pursued formal study and certification in minority languages. This formal recognition of minority language knowledge represents a positive step towards preparing teachers for multilingual classrooms. Nonetheless, the data revealed that this, in itself, was insufficient; most teachers did not perceive a clear connection between knowing a minority language and using it as a pedagogical resource in their teaching.

Most teachers agreed that ethnic minority students performed at a lower academic level compared to their Kinh peers. These students were frequently described as slow learners, shy, and unmotivated. Teachers consistently identified the language barrier experienced by these students as a significant challenge in the classroom:

They speak Hmong, but in class, we still have to reinforce their Vietnamese. For first graders, we have to learn Hmong ourselves to translate for them, as they don't fully understand Vietnamese yet. Their Vietnamese is much weaker, mainly because they live in remote areas with limited interaction with Kinh speakers. We often have to repeat things multiple times for them to understand. Their pronunciation of Vietnamese can be hard to grasp, requiring us to listen carefully. (TAG12-ELT-11)

Some students primarily communicate in their local languages at home and in their communities. Their proficiency in Vietnamese is limited, which results in slower comprehension of lessons taught in the standard language compared to their classmates. (TAG14-ST-11)

Most students can understand and express themselves well in Vietnamese. However, students from more remote areas may struggle with speaking fluently. They know what they want to say, but they sometimes find it difficult to express in Vietnamese. Some students who transition from their ethnic language to Vietnamese may have pronunciation issues. (TAG3-ELT-11)

According to the teachers, the language barrier was most prominent during the first years of schooling, as pupils transitioned into the Vietnamese language alongside adapting to formal education itself. Many children entered school with little or no exposure to Kinh, necessitating their simultaneous immersion in both a new linguistic environment and the national curriculum:

Regarding our students, they do face language barriers. However, we follow the Ministry of Education's curriculum and teach in the official language, Vietnamese. The challenges are more apparent in Grades 1 and 2, where teachers sometimes need to use the students' mother tongue. For example, Hmong students often struggle with counting in Vietnamese, so sometimes teachers have to use a bit of Hmong, especially for counting numbers with first graders. (TAG11-ST-1)

All my students are Tày and Nùng. In class they use Vietnamese, but among themselves they speak Tày and Nùng. Students in Grades 1–2 are not yet fluent in Vietnamese; by Grade 3 they are more proficient. Parents speak Tày or Nùng, so families and the school prioritise Vietnamese. Some students, particularly those from Zone 3, speak more slowly and learn more slowly, except for a few gifted ones. Teachers often repeat explanations for students to understand. (TAG5-ST-1)

Most participant teachers worked in schools with a high proportion of ethnic minority pupils. Eighteen out of thirty teachers reported knowing one or more minority languages, either due to shared ethnic backgrounds or through formal language learning. However, due to the strong encouragement for the national language to be taught at schools, the use of minority languages in classrooms was somehow controversial. Although there were no explicit policies prohibiting their use, Kinh was implicitly prioritised, perceived by teachers as the language most strongly associated with academic achievement and social mobility:

In our teaching, we encourage students to use Vietnamese and limit the use of their ethnic languages. I'm not worried about them forgetting their ethnic languages, as even ethnic teachers use Vietnamese. They only use ethnic languages when necessary to clarify things students don't understand. The school doesn't have any strict policies about which languages should be used. (TAG10-ST-1)

The national curriculum requires them to know Vietnamese, so I don't see it as an issue or a requirement to apply their languages. There's no mandate to use Vietnamese, but they need it to learn. (TAG13-ST-1)

Vietnamese is the mandatory language in class. Teachers only use a little ethnic language when students don't understand ... I encourage students to use the national language rather than other languages because teachers don't always know Tày to communicate. All teachers discourage the use of ethnic languages in school. (TAG2-ELT-1)

At our school, about 90 per cent of the students are Nung, and around 10 per cent are Dao. While the students sometimes speak their ethnic languages to each other, they use Vietnamese in the classroom. In my English lessons, I encourage them to use English as much as possible to create a communicative environment ... In our area, students are encouraged to use Vietnamese at school, but we don't prohibit them from using their ethnic languages since that's part of their identity. However, in class, they mostly understand that they should speak Vietnamese to communicate with teachers and classmates, so they don't use their ethnic languages much. We don't ban it, because that's part of their culture, and it wouldn't be right to do so. But we do encourage them to use Vietnamese as much as possible. (TAG3-ELT-1)

I teach Vietnamese to the students, and their ethnic language doesn't contribute much to their learning; in fact, it often hinders it. They think in Dao. They communicate daily with their parents and friends at school in Dao. Our efforts are quite determined to encourage students to speak Vietnamese at school and communicate with each other in Vietnamese. This way, they will think in Vietnamese and communicate better, leading to faster understanding. However, we haven't achieved this yet. They still think in Dao and speak in Dao. When they read a request, they have to do two things: first, read it in Vietnamese; second, translate it into Dao to think about it. I see it as a hindrance rather than an advantage. (TAG7-ST-11)

Although teachers were largely unaware of any formal language policy at their schools, there was strong consensus that minority languages were not to be used in teaching or communication with the school:

The state policy clearly prioritises preserving culture and ethnic identity. They will not abandon their language, and in the Dao community, they still use it. We also want to preserve that identity, but we need some way for the Dao language and other ethnic languages to no longer be an obstacle but rather an advantage. I personally have not found that yet. Because the textbooks are common and use standard Vietnamese. The language of ethnic minority students is only a small part, so it cannot be widely used. (TAG7-ST-11)

Occasionally, I use the ethnic language, but only rarely because the teachers don't allow the use of ethnic languages in class. If you use it, they won't agree, especially the culture teachers who made that rule. (TAG8-ELT-11)

When the project objectives were shared, many teachers expressed uncertainty regarding the feasibility of incorporating ethnic minority languages in classroom instruction, largely due to the priority given to Kinh and the constraints of the curriculum. Teachers identified the need for practical strategies, resources, and targeted professional development to support multilingual teaching:

I believe that if we want to carry it [inclusion of native languages into the lessons] out, specific methodological guidance and supporting materials are needed so that teachers know how to apply it. (TAG1-ST-11)

To do this [integrating pupils' multilingualism in the curriculum], I would need more resources and professional development support. However, some major obstacles are the school's limited facilities, particularly the lack of internet and computers. (TAG13-ELT-11)

I think more professional development support is needed. (TAG14-ELT-11)

If I were to integrate multilingualism into my teaching, I think the most important support would come from the school. That's essential. Additionally, resources like guidelines or professional groups to consult with would help me improve my expertise. Without those resources, I wouldn't know where to start or how to approach teaching such students. So, I believe resources, school support, and professional development are necessary. (TAG15-ELT-11)

In response to these reported professional development needs, we developed a teacher training session and accompanying TAG Resource Book designed to provide practical resources and methodological support for teachers working in multilingual classrooms.

4.2 To what extent are TAGs an effective strategy for promoting a) teacher learning and b) female English language teacher leadership regarding multilingualism among Vietnamese teachers?

This project introduced TAGs as a mechanism to promote linguistic inclusion through teacher learning and collaboration. English language teachers received training in multilingual pedagogies, and facilitated TAGs using the project *TAG Resource Book*. The extent to which TAGs serve as an effective strategy for promoting teacher learning and female English language teacher leadership regarding multilingualism among Vietnamese teachers is structured in four sections: teacher learning, collaboration, female English teacher leadership, and enablers and barriers.

TAGs and teacher learning

While analysing teacher learning, we looked for evidence for changes in teachers' perceptions as well as pedagogical change. Teacher learning was evidenced primarily through self-reported shifts in perceptions and classroom practices. Participation in TAGs supported teachers in reframing their understanding of multilingualism, from viewing it as a pedagogical obstacle to recognising it as a resource for student learning:

Previously, I thought multilingualism simply meant using English or other foreign languages. However, I now understand that ethnic languages are also a form of multilingualism. Allowing students to use their ethnic language helps them grasp lessons better, as they can transition between languages more naturally. (TAG13, ELT, Post-I)

Before learning about this project, I had only heard of the concept of multilingualism in a vague way, and it felt very unfamiliar to me. But after joining the project and experiencing it first-hand, I was like, 'Wow! If students are allowed to speak their mother tongue in the classroom, they will feel so happy and proud.' I myself am from an ethnic minority group, so realising that my own ethnic language is accepted in the classroom made me feel truly happy.

When students can use their mother tongue comfortably during lessons, they also become more confident and no longer feel hesitant or ashamed of their language. (TAG3, ST, Post-I)

Teachers reported engaging with multilingual strategies such as translanguaging and language-aware teaching and feeling encouraged to trial these in their classrooms. For many, this resulted in pedagogical shifts, including a move away from monolingual norms that had previously gone unquestioned:

I have changed a lot through this project. Before joining, I didn't pay much attention to multilingualism and didn't fully understand it. However, after participating, I realised what multilingual students are like and that I actually have such students in my class. This helped me adjust my teaching methods to better suit them. I also learnt about translanguaging techniques and teaching methods for multilingual students that I hadn't known before. The biggest change is in the school's general approach. Previously, most teachers required students to use only one language – Vietnamese – in the classroom. However, through this course, we have shifted our mindset. Now, we encourage students to use their own languages in learning and respect their linguistic backgrounds. (TAG10, ELT, Post-I)

For others, the training allowed them to name and systematise previously intuitive practices, giving teachers a clearer pedagogical rationale for what they were already doing:

I learnt that I could apply techniques such as translanguaging and code-switching in teaching. In fact, I had unconsciously been doing these things before, but I didn't know what they were called. Thanks to the project, I now have a clearer understanding of these concepts. (TAG3, ELT, Post-I)

Teachers repeatedly raised the need for more practical examples and context specific materials to moderate their teaching practice:

I would like more in-depth training on how to teach reading comprehension skills to primary school students. We need more specific videos, model classroom lesson so that we can implement this in schools; we need supporting materials. (TAG1-ST-Post-I)

At the moment, I still have concerns about how to implement multilingual education effectively in schools because we need more visual materials to help everyone understand it better. As teachers, we really need resources like sample lessons and teaching demonstrations. It's not enough to have just theories because the gap between theory and practice is quite significant. (TAG1-ST-Post-I)

I would also like to observe model lessons to see how multilingual practices are implemented in English classrooms. Since each subject has its own characteristics, multilingual approaches should be adapted accordingly. (TAG11-ELT-Post-I)

There should be a detailed guide on how to apply multilingual education in specific situations. In the future, I think this project could be implemented in a specific school as a model so that teachers can observe the methods being used and learn how to apply them on a larger scale. (TAG10-ELT-Post -I)

Reports of increased student engagement and motivation were common among teachers who adopted multilingual practices. Teachers reported that their students became more confident and comfortable using their mother tongue in peer discussion:

Using all three languages – their ethnic language, the national language, and English – helps foster a closer bond between teachers and students. When I use my students' mother tongue, they feel respected and find it easier to connect with me. This not only supports their learning but also boosts their confidence in the classroom. (TAG8, ELT, Post-I)

In the past, teachers were not aware of multilingualism and did not allow students to use their native language in class. However, after learning about multilingual education, teachers now encourage students to use multiple languages. This approach has proven beneficial, as it helps students understand lessons better. When students can express themselves in their mother tongue, they grasp concepts more thoroughly. (TAG10, ST, Post-I)

The ripple effect of multilingual pedagogies was also evident, as teachers began to advocate for inclusive strategies beyond their immediate subject area:

After I learnt that, I shared it with teachers who teach cultural subjects, such as maths and Vietnamese. There was a first-grade teacher who said she was very hesitant and didn't want her students to speak in Hmong. But there are many first graders who have just started school. They only speak Hmong and do not fully understand Kinh... Once the children understand, they feel very happy, so teachers and students will be closer. (TAG15, ELT, Post-I)

I've observed that students are more engaged in lessons and are eager for me to incorporate more ethnic languages into class activities. (TAG4, ST, Post-I)

Given that most participating teachers were themselves from ethnic minority backgrounds, these pedagogical shifts were interwoven with changes in linguistic identity. Teachers spoke about valuing their own languages in new ways, with some framing the use of their mother tongue in teaching as a matter of personal and professional pride:

What I like the most is that I can use my mother tongue when teaching, conserving my mother tongue.
(TAG13, ST, Post-I)

If that's the case, if there's a clear method and document, then that's really a good thing for ethnic minorities. Will increase confidence in being ethnic. That 'my ethnic language is also used in my classes', and 'I am very proud of that'. I myself am an ethnic person. If that were the case, I would feel very proud. It's a bit of a confidence thing for me. (TAG3, ST, Pre-I)

The structured nature of TAG meetings created spaces for reflection and professional exchange. Teachers reported that TAGs enabled cross-subject sharing, which had been rare prior to the project, broadening discussions about the role of language in learning beyond English classrooms.

Collaboration in TAGs

Collaboration within TAGs emerged as a critical factor supporting teacher learning and pedagogical change. In more effective TAGs, structured dialogue facilitated professional exchange and collective problem solving. Teachers consistently described TAGs as supportive spaces:

Through this project, I've shared my experiences with some colleagues. Some teachers of other subjects have also started to confidently apply these strategies. I feel that there are now more great ideas, and I hope that in the future, more integrated methods will be introduced into teaching [...]. Each subject requires a different approach, but by sharing with each other, we can learn from our colleagues' experiences and apply them to our own subjects.
(TAG2, ELT, Post-I)

I learnt how to implement each activity and collaborate effectively with other members. Every participating teacher had their own expertise since we teach different subjects... which allowed me to learn a lot from each field.
(TAG7, ELT, Post-I)

I think that during the process, when we both implement and share, it not only benefits colleagues but also helps me improve my own teaching skills. As a result, my lessons become more effective. (TAG8, ST, Post-I)

For some, participation in TAGs also reduced professional isolation, contributing to improved emotional well-being and more proactive teaching practices:

Previously, my work was heavily influenced by my feelings and moods. But after studying this issue, I realised that many other teachers shared similar approaches. Recognising this made me feel more at ease [...]. Applying practical language methods in the classroom has made me more proactive. I no longer feel exhausted or have the negative emotions I once did. (TAG7, ST, Post-I)

Through working together, the three of us have become closer. Our professional relationship, as well as our personal bond, has strengthened – we are more open and understanding of each other. We now know what we can share with one another, and I'm truly grateful for that. (TAG2, ELT, Post-I)

Yes, I do [feel closer to the other teachers]. Normally, each of us teaches a different subject, so we don't interact much. But through this group, we had the chance to exchange teaching methods and learn from each other, which brought us closer. (TAG2, ST, Post-I)

Working across subjects towards a shared purpose played a central role in fostering collegial trust and teacher well-being, resulting in sustained meaningful professional dialogue around supporting multilingual students.

Observation notes from teacher educators confirmed a gradual increase in teachers' engagement and collaboration within TAGs, reinforcing findings from the interviews. Teachers became more proactive over time, contributing ideas, asking questions, and drawing connections between their own and others' classroom practice. In more effective TAGs, peer support was clearly visible, with members fostering a collegial learning environment:

The group became increasingly friendly and open. Their sharing was sincere. Every teacher shared the talking time equally. One participant was active; sometimes, she even took the initiative to share in the discussion with sharp insights. Nonetheless, the English teacher was still the one who understood the project most and led the group very well. (TAG4, TE, Meeting 4).

High level of openness and rapport. Participants openly shared their ideas, challenges, and disagreements without hesitation. The art teacher explicitly and genuinely expressed challenges in seeing a fit for translanguaging techniques to her subject but still participated and indicated she would revisit the topic later. (TAG3, TE, Meeting 4)

However, in some TAGs, there was little observable change in collaboration among group members, largely due to the limited effectiveness of TAG leaders in facilitating discussions and guiding group processes. When leadership was weak or passive, meetings tended to follow the *TAG Resource Book* mechanically with minimal interaction, critical questioning or exchanging of teaching experience. As reflected in teacher educators' observations, participants in these groups often waited for prompts and relied heavily on the teacher educator to move the discussion forward:

Openness was limited. The English teacher appeared reserved and less forthcoming with their thoughts. The participants mentioned difficulties in a very formal and generic way. They vaguely listed them without going into description or providing further context. The TAG leader showed minimal effort to foster an inclusive environment, as she didn't summarise nor ask further

questions of clarification but just moved on after each person's turn. (TAG2, TE, Meeting 4).

Female English teacher leadership

A key aim of the project was to position female English language teachers as leaders of multilingual pedagogy. This was based on two working assumptions: that female teachers had limited access to leadership roles and that English language teachers, by virtue of their language teaching expertise, were well-placed to champion multilingual approaches.

The first assumption was not supported by the data. Most participants reported that leadership roles in their schools were predominantly held by women, with family responsibilities cited as the only significant constraint on female leadership:

In primary schools, most leadership positions are held by female teachers, as male teachers typically work at the secondary and high school levels. For example, at my school, there are three management positions, with only one held by a male, while the other two leaders are female. The same applies to other schools, where sometimes all three leadership positions are occupied by women. Therefore, I don't see any significant barriers for female teachers in leadership roles. (TAG9, ELT, Post-I)

There were no barriers since we were all teachers in the same school and had a collegial relationship. Working with female teachers felt the same as working with male teachers. (TAG10, ELT, Post-I)

Nevertheless, for some of the English language teachers, it was their first experience in a leadership role. The interview findings suggest that for these individuals, the opportunity to lead the TAGs greatly supported their professional growth:

My first experience with this project was quite new and exciting. I was assigned as the team leader, responsible for organising meetings and planning content, which I found enjoyable. [...] It was quite an interesting experience because, in the first TAG session, I was the guiding teacher. I had to read the content in advance, prepare the

discussion topics, and think of questions and scenarios for the other teachers. Through this, I felt that my leadership and teamwork skills improved significantly. (TAG10, ELT, Post-I)

This was my first time joining a project and forming a group with teachers from my school. At first, I was the group leader, and every time we had an online meeting, I felt nervous and didn't know where to start. But gradually, I guided my colleagues to complete the tasks better, with support from the mentor. From the second task onwards, we worked more smoothly and became better organised [...] It was very challenging. I realised I needed to learn a lot more. (TAG11, ELT, Post-I)

During the first TAGs session, I needed a lot of support from my mentor. However, in later sessions, I became more confident and was able to lead discussions, ask guiding questions, and encourage deeper conversations. My leadership skills improved, and I became more self-assured. (TAG12, ELT, Post-I)

With regard to the second assumption, findings were mixed. While many English language teachers were willing to support colleagues, they did not consistently perceive themselves as pedagogical leaders. Some articulated uncertainty about their capacity to guide peers, viewing leadership as beyond their current competencies:

Currently, I don't have the ability to support other subject teachers in helping multilingual students. However, I think it's a good idea and something I would need to learn more about to implement. (TAG14, ELT, Pre-I)

The biggest challenge I faced as a leader was time management. As a female teacher, besides teaching, I also have to take care of my family and children, so balancing work and personal life can sometimes be quite difficult. (TAG3, ELT, Post-I)

If it's just an informal discussion, I feel very confident. But if I were assigned the role of a team leader and had to directly guide or instruct on multilingual practices, I think I would still feel a bit unsure. (TAG8, ELT, Post-I)

Here, an additional layer of complexity emerged from the interviews: while some English language teachers embraced their learning and saw themselves as pedagogical leaders, they simultaneously expressed uncertainty about how to extend this leadership to colleagues teaching other subjects:

After many group discussions, I noticed that teachers from different subjects have their own ways of applying these techniques. So, for my subject, which is English, I think I am confident enough to share with my fellow English teachers. However, when it comes to all the other subjects in the school, I don't think I can do it yet – I don't feel confident enough, and I don't think I have the ability to do that. (TAG2, ELT, Post-I)

While this quotation highlights that there is still work to be done to support English language teachers in acting as agents of multilingualism for their whole school, it also foregrounds English teachers' increased awareness of subject-specific approaches to translanguaging, this being a first step towards being able to develop and lead a whole-school approach.

For several teachers, participating in the project became a process of recognising their own capacities and skills in this area. Although this did not always translate into leading others, it helped them view their expertise in a new light and as a potential resource for multilingual approaches across the whole school:

English teachers have certain advantages. First, we have a heightened sensitivity to languages since we frequently engage with multiple languages, both domestically and internationally. This makes it easier for us to adopt and adapt to multilingual teaching practices. Second, in our teaching process, we often apply some of these strategies unconsciously. When given the opportunity to study them in depth, I realised that many of the

techniques I had been using were already aligned with multilingual teaching methods. This made it easier for me to grasp and further develop my understanding of these practices.
(TAG3, ELT, Post-I)

Perceptions among subject teachers regarding ELTs' leadership potential were similarly varied. Some recognised ELTs as language experts, while others questioned the applicability of multilingual strategies outside language classrooms, suggesting a need for clearer cross-disciplinary messaging. While subject teachers often responded positively – likely out of politeness – when asked about the potential contributions of English language teachers to subject teaching, variations in the depth of their responses revealed the extent of their genuine understanding:

I think English teachers can share a lot of useful insights. However, applying the mother tongue in teaching English is quite challenging. Since students are still in the process of learning English, switching to the mother tongue might cause confusion in their learning.
(TAG3, ST, Post-I)

The fact that this subject teacher, who was teaching literacy, referred only to English language teachers' insights in relation to English instruction, and in addition repeated a common myth that multilingualism leads to confusion, suggests that this particular teacher did not grasp what we imagined as the broader role English language teachers play in supporting linguistically diverse students. This contrasts with responses from other subject teachers, who demonstrated a deeper understanding and offered more concrete reflections on the skills English language teachers bring to cross-curricular teaching:

English teachers have an advantage because they not only understand Vietnamese but are also proficient in English. This allows them to help students learn Vietnamese from the perspective of an English speaker. This is beneficial for multilingual teaching, such as using bilingual vocabulary, explaining words, or organising pair activities where students can communicate in both languages. I've noticed that English teachers have a stronger grasp of these methods and can guide teachers of cultural studies or other subjects in applying them effectively. (TAG2, ST, Post-I)

Basically, they already have the skills to guide others. By nature, they have the ability to explore and discover new methods to share with others. This skill is more developed compared to subject teachers. Recently, after receiving training and working directly with English teachers, I observed that they are capable of organising and guiding students effectively in applying multilingual practices. (TAG10, ST, Post-I)

I find the teaching strategies used by English teachers very helpful. For instance, their methods of organising word games or practising sentence structures can be adapted to my subject.
(TAG2, ST, Post-I)

By the end of the project, TAGs had created openings for English language teachers to assume leadership roles, but engagement with these roles remained uneven. A subset of eight ELTs showed clear growth: they developed confidence and organisational skills and began convening informal preparatory meetings. In contrast, six ELTs demonstrated limited progression, often citing workload, remoteness and low confidence as barriers. For these teachers, leadership tended to remain procedural – focused on scheduling TAGs rather than providing instructional guidance.

In several TAGs, subject teachers defaulted to the teacher educators for support instead of the English language teachers, reflecting weak perceptions of English language teachers' authority. The difficulty some English language teachers experienced in guiding discussions about multilingual strategies highlighted this fragility. Where subject teachers questioned the relevance of such approaches, English language teachers struggled to provide persuasive pedagogical arguments:

I did share and spend time learning and exchanging ideas with them. However, after participating for a while, I gradually spoke and shared less. I felt that the approach wasn't really effective for me, so over time, I participated less.
(TAG3, ST, Post-I)

Observation and interview data confirmed the important role that the teacher educators played within the TAGs. In some groups, the teacher educators remained largely in a leadership or authority role throughout, while in others their

leadership decreased over time as English language teachers gradually stepped into that role, as was more in line with the project's aims.

Even where this shift occurred, the ongoing mentoring provided by teacher educators in between TAG sessions remained central to the success of the project, offering reassurance, theoretical grounding and pedagogical guidance throughout:

However, during the first training session, the instructors [teacher educators] reassured us that it wasn't too complicated – we just needed to follow the steps outlined in the materials. Once I understood the process, my worries disappeared. After that, I found the project very beneficial, and I got to interact with open-minded, friendly teachers who were always willing to help us complete our tasks successfully.
(TAG1, ELT, Post-I)

Initially, I wasn't confident about sharing this approach with colleagues. But with the support of the teacher educator, I gradually became more comfortable and now feel confident enough to introduce multilingual teaching practices to other teachers. (TAG13, ELT, Post-I)

When I was elected as the team leader, I was quite overwhelmed at first because I had only worked as a teacher before and had never been a team leader or held a leadership role. However, thanks to the mentor teacher's dedicated guidance, I gradually became more confident.
(TAG2, ELT, Post-I)

I wasn't able to understand thoroughly. Thanks to the teacher educator's guidance, I could understand better. At first, I was quite confused because I couldn't grasp all the concepts. After a few sessions, with teacher educator's guidance, I could comprehend better the concepts and methods of implementation, and I could convey them to my students. With the teacher educator's guidance and exchanges with

other teachers in my group, I could apply what I've learnt to my class, and I found that my students became more relaxed, active and excited.
(TAG14, ELT, Post-I)

Overall, while TAGs offered a foundation for leadership development, English language teacher leadership remained somewhat fragile in some cases, with clearer role definition and targeted support necessary for more sustained professional leadership to emerge.

Enablers and barriers

The effectiveness of TAGs in fostering teacher learning and leadership was shaped by a constellation of enabling and constraining factors that were closely intertwined with the processes described in the preceding sections on teacher learning, collaboration and leadership.

Key enablers

1. *Institutional support and legitimacy:* Support from DOETs and school leaders lent the project credibility and facilitated teacher recruitment. This institutional backing was crucial in encouraging teachers, particularly when teachers perceived the use of minority languages as controversial to the school norms.
2. *Structured resources and mentoring:* The *TAG Resource Book* and the structured training gave teachers a clear entry point into multilingual pedagogy. This was particularly important given the widespread uncertainty and misconceptions about integrating minority languages. Teachers repeatedly highlighted that having stepwise guidance reduced anxiety and legitimised new practices. Equally vital was the ongoing mentorship from teacher educators, which scaffolded English language teachers' leadership. Effective TAGs were those where mentoring gradually receded as English language teachers gained confidence, as reflected in teacher educator observation notes.
3. *Opportunities for reflective peer learning:* The collaborative nature of TAGs created a rare professional space for cross-subject dialogue and reduced teacher isolation. These exchanges not only built collegial trust but also encouraged teachers to trial translanguaging and language-aware practices. TAGs thus functioned as both a pedagogical and emotional support mechanism.

Key barriers

1. *Entrenched monolingual norms and policy ambiguity:* Some teachers' persistent belief that 'Vietnamese-only' was the safest or most legitimate approach to instruction limited the uptake of multilingual practices. This reflects the professional development need identified earlier, where teachers described minority languages as hindrances. The absence of clear operational guidance on using home languages reinforced these ideologies.
2. *Leadership fragility among English language teachers:* Several ELTs struggled to move from procedural to pedagogical leadership. In these TAGs, meetings often became mechanical and dependent on teacher educators to sustain discussion, constraining the depth of learning and reducing the likelihood of long-term sustainability.
3. *Logistical and modal constraints:* A key barrier across TAGs was time constraints. Teachers often struggled to find adequate time for TAG activities amid their regular teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Additionally, the online format of TAG meetings, while enabling teacher educator participation, reduced opportunities for informal interactions and relationship-building. Teachers themselves noted that spontaneous, face-to-face exchanges and joint lesson planning would have deepened collaboration and practice-sharing.

4. *Need for practical, observable models:* Teachers repeatedly requested concrete examples of how to integrate home languages into specific subject lessons. In the absence of classroom modelling or peer observation, some participants – especially subject teachers – found it difficult to translate conceptual understanding into practice, limiting the degree of pedagogical change reported.

These enablers and barriers directly mirror the findings in earlier sections: teacher learning flourished when supported by clear resources and mentoring; collaboration thrived in TAGs with relational trust; and leadership growth remained fragile where institutional norms and confidence gaps persisted. This alignment underscores that sustaining multilingual pedagogical change requires not only structured professional learning but also systemic support to address policy ambiguity, leadership development, and the provision of concrete, practice-oriented examples.



5

Discussion

This study set out to answer two core research questions: 1) What are the professional development needs perceived by Vietnamese teachers concerning the teaching of multilingual students? and 2) To what extent are TAGs an effective strategy for promoting teacher learning and female English language teacher leadership regarding multilingualism? In discussing these questions, we also consider broader implications for policy, teacher education and research, particularly in rural and ethnolinguistically diverse contexts such as northern Vietnam.

5.1 Responding to teachers' professional development needs

The study confirms that many teachers – especially those teaching early grades – feel ill-equipped to work effectively with students from minority language backgrounds. While some held or pursued language proficiency certificates in minority languages, they rarely employed these in pedagogical practice. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights how teacher education in Vietnam has largely failed to prepare educators to work in linguistically diverse classrooms (Nguyen & Ha, 2023; Do & Nguyen, 2023).

The findings reinforce the notion that systemic and cultural factors contribute to a widespread deficit in multilingual awareness. Teachers frequently cited a lack of policy clarity, curriculum alignment, and usable classroom strategies as major constraints. These findings echo earlier research on monolingual bias in educational settings, which shows that teachers often regard home languages as impediments rather than assets (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Teachers in our study explicitly described minority languages as 'hindrances' to student learning or as peripheral to the formal curriculum – sentiments that reflect deep-rooted language ideologies within Vietnamese education.

While national policy in Vietnam ostensibly supports linguistic diversity, its unclear messaging has contributed to a school-level culture that tacitly discourages the use of ethnic languages (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Kosonen, 2017).

5.2 Evaluating the effectiveness of TAGs as a bottom-up strategy

The use of TAGs emerged as a promising approach to fostering teacher-led professional development in multilingual pedagogy. TAGs provided a reflective space for teachers to discuss challenges, experiment with strategies, and share experiences across disciplinary boundaries. Teachers who previously worked in isolation reported that the TAGs increased trust, collegiality and even personal well-being. These findings support the notion that collaborative professional learning communities can promote sustainable pedagogical change (Borg et al., 2020).

However, the extent of the TAGs' success varied considerably. The most effective TAGs featured proactive facilitation, regular mentoring, and a balance between structure and flexibility. In contrast, others remained procedural, relying on teacher educators for leadership and struggling to move beyond superficial dialogue. These discrepancies reveal the fragility of grassroots leadership in contexts with limited experience of distributed authority and professional autonomy.

One important insight was the role of English language teachers in catalysing change across subjects. ELTs' training in language awareness positioned them well to lead discussions on multilingual pedagogy. Yet many ELTs remained hesitant to extend their influence beyond the English classroom, suggesting the need for further support in leadership development and cross-subject collaboration. The research highlights that, while ELTs possess the linguistic and pedagogical tools, they often lack the institutional confidence or perceived legitimacy to take the lead in change among colleagues.

5.3 Empowering ethnic minority teachers: identity, leadership and belonging

A particularly significant contribution of this project was its effect on ethnic minority teachers' professional identity. Teachers from ethnic backgrounds often described increased pride in their languages and communities, and several explicitly connected the ability to use their own language in teaching to enhanced self-worth and confidence. This echoes findings from Tavares and Benediktsson (2025), who argue that empowering minority teachers through language and cultural recognition contributes to teacher agency, retention and student belonging.

Tavares and Benediktsson (2025) also emphasise that empowerment is not simply about representation but about reconfiguring institutional norms to value the linguistic and cultural capital of minority educators. The shifts observed in this study – where minority teachers began to value and integrate their home languages into teaching – can be interpreted as early signs of such reconfiguration. For these teachers, participation in TAGs not only provided methodological tools but also legitimated aspects of their identity previously marginalised by mainstream discourse.

This finding has significant implications. In contexts where the language of instruction diverges sharply from students' home languages, minority teachers can act as cultural and linguistic bridges. However, this potential can only be realised if school systems explicitly recognise and support these roles. As Tavares and Benediktsson (2025) argue, minority teachers must not only be included – they must be positioned as epistemic agents capable of transforming education systems from within.

5.4 Reflections on gender and teacher leadership

While the project initially assumed that gender might constrain leadership, findings revealed that female teachers often already held leadership roles in their schools. However, this did not automatically translate into pedagogical leadership, particularly around multilingualism. ELTs expressed doubts about their capacity to support peers and particularly colleagues from other subject areas. This indicates that leadership development must go beyond positional authority to include support in enacting change, especially across disciplines.

Leadership emerged most robustly when ELTs received sustained mentoring from teacher educators. Those who embraced the facilitation role gained confidence, organisational skills, and a sense of professional growth. Yet without such support, others struggled. This variability underscores the importance of targeted scaffolding in leadership development – particularly for pedagogical change that challenges dominant norms.

5.5 Limitations and future research

While this project offers meaningful insights into multilingual pedagogy and teacher leadership in rural Vietnam, it is important to reflect critically on its limitations. These fall into two distinct areas: limitations in the implementation of the TAG model, and limitations in how the project and its outcomes were evaluated.

Limitations in implementation

One of the central constraints was the online delivery of TAGs, necessitated by logistical and geographical challenges. This format allowed for broader and more consistent participation from teacher educators, whose mentoring and modelling were vital to the project's success. However, it also constrained opportunities for informal, face-to-face interaction among teachers. Several participants reported difficulty building relational trust or sustaining momentum between sessions – factors that can be essential to deep professional learning and local ownership of change. The lack of in-person interaction may have particularly limited teachers' ability to engage in spontaneous peer feedback, co-planning or classroom observations.

Limitations in evaluation

On the evaluation side, the primary limitation was the reliance on self-reported data. While interviews and TAG session recordings offered valuable insight into teacher beliefs, identity and leadership, they could not provide direct evidence of how multilingual pedagogies were enacted in practice. We were unable to observe classrooms or gather systematic data on student responses, limiting our ability to assess the full impact of pedagogical change.

Furthermore, the time-bound nature of the project meant that we captured only short-term shifts in teacher thinking and confidence. The longer-term sustainability of TAGs and of newly developed practices remains an open question. It is possible that without continued institutional support or mentoring, TAGs may lose momentum or revert to more conventional patterns of continuing professional development.

Future research directions

In light of these limitations and the emergent insights of the project, we propose several directions for future research. Here are some research questions that could expand on the current project:

- How do multilingual pedagogical practices actually unfold in classrooms over time? Classroom-based research is needed to document how teachers apply translanguaging, bilingual scaffolding and other strategies – and how students respond to these in terms of engagement, identity and learning outcomes.
- What are the long-term effects of TAG participation on teacher leadership and instructional practice? Longitudinal studies could track whether teachers who led or engaged actively in TAGs continue to initiate change after the withdrawal of external mentors.
- How do students perceive shifts in language practices in their schools? Including student voices would offer crucial insights into how multilingual strategies affect learners' sense of belonging, confidence and participation.

By pursuing these questions, future research can move beyond demonstrating the possibility of change to understanding the processes, conditions, and relational dynamics that make it lasting and transformative.

6

Recommendations

6.1 For teachers

- *Recognise home languages as learning assets:* Our study found that many teachers, especially those from majority language backgrounds, either underestimated or misunderstood the value of students' linguistic repertoires. Several participants initially expressed concerns that using multiple languages might confuse learners. However, through participation in TAGs, teachers began to view students' home languages as a bridge to learning, identity and participation. This shift underscores the importance of fostering professional reflection around multilingual pedagogies and highlights the need for teachers to recognise the benefits of drawing on learners' home languages to enhance teaching effectiveness.
- *Engage in peer learning through sustained collaboration:* The TAG model adopted in this project proved to be a powerful vehicle for professional growth. Teachers who participated in TAGs reported feeling less isolated and more open to pedagogical experimentation. These groups fostered reflective dialogue and challenged long-held assumptions about linguistic homogeneity. As such, teachers should advocate for, and take ownership of, collaborative learning spaces – especially those that prioritise problem solving in local, multilingual contexts. To make this work in practice, teachers might begin by setting up small, interest-based groups that meet regularly (e.g. fortnightly) to analyse student demographics, classroom incidents, trial simple pedagogical interventions, and collectively troubleshoot challenges emerging from their multilingual classrooms. By taking ownership of these structured, ongoing conversations, teachers can cultivate collaborative learning spaces that directly support local problem solving. The *TAG Resource Book* used in this project could be used as a reference.

6.2 For teacher educators

- *Provide sustained mentoring to scaffold teacher leadership:* The project revealed that English language teachers often lacked confidence in stepping into facilitative or leadership roles, even when they held pedagogical expertise. However, those who received regular mentoring from teacher educators were more likely to take initiative, lead TAG sessions and support peers. This underscores the need for mentoring that goes beyond one-off workshops and offers long-term relational support, including feedback, co-facilitation and leadership modelling.
- *Contextualise pedagogy with local linguistic realities:* Teachers repeatedly called for practical, situated examples of how multilingual strategies could work in rural Vietnamese classrooms. CPD sessions that rely on abstract theory or decontextualised examples risk further alienating teachers. Educators should therefore design training that incorporates local languages, local school conditions, and real examples from peer practice – especially highlighting successful uses of minority languages in core subjects.
- *Facilitate cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration:* While English language teachers gained confidence in applying multilingual strategies, subject teachers were often less sure about how to adapt these ideas to content areas such as science or maths. This disciplinary divide was a recurring theme in the data. To bridge it, teacher educators should create opportunities for interdisciplinary teams to explore how multilingual practices can be adapted across the curriculum. Co-teaching, peer observation and joint lesson planning could serve as useful entry points.

- *Foster linguistic confidence, especially for minority teachers:* Teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently described a lack of confidence in integrating their own languages into teaching, often due to internalised deficit narratives or institutional norms that marginalise non-Vietnamese languages. Yet when these teachers were invited to use their home languages as pedagogical tools, they experienced greater professional affirmation and pride. Teacher educators and teacher communities should actively encourage minority teachers to draw on their linguistic and cultural capital and should recognise this as a strength rather than a deviation from standard practice.

6.3 For policymakers

- *Clarify and communicate multilingual language policy:* The research highlighted widespread misconceptions about national language policy, with many teachers unsure whether using ethnic minority languages in class was allowed or encouraged. While Vietnam’s official stance is nominally supportive of linguistic diversity, teachers often interpret policy through the lens of Vietnamese-only schooling norms. Clearer messaging, publicly disseminated examples, and explicit inclusion of multilingual practices in national curriculum guidance are urgently needed.
- *Institutionalise and fund professional learning communities:* The success of TAGs in this study was in part due to institutional buy-in and external support. However, sustainability remains a challenge without structural integration. Education authorities should formally recognise collaborative teacher development models like TAGs, allocate regular time within the school week for peer learning, and incentivise teacher-led inquiry with leadership credits or career progression pathways.
- *Recognise and invest in minority teacher leadership:* Our project underscored that minority teachers possess unique potential to lead educational change from within their communities, yet they are often overlooked in official training and leadership pipelines. Policymakers should develop targeted leadership programmes that explicitly recruit, train and support ethnic minority teachers – not merely as symbolic figures but as designers of inclusive pedagogies. This may involve scholarships, leadership coaching or the creation of regional hubs for minority teacher professional development.



7

Conclusion

This study explored how English language teachers in rural Vietnam can act as agents of multilingualism through locally embedded, teacher-led professional development implemented via TAGs. The project demonstrated that TAGs can foster meaningful shifts in teacher beliefs, professional identities, and in some cases, classroom practices. Teachers moved from perceiving minority languages as barriers to recognising them as valuable learning resources. For ethnic minority teachers, participation in TAGs also reinforced professional pride and validated their linguistic heritage. Collaborative work within TAGs helped reduce professional isolation and opened up new avenues for female ELTs to engage in leadership roles.

At the same time, the study highlights a significant gap in current education policy and practice: the under-recognition of home languages and of minority teachers as knowledge-holders. Despite the rich linguistic capital within rural schools, dominant monolingual norms persist, and teachers – especially those from minority backgrounds – often feel their languages and expertise remain peripheral to formal education.

A key insight from the project is that while bottom-up models of professional development – built on teacher collaboration, reflection and local leadership – can drive meaningful change, their success in this context depended on top-down scaffolding. Mentoring by teacher educators, the provision of structured resources, and institutional support from DOETs were critical to sustaining TAGs and achieving positive outcomes. Without this external guidance, the teacher-led process might have struggled to gain momentum or achieve lasting impact.

This experience underscores the importance of context-sensitive adaptations to theoretical models of teacher-led professional learning. In settings where teacher autonomy, leadership experience and collaborative capacity are still developing, bottom-up initiatives must be complemented by structured support and mentoring that build confidence, model reflective practice and legitimise new approaches within the school culture.

In sum, this project offers a nuanced contribution to the field of multilingual education and teacher professional development. It shows that sustainable pedagogical change is possible when teacher agency is nurtured through collaborative structures, but also when policy, mentorship, and resources converge to create a scaffolded pathway to teacher empowerment. By combining local ownership with strategic external support, such hybrid models can help close the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities, positioning both students' home languages and minority teachers' expertise at the heart of inclusive education.

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Appendix

Teacher Activity Group Resource Book

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Teachers of English as agents of multilingualism in rural Vietnam

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