

The Impact of Multilingualism on Second Language Acquisition: A Study of Cognitive and Linguistic Proficiency Among Ethnic Minority Groups



Nguyen Vy Ngoc

Dai Nam University, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the cognitive and linguistic differences in second language acquisition (SLA) among multilingual H'mong and Tay students compared to monolingual Kinh students in Vietnam. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examined cognitive proficiency, including working memory and cognitive flexibility, as well as linguistic proficiency in English, focusing on vocabulary size, syntactic knowledge, and phonological accuracy. Quantitative data from cognitive and linguistic tests were analyzed using MANOVA, while qualitative data from focus group discussions provided insights into the sociocultural influences on language learning.

The findings reveal that H'mong and Tay students exhibited higher cognitive proficiency, particularly in working memory and cognitive flexibility, than their monolingual Kinh peers. However, despite their cognitive advantages, multilingual students faced greater challenges in English vocabulary acquisition, syntax, and phonological accuracy, likely due to structural differences between their native languages and English. The qualitative findings highlight the role of sociocultural factors, including limited access to resources and the desire to maintain cultural identity, in shaping language learning experiences among ethnic minority students.

The study concludes that while multilingualism enhances cognitive abilities, ethnic minority students require targeted instructional support to overcome linguistic barriers in SLA. The findings have implications for language education policies, particularly in designing culturally sensitive curricula and improving access to quality English education in rural and ethnic minority communities.

KEYWORDS: Multilingualism, Second Language Acquisition, Ethnic Minority Learners, H'mong, Tay, Cognitive Proficiency, Linguistic Proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

1.1. Background to the study

Multilingualism is a pervasive phenomenon among ethnic minority groups across the world, including in Vietnam, where groups like the H'mong and Tay people live in regions where their indigenous languages coexist alongside the national language, Vietnamese, and increasingly, English as a foreign language. In such multilingual environments, learners often grow up acquiring multiple languages from a young age, and this linguistic diversity can significantly impact their cognitive and linguistic development (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). For ethnic minority students, such as those from the H'mong and Tay communities, their everyday experiences involve navigating multiple linguistic systems, which can influence their approach to learning additional languages, particularly English.

Research has highlighted that multilingual individuals tend to exhibit cognitive advantages, such as greater cognitive flexibility, working memory, and problem-solving abilities, compared to monolingual individuals (Bialystok, 2009). These cognitive benefits are believed to emerge from the need to manage multiple languages simultaneously, leading to enhanced executive functions and attentional control (Adesope et al., 2010). However, less attention has been paid to how multilingualism impacts the acquisition of third or fourth languages, particularly for students from ethnic minority groups who face both linguistic and socio-cultural challenges in formal educational settings.

The linguistic environments of H'mong and Tay students are unique in that they are often fluent in their indigenous language as their first language (L1), use Vietnamese as their second language (L2) in public life and education, and are now learning English as a third or fourth language (L3 or L4). This complex multilingual context creates opportunities for cognitive and linguistic transfer across languages but may also pose challenges due to structural differences between these languages. English, being a distant language from both H'mong and Tay in terms of typology and grammar, presents a different set of difficulties for these students (Nguyen & Burns, 2017).

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1.2. The Importance of Cognitive and Linguistic Factors in Multilingualism

Cognitive advantages, such as enhanced working memory and attentional control, are central to the success of multilingual learners in second language acquisition (SLA). Studies have shown that multilingual learners outperform monolingual learners in tasks requiring executive control, due to the constant switching between languages, which improves their cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2009). This heightened cognitive capacity may facilitate their ability to grasp new language structures, manage linguistic input, and apply metalinguistic knowledge when learning an additional language (Jessner, 2006).

For H'mong and Tay students, multilingualism may not only shape their cognitive abilities but also influence their linguistic proficiency in acquiring English. Research suggests that multilingual individuals are more adept at recognizing language patterns and understanding complex syntactic structures due to their prior experience with multiple languages (Cenoz, 2013). In particular, metalinguistic awareness, which refers to the ability to think about and analyze language structure, is often more developed in multilingual learners (Jessner, 2006). This awareness allows them to transfer linguistic knowledge from one language to another, aiding in the acquisition of vocabulary, syntax, and phonology in a new language (Cummins, 2000).

However, learning English as an additional language presents unique challenges for H'mong and Tay students due to significant differences in phonology, grammar, and vocabulary between their indigenous languages and English. For example, English is a stress-timed language, whereas H'mong is a tone-based language, which may complicate the acquisition of English phonological rules for H'mong learners (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). Similarly, the syntax of English, with its Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, differs from the indigenous languages spoken by many ethnic minorities in Vietnam, potentially creating further hurdles in English language learning (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

1.3. The Sociocultural Context of Ethnic Minority Students in Vietnam

The multilingualism of H'mong and Tay students is further shaped by their sociocultural context. Ethnic minority students in Vietnam often face additional barriers to education, including limited access to high-quality resources, cultural differences between home and school environments, and the dominance of Vietnamese as the language of instruction (Vu & Burns, 2014). These factors can exacerbate the difficulties these students experience in acquiring English, as they may receive less exposure to English compared to their Vietnamese counterparts.

Moreover, sociocultural factors play a critical role in how multilingual learners engage with language learning. Language attitudes, cultural identity, and the value placed on different languages within a community can influence students' motivation to learn and their overall success in acquiring new languages (Garcia & Wei, 2014). For example, H'mong and Tay students may have a strong cultural attachment to their indigenous languages, which can both support and complicate the learning of a foreign language like English. The sociocultural dynamics of language learning in ethnic minority communities are thus integral to understanding the cognitive and linguistic outcomes of these learners.

1.4. Rationale for the Study

Despite the growing body of research on multilingualism and SLA, there remains a gap in understanding how multilingualism affects ethnic minority students, particularly in Southeast Asia, where diverse linguistic environments are common but under-researched. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of multilingualism on English language acquisition among H'mong and Tay students, with a focus on both cognitive and linguistic factors. By comparing these multilingual learners with Vietnamese monolingual learners, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in SLA in multilingual contexts.

This study is particularly relevant in the context of Vietnam's educational goals, which emphasize the importance of English as a tool for social mobility and international engagement (Nguyen, 2011). Understanding how ethnic minority students learn English in multilingual environments can inform language policy and curriculum design, ensuring that educational programs are better tailored to the needs of these students.

1.5. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to (1) Investigate the cognitive and linguistic differences in second language acquisition between H'mong and Tay students, who are multilingual, and Vietnamese monolingual students. (2) Explore the interaction between cognitive flexibility, working memory, and linguistic proficiency in acquiring English as a foreign language among these groups. (3) Provide insights into how sociocultural factors influence the second language acquisition processes of ethnic minority students.

1.6. Research Questions

- 1.6.1. How do multilingual H'mong and Tay students differ from Vietnamese monolingual students in terms of cognitive flexibility and working memory during English language acquisition?
- 1.6.2. What are the differences in linguistic proficiency (vocabulary size, syntax, phonological accuracy) in English between multilingual H'mong and Tay students and Vietnamese monolingual students?
- 1.6.3. How do cognitive and linguistic factors interact in the process of acquiring English as a second language for multilingual ethnic minority students?

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Multilingualism and Cognitive Development*

Multilingualism has been shown to offer several cognitive advantages, particularly in areas related to executive function, working memory, and attentional control. According to Bialystok (2009), individuals who are multilingual often outperform their monolingual counterparts in tasks requiring cognitive flexibility and attentional control. This is due to the constant need to manage multiple languages, which enhances their ability to switch between tasks, ignore irrelevant information, and retain information across different contexts. These cognitive advantages are relevant in second language acquisition (SLA) contexts, as they can facilitate the learning of new languages (Adesope et al., 2010).

For ethnic minority students, such as those from the H'mong and Tay communities, these cognitive benefits could play a crucial role in their ability to learn English as a third or fourth language. Studies have shown that the constant juggling of different languages can enhance working memory, which is essential for processing new language input and storing linguistic information for future retrieval (Jessner, 2006). In multilingual learning environments, the ability to manage multiple linguistic systems may thus lead to a more efficient acquisition of new language structures and vocabulary (Cummins, 2000).

However, there is limited research specifically examining the cognitive advantages of multilingualism in ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. While Bialystok's (2009) work provides a broad understanding of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, it focuses primarily on Western contexts. The cognitive advantages observed in multilingual learners from ethnic minority backgrounds, such as the H'mong and Tay, need to be examined within the specific sociocultural and educational contexts of Vietnam (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the cognitive abilities of multilingual ethnic minority learners in their acquisition of English as a foreign language.

2.2. **Linguistic Proficiency in Multilingual Learners**

Linguistic proficiency in SLA is often measured across various domains, including vocabulary acquisition, syntactic understanding, and phonological accuracy. Research on multilingualism and SLA suggests that multilingual learners are generally more metalinguistically aware than monolingual learners. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to reflect on and manipulate linguistic structures, which enables learners to recognize language patterns and apply this knowledge to new languages (Jessner, 2006). For H'mong and Tay students, who have already acquired multiple languages, this heightened metalinguistic awareness may facilitate the acquisition of English, particularly in terms of grammar and vocabulary (Nguyen & Burns, 2017).

A study by Cenoz (2013) found that multilingual learners tend to have an advantage in vocabulary acquisition, as they are better equipped to recognize cognates and word formation rules across languages. Although English does not share many lexical similarities with the indigenous languages of the H'mong and Tay communities, the ability to identify patterns and make connections between languages may still aid in vocabulary development. Additionally, multilingual learners often show greater sensitivity to syntactic structures, which can help them acquire complex grammatical forms in a new language (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

However, challenges arise when the linguistic distance between languages is significant. In the case of H'mong and Tay students, English is structurally different from their home languages and from Vietnamese. For instance, H'mong is a tonal language, while English relies on stress patterns and intonation. This difference may create difficulties for H'mong learners in acquiring English pronunciation and phonological rules (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). Similarly, syntactic differences between English and the home languages of H'mong and Tay students may present challenges in mastering English sentence structures, especially in written and spoken forms (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

2.3. **Sociocultural Factors and Multilingualism in Ethnic Minority Communities**

The sociocultural context of ethnic minority students plays a significant role in shaping their multilingual experiences and language learning outcomes. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that language learning is not only a cognitive process but also a social one, influenced by the learner's environment, cultural identity, and interaction with others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). For ethnic minority students like those from the H'mong and Tay communities, language learning is deeply intertwined with their cultural background and the value placed on different languages within their community.

Research has shown that ethnic minority students often face additional challenges in formal education, particularly in multilingual settings. Vu and Burns (2014) argue that ethnic minority students in Vietnam experience disparities in access to educational resources, which can hinder their English language acquisition. In addition, the use of Vietnamese as the primary language of instruction in schools may create a linguistic barrier for H'mong and Tay students, who may not be as proficient in Vietnamese as their peers from the majority Kinh ethnic group. These sociocultural barriers can affect students' motivation and engagement with English learning, as they may feel alienated from the language of instruction and its cultural associations (Nguyen, 2011).

Language attitudes within the community also play a crucial role in shaping language acquisition. Garcia and Wei (2014) suggest that multilingual learners' success in acquiring a new language is often linked to how languages are perceived in their social environment. If English is viewed as a language of opportunity, students may be more motivated to learn it. However, if their indigenous languages are devalued in comparison to Vietnamese or English, this may lead to a loss of cultural identity and decreased

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motivation for language learning. For H'mong and Tay students, striking a balance between maintaining their indigenous languages and learning English as a global language is a sociocultural challenge that needs further exploration (Nguyen & Burns, 2017).

2.4. Multilingualism and Second Language Acquisition in Vietnam

In the Vietnamese context, multilingualism has been studied primarily in relation to the national language, Vietnamese, and English as a foreign language. Nguyen and Hamid (2020) highlight the complexities of language learning in Vietnam, where ethnic minority students often have to navigate between their home language, the national language, and an international language. The introduction of English into this linguistic landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for multilingual learners, particularly those from rural and remote areas where ethnic minority groups are concentrated.

Ethnic minority students in Vietnam are often at a disadvantage when it comes to English language learning due to limited access to quality educational resources and trained language teachers. Nguyen (2011) notes that English language instruction in rural schools is often underfunded and under-resourced, which can exacerbate the linguistic challenges faced by ethnic minority learners. Despite these challenges, the multilingual backgrounds of these learners may serve as a cognitive and linguistic resource for acquiring English, as suggested by research on the cognitive benefits of multilingualism (Bialystok, 2009).

This study aims to build on the existing research by focusing specifically on the multilingual experiences of H'mong and Tay students, who represent two of the largest ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. By examining the cognitive and linguistic factors that influence their English language acquisition, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of multilingualism in ethnic minority communities and its implications for language education in Vietnam.

2.5. Research Gaps

While there is substantial research on multilingualism and SLA, few studies have examined these issues in the context of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. Most of the existing literature focuses on bilingualism or multilingualism in Western or urban contexts, which may not fully capture the unique challenges and opportunities faced by ethnic minority students in rural Vietnam. Additionally, while studies such as Vu and Burns (2014) have explored the educational experiences of ethnic minority students, there is limited empirical research on how their multilingual backgrounds specifically affect their English language acquisition.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study will adopt a comparative, cross-sectional design using a mixed-methods approach. The primary focus will be on examining the cognitive and linguistic differences in second language acquisition (SLA) between multilingual students from the H'mong and Tay ethnic groups and Vietnamese monolingual students. A MANOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) will be applied to test differences across multiple dependent variables (cognitive and linguistic proficiency). Qualitative data will also be collected through focus group discussions to explore the sociocultural influences on language learning within these communities. The mixed-methods approach will allow for a comprehensive analysis, combining quantitative measures of cognitive and linguistic proficiency with qualitative insights into sociocultural factors influencing SLA.

3.2. Participants

The study will involve three participant groups:

- H'mong students: Multilingual individuals who speak H'mong as their first language (L1), Vietnamese as their second language (L2), and are learning English as a foreign language (L3).
- Tay students: Multilingual individuals who speak Tay as their L1, Vietnamese as their L2, and are learning English as an L3.
- Vietnamese monolingual students: Individuals who speak Vietnamese as their L1 and are learning English as their L2.

The study will use purposive sampling to select participants from secondary schools and universities in northern Vietnam, specifically in areas where H'mong and Tay populations are prevalent. A total of 112 participants were recruited, with 25 participants from H'mong group, 44 participants from Tay group, and 52 students from Kinh group (Vietnamese). Participants will be students aged between 18 and 25, with similar levels of exposure to English language instruction in formal educational settings.

The study will control for variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, and years of formal English education to minimize external influences on the results.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

3.3.1. Quantitative Data Collection

To measure cognitive proficiency, the following tasks will be administered:

Working Memory: The digit span task will be used to measure the participants' ability to retain and manipulate information. This task will involve recalling a sequence of digits presented to them, both in forward and backward order (Wechsler, 2008).

Cognitive Flexibility: The Stroop test will be employed to assess participants' ability to manage cognitive interference. Participants will be asked to name the color of the ink in which a word is written rather than reading the word itself. This test measures attentional control and executive function (Stroop, 1935).

To measure linguistic proficiency in English, the following assessments will be used:

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Vocabulary Size: Participants will complete a Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) that assesses their knowledge of English words at various frequency levels.

Syntactic Knowledge: A sentence completion task will be used to evaluate participants' understanding of English syntax. This task will present incomplete sentences that participants must complete by selecting the appropriate grammatical structure.

Phonological Accuracy: Participants' phonological proficiency in English will be measured through a reading-aloud task. Native English speakers will rate participants' pronunciation accuracy, focusing on stress patterns, intonation, and overall phonological correctness.

3.3.2. Qualitative Data Collection

To gain deeper insights into the sociocultural factors influencing SLA among H'mong and Tay students, focus group discussions (FGDs) will be conducted. These discussions will explore participants' experiences with language learning, the role of their home languages, and the sociocultural attitudes toward English within their communities.

Participant Selection for FGDs: A subset of 10 participants from each ethnic group (H'mong, Tay and Kinh) will be selected for the focus group discussions, based on their willingness to participate.

Focus Group Topics: The discussions will focus on:

- Attitudes toward learning English and other languages.
- Perceived challenges and benefits of being multilingual.
- How community and family influence language learning.
- Experiences with English language instruction and access to learning resources.

The qualitative data from FGDs will complement the quantitative data, providing a more holistic understanding of how sociocultural factors influences SLA in multilingual ethnic minority communities.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The primary statistical method for analyzing quantitative data will be MANOVA. This multivariate analysis technique will assess the differences between the three participant groups (H'mong, Tay, and Vietnamese) on multiple dependent variables, including cognitive proficiency (working memory, cognitive flexibility) and linguistic proficiency (vocabulary size, syntactic knowledge, phonological accuracy).

Independent Variable: Ethnic group (H'mong, Tay, Vietnamese).

Dependent Variables: Cognitive and linguistic proficiency scores.

After conducting MANOVA, post-hoc analyses will be performed to identify specific group differences across the dependent variables.

Additionally, descriptive statistics will be used to summarize participants' performance in each cognitive and linguistic task. Correlational analyses will be conducted to explore the relationship between cognitive proficiency and linguistic proficiency within each group.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Data from the focus group discussions will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to sociocultural influences on SLA.

Thematic categories will likely include:

- Language attitudes and motivation.
- Cultural identity and language learning.
- Challenges in accessing English education.
- The influence of family and community on language learning.

The qualitative findings will be triangulated with the quantitative results to offer a richer understanding of how sociocultural factors shape the language acquisition process for multilingual learners in ethnic minority communities.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of cognitive and linguistic proficiency among the three participant groups - H'mong, Tay, and Kinh (Vietnamese) revealed significant differences in both cognitive flexibility and linguistic performance in second language acquisition (SLA) (Table 1 and Table 2). The cognitive proficiency tests, specifically the digit span task and the Stroop test, demonstrated that the multilingual H'mong and Tay students outperformed the monolingual Kinh students. In the digit span task, Tay participants achieved the highest mean score, reflecting superior working memory. H'mong students also scored above the Kinh group, though slightly lower than the Tay participants. This indicates that managing multiple languages enhances cognitive skills, particularly working memory. In the Stroop test, both H'mong and Tay groups demonstrated higher cognitive flexibility, with the Tay students showing slightly better performance. These results suggest that multilingualism enhances attentional control, likely due to the constant language switching and cognitive demands involved in managing multiple linguistic systems.

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Table 1: Cognitive Proficiency Data

#	Groups	Working memory score (mean)	Cognitive flexibility score (mean)
1	H'mong	6.1	87.4
2	Tay	6.8	89.1
3	Kinh (Vietnamese)	5.9	82.3

Linguistically, the findings were more nuanced. In terms of English vocabulary size, the Kinh group outperformed both H'mong and Tay participants. The mean vocabulary score for Kinh students was significantly higher, likely due to their closer alignment with the national language, Vietnamese, which has greater lexical similarity to English compared to H'mong and Tay. Tay students outperformed the H'mong group in vocabulary size, although both multilingual groups scored lower than the Kinh students. This suggests that despite the cognitive advantages of multilingualism, the structural distance between their home languages and English presents a challenge in acquiring vocabulary.

Table 2: Linguistics Proficiency Data

#	Groups	Vocabulary size (mean)	Syntactic knowledge	Phonological accuracy
1	H'mong	54	23	67
2	Tay	60	25	71
3	Kinh (Vietnamese)	65	27	76

Regarding syntactic knowledge, Kinh students again outperformed the H'mong and Tay groups, though the gap was less pronounced than in vocabulary. Tay students showed a stronger understanding of English syntax compared to H'mong students, likely due to greater exposure to Vietnamese, which shares some syntactic features with English. However, the overall performance of the multilingual groups suggests that while their cognitive flexibility may benefit their language learning processes, structural differences between their first languages and English remain a significant barrier in syntactic acquisition.

In the phonological accuracy task, Kinh students demonstrated the highest scores, with Tay students performing better than H'mong students. The phonological differences between tonal languages like H'mong and Tay and stress-timed English likely contribute to these difficulties. H'mong participants, whose home language is tonal and lacks the prosodic features of English, struggled the most with English phonological rules. Tay students, while also from a tonal language background, showed slightly better phonological accuracy, perhaps due to greater exposure to both Vietnamese and English in educational settings.

Qualitative findings from the focus group discussions provided further insights into the sociocultural context of language learning among the ethnic minority groups. Both H'mong and Tay participants expressed high levels of motivation to learn English, viewing it as a key to better educational and professional opportunities. However, they also highlighted the lack of resources and proficient teachers in their communities, which limited their exposure to English. The Tay students generally had more access to English-learning resources compared to the H'mong group, which may explain their relatively better performance in both vocabulary and syntax tasks. Furthermore, many participants from both groups emphasized the importance of maintaining their indigenous languages and cultural identity, creating a complex dynamic where students sought to balance the demands of learning English while preserving their linguistic heritage.

In summary, while multilingualism provided cognitive advantages in areas such as working memory and cognitive flexibility, the linguistic challenges faced by the H'mong and Tay students, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and phonological accuracy, highlight the difficulties posed by the structural differences between their native languages and English. Sociocultural factors, including limited resources and the need to maintain cultural identity, also play a crucial role in shaping their language learning experiences. The findings suggest that targeted educational support and resources are necessary to help multilingual ethnic minority students to bridge the gap in English language acquisition, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight several important insights into the cognitive and linguistic differences in second language acquisition (SLA) among multilingual H'mong and Tay students compared to monolingual Kinh students. These results offer both support and new perspectives for the broader understanding of multilingualism, cognitive flexibility, and linguistic proficiency in the context of ethnic minority learners.

5.1. Cognitive Proficiency

As expected, multilingual H'mong and Tay students demonstrated higher cognitive proficiency, particularly in working memory and cognitive flexibility, compared to their Kinh peers. The results align with previous research by Bialystok (2009) and Adesope

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et al. (2010), which suggests that multilingualism enhances executive functions. The superior performance of H'mong and Tay students in the digit span task and Stroop test suggests that their regular engagement with multiple languages enhances their cognitive flexibility and attentional control. Managing multiple languages appears to provide an advantage in maintaining focus, processing complex tasks, and switching between different linguistic contexts. This finding confirms the hypothesis that multilingual learners benefit from cognitive advantages that potentially facilitate the acquisition of additional languages like English.

5.2. Linguistic Proficiency

Contrary to their cognitive advantages, multilingual H'mong and Tay students faced greater challenges in terms of linguistic proficiency in English, as reflected in lower scores for vocabulary size, syntactic knowledge, and phonological accuracy compared to the Kinh group. The vocabulary size results suggest that structural differences between the H'mong and Tay languages and English present significant barriers to acquiring new words. This echoes findings from Cenoz (2013), who noted that the distance between the languages being learned and the learner's native language impacts vocabulary acquisition.

The syntax and phonology results further reinforce this linguistic challenge. While the cognitive flexibility of multilingual learners could have aided in recognizing syntactic patterns, the structural differences between their first languages (L1) and English (L2) likely inhibited their ability to transfer existing knowledge to the new language. H'mong and Tay students struggled more with English syntax and phonology, likely due to differences in sentence structure, tone, and stress patterns between their home languages and English (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). This finding aligns with the work of Jessner (2006), who suggested that the complexity of managing languages with different structural properties can pose additional hurdles in SLA.

5.3. Sociocultural Factors

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the sociocultural context of language learning among H'mong and Tay students. While both groups expressed a strong desire to learn English for future opportunities, they highlighted the lack of access to adequate resources and proficient English teachers in their communities. The Tay students, who generally performed better than the H'mong group in linguistic tasks, likely had slightly more exposure to English and better access to learning materials, which may explain their relatively higher scores. These observations are consistent with the findings of Vu and Burns (2014), who documented the educational challenges faced by ethnic minority students in Vietnam, including disparities in educational resources and instructional quality.

Moreover, the tension between learning English and maintaining cultural identity emerged as a significant theme in the focus group discussions. Both H'mong and Tay students expressed concern about losing their indigenous languages, suggesting a cultural dilemma in balancing the demands of English acquisition with the preservation of their heritage languages. This reflects the complex interplay between language, identity, and motivation, as described by Garcia and Wei (2014), and underscores the importance of culturally sensitive language education policies that respect students' linguistic heritage while fostering English proficiency.

6. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research on multilingualism and SLA, particularly in the context of ethnic minority students in Vietnam. The cognitive advantages associated with multilingualism, such as enhanced working memory and cognitive flexibility, were evident among H'mong and Tay learners. However, these cognitive benefits did not translate into similar advantages in linguistic proficiency, as both groups faced challenges in English vocabulary acquisition, syntax, and phonological accuracy compared to their Kinh counterparts.

The linguistic difficulties faced by H'mong and Tay students highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies that take into account the structural differences between their native languages and English. Additionally, sociocultural factors such as limited access to resources and the desire to maintain cultural identity significantly influence the language learning process for ethnic minority students.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION:

Tailored Pedagogical Approaches: Language instruction should be adapted to address the specific challenges that H'mong and Tay students face in learning English, particularly with respect to vocabulary and phonology. Pedagogical approaches that leverage their cognitive flexibility while providing more structured support for linguistic elements could improve outcomes.

Resource Allocation: There is an urgent need to improve access to quality English education in rural and ethnic minority communities, ensuring that students are provided with the necessary materials, teaching expertise, and support.

Cultural Sensitivity: Language policies should promote the preservation of indigenous languages alongside the acquisition of English, helping students maintain their cultural identities while achieving proficiency in global languages.

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