



The Cultivation of Foreign Language Talents for China's Modernization: A Case Study of Vietnamese Majors at a Chinese University

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Abstract

As a bridge and link of economic exchange, foreign language talents, especially those who master the languages of countries with unique geographical locations around China, play a vital role in the process of China's modernization. This paper chooses a Border Chinese University as the research site to dig out the contributions that the foreign language talents (using the Vietnamese as example) have done for the China's modernization. By using the way of semi-structured interviews, online and offline interactions, face-to-face communication, the paper explores the cultivation of foreign language talents in a university with a deep analysis. Findings show that such talents can not only skillfully tell Chinese stories in the language of the target country, but also deeply explore the inheritance and influence relationship between China's excellent culture and the economy and culture of neighboring countries, so as to better promote two-way in-depth integration, communication and cooperation. It is apparently shown that at present, how to explore the new path of language talents training in neighboring countries and how to train foreign language talents in a broader sense has become a new question in front of our higher education workers. This paper discussed with the problems that now presented in cultivation of foreign language talents, which will show a paradigm for the foreign language talents cultivations.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Vietnamese Language Talents, BU, Vietnamese, Language Policy

1. Introduction

Since China emerged as the world's second-largest economy in 2010 and proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the country has actively advanced political, economic, and cultural engagement with a wide range of nations, particularly those countries in Southeast Asia. In parallel with China's socioeconomic ascent, foreign language education has entered a phase of strategic valorization, where the development of language programs is increasingly shaped by national and geopolitical priorities [1]. By 2017, a total of 583 Chinese universities were offering 1417 undergraduate-level foreign language programs, most of which focused on the national languages of China's neighboring countries [2].

The dramatic growth in both the number and scale of so-called "small" language programs is not merely unprecedented, it is also deeply intertwined with geopolitical considerations [3]. This trend is especially evident in China's border provinces, which serve as strategic corridors linking China to 14 neighboring countries and, by extension, to broader international networks [4]. Yunnan province, for example, has prioritized the development of language programs not geared toward Western Europe or the Anglophone world, but rather focused on the languages of neighboring Asian countries [5]. Geographically situated in Southwest China and sharing borders with Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos, while also lying in close proximity to Thailand and Cambodia, Yunnan has been discursively positioned as a bridgehead for China's engagement with Southeast Asia. In this context, the province has witnessed significant growth in its small language education sector, particularly in Southeast Asian languages.

Currently, 32 universities, primarily located in North and Southwest China, offer degree programs in Southeast Asian and South Asian languages [6]. Among these, Yunnan leads the nation in the number of institutions providing such programs [5]. Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly pertinent to investigate the lived experiences of Chinese students studying small languages in contemporary China.

It is, therefore, timely to examine the small language learning experiences of Chinese students in contemporary China within the sociopolitical landscape shaped by regional diplomacy and transnational cooperation. Among the Southeast Asian languages that have gained prominence in recent years, Vietnamese occupies a strategically important position. Vietnam is not only a close geographic neighbor but also a key partner in several regional initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework. As such, Vietnamese language education has received increasing institutional support, especially in provinces like Yunnan that serve as a front line for cross-border engagement.

The learning of Vietnamese by Chinese university students reflects broader shifts in China's foreign language policy, which now emphasizes linguistic preparedness for regional integration and geopolitical cooperation. Vietnamese, as a small language in the Chinese educational context, is no longer viewed solely

through the lens of linguistic diversity, but also as a resource for diplomatic, economic, and cultural mediation. Students majoring in Vietnamese are often motivated by the desire to participate in China's global rise, positioning themselves as cultural intermediaries and contributors to national development. Their learning trajectories are shaped not only by pedagogical factors but also by the sociopolitical values attached to the language itself, such as patriotism, internationalism, and service.

This study, therefore, explores how Chinese students majoring in Vietnamese conceptualize their language learning experiences within this broader context. It investigates how they navigate their identities, aspirations, and perceived roles as future participants in China's international engagement with Southeast Asia. In doing so, it sheds light on how small language education is both a personal and political endeavor in China's evolving global strategy.

2. Literature Review

Within the framework of the BRI, fostering intercultural communication between China and its neighboring countries has become a strategic priority. According to Liu [7], China has signed over 200 cooperation agreements on BRI-related projects with 147 countries and 32 international organizations. In the context of China's socioeconomic ascent, foreign language education has entered a period of heightened valorization. As part of China's going out strategy, there is a growing demand for foreign language-proficient professionals to engage in trade and economic activities with countries along the BRI [8]. In this context, multilingual competence is increasingly framed in terms of moral values such contributing to China's nationalist agenda and its broader neoliberal globalization project [4].

China's foreign language education in so-called small languages—less commonly taught language—has witnessed unprecedented expansion in recent decades. According to Tian [9], citing Jiang Jingkui, Director of the Department of Foreign Languages at the Ministry of Education, more than 580 small language teaching centers have been established across 197 universities, serving tens of thousands of students. The rapid development of small language programs is not only unprecedented in scale but also significantly influenced by geopolitical considerations [3].

The spatial distribution of small language education in China reflects a broader geopolitical strategy aimed at transforming border provinces into windows for international cooperation [3]. Yunnan province, in particular, has been discursively positioned as a strategic bridgehead for China's engagement with Southeast Asia. Consequently, the region has experienced substantial growth in foreign language programs focused on Southeast Asian languages. As of recent years, 32 universities—mainly located in northern and southwestern China—degree programs in the languages of South and Southeast Asia [6]. Yunnan leads nationally in the number of such programs. For instance, Yunnan Minzu University has established 15 language programs focusing on Asian and Southeast Asian languages

[6], while Yunnan University has launched 10 new language programs in these regions within just seven years [10]. The growing emphasis on small language education is deeply embedded in China's reciprocal diplomatic approach toward peripheral and BRI-participating countries [11] [12].

While the growing body of research has illuminated the geopolitical and strategic dimensions of China's small language education, much of the existing scholarship tends to focus on broad policy frameworks, institutional developments, or generalized trends in language planning [1] [3]. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific experiences of learners studying individual Southeast Asian languages—particularly Vietnamese. Despite Vietnam's critical geopolitical and economic importance within the Belt and Road Initiative and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, little attention has been paid to how Vietnamese language education is being conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in the Chinese context. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that foregrounds the voices and lived experiences of Chinese students majoring in Vietnamese, as well as how they perceive their linguistic training in relation to national strategies and personal aspirations. The perspectives of Vietnamese students themselves—either as language learners in China or as participants in cross-border educational initiatives—are also largely absent from current academic discourse. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by examining Vietnamese language education in China through the lens of student experience, with a particular focus on identity construction, imagined futures, and the sociopolitical value attached to learning Vietnamese in contemporary China.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Spolsky's language policy framework, which provides the theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics of language behavior within a society. Language policy can be defined as both the explicit and implicit measures employed to influence the language practices of individuals [13]. Spolsky conceptualizes language policy as consisting of three interrelated components: language management, language beliefs, and language practice [14].

Language management, as introduced by Spolsky [13], represents the first explicit and comprehensive aspect of his language policy framework. Spolsky adopts Fishman's [15] concept of 'domain' to explain how different linguistic registers are subject to distinct language policies. According to Spolsky [14], language management refers to the deliberate attempts to regulate language use in specific domains, often with the goal of ensuring the survival or development of particular languages or dialects. The theory of language management rests on three key assumptions. First, language policy influences individual language choices, serving as a foundational factor in understanding why individuals choose to speak specific languages and how they come to value particular languages over others. Second, language policy encompasses three interrelated components: language practice, language belief, and language management, each playing a distinct yet intercon-

nected role in shaping language behavior. Third, each component of language policy contributes to explaining language choice, offering insight into the decision-making processes of language users.

Language beliefs refer to the societal perceptions of the value, status, and importance of particular languages, dialects, or linguistic features [16]. These beliefs are shaped by the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which a language is spoken. The ideology surrounding a language or variety is often rooted in the status of its speakers, the number of individuals using it, and the perceived social and economic benefits associated with its use. Language beliefs can be organized into broader ideologies, which reflect the values shared by specific groups within a community. Such ideologies often inform the way languages are valued, with speakers of a particular language or dialect deriving social benefits based on the status attributed to that language [8]. These beliefs can vary significantly across different communities, influenced by factors such as culture, geography, and education.

Language practice refers to the observable behaviors and language choices that individuals make in their daily lives. As Spolsky [13] asserts, language practices reflect “what people actually do” rather than “what people think should be done.” These practices involve the selection of specific linguistic features and varieties, and they become part of language policy when they are regular and predictable. In this context, language practices encompass the actual language use observed in communicative settings, including the variety of language chosen for specific functions, the linguistic variants used with different interlocutors, and the speech norms that govern silence and communication [16]. Language practices thus provide a concrete understanding of language behavior, offering insight into how individuals navigate their linguistic environment.

Related to language policy is the concept of language planning. Some scholars view language planning as a subset of language policy [17], though for the purposes of this study, we treat language planning as an independent concept. Language planning refers to the deliberate efforts to influence language use within a society, focusing on aspects such as language acquisition, language structure, and the allocation of linguistic functions. Language planning operates through three key dimensions: corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning. Corpus planning refers to efforts aimed at developing and standardizing one or more languages to maximize their functional utility in society. This includes initiatives such as the development of writing systems, the introduction of foreign terms, and the creation of new words [18]. In China, corpus planning initiatives include the promotion of Simplified Chinese characters, the establishment of the Pinyin system, and the widespread use of Mandarin. These efforts have significantly improved communication across different regions, particularly in areas where local dialects were once predominant in education and public life. For instance, following the country’s policy shift to promote Mandarin, regions like Yunnan and Guizhou saw a dramatic shift in language use, with Mandarin becoming the dominant

medium of instruction and communication.

Status planning involves efforts to influence the social and economic status of languages or dialects, with the aim of improving their prestige and value within society. This includes policies that elevate the status of national languages or promote the use of minority languages in specific domains. Acquisition planning focuses on shaping language learning policies, including curriculum design, language education, and the promotion of second language acquisition at various levels of education.

According to Spolsky's framework, language policies are constituted by three interdependent but distinct elements: language management, language beliefs, and language practice. Language management refers to the explicit measures employed by individuals or groups with power to regulate language practices and beliefs. Language beliefs pertain to the perceptions of the value and status of languages, while language practices encompass the actual linguistic choices made by individuals. Together, these components help to explain language choice and provide the necessary context for understanding language learning and the social functions of language within a given society.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Collection

The methodology part first provides the rationale for undertaking a qualitative study. The research takes an ethnographic approach and draws on interviews with over participants of Vietnamese languages, texts collected from public linguistic landscapes, fieldwork observations and policies and official policy commentaries.

In 2023-2024, the author spent one year in a border university in China for exploring Vietnamese Language learners' experience and how they develop their language skills in the border area between China and Vietnam. During the whole year in this university, the author did fieldwork, using face-to-face communication, online interactions, class observation to naturally immerse among the Vietnamese learning students. At this process, the author felt that became increasingly familiar with Vietnamese students what they think and what they pursue, even the knowing their lifestyles through participation in, and organization of, a variety of public interest advocacy and discussing training events for university students between 2023 and 2024.

4.2. Participants

The participants are chosen in a border university in China, who are postgraduate students in the first year. The author chooses the three Vietnamese postgraduate students as participants to explore how the Vietnamese language poses influence to their thinking and how they use their language competence to be the language talents. With the acronym P to stand for their name respectively from P1 to P3, their basic information is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The basic information of participants.

| Participants | Gender | Age | Language Background |
|--------------|--------|-----|----------------------------|
| P1 | Female | 23 | Chinese Vietnamese English |
| P2 | Female | 23 | Chinese Vietnamese English |
| P3 | Female | 23 | Chinese Vietnamese English |

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic approach, integrating semi-structured interviews, participant observation (both in and out of class), online interactions, document collection, and field notes. Over one year of fieldwork, the researcher was immersed in the academic life of Vietnamese majors at a border university, attending classes Monday through Friday depending on institutional schedules and participant availability. Prolonged engagement enabled the researcher to build rapport with students and gain in-depth insights into their learning experiences.

Aligned with prior sociolinguistic research on language learner experiences [10] [19]-[21], the study employed content analysis to interpret the data. Content analysis offers a systematic method to identify key patterns in participants' narratives [22]. Drawing on Language Policy theory [13] [17], which emphasizes the interaction between language beliefs, practices, and management, this study investigates how Vietnamese majors navigate their learning within state-driven language policies and geopolitical frameworks.

5. Findings

5.1. Current Status of Vietnamese Talent Cultivation

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the current state of Vietnamese language education at Chinese universities, focusing on curriculum design, faculty strength, and student development. These areas are pivotal in understanding how the Vietnamese language programs contribute to cultivating foreign language talent essential for China's modernization efforts.

The curriculum for Vietnamese language programs at border universities typically includes a combination of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and cultural courses that explore Vietnamese history, culture, and society. However, the curriculum often lacks opportunities for practical application, such as internships or exchange programs, which could significantly enhance students' language proficiency and cultural competence in real-world contexts.

我们的课程设置主要是围绕听说读写四方面，但是在真正的实践经历还是比较少的，尽管有一些活动，但是实际练习是很少的，和越南人沟通的机会是不是很多。

Our curriculum mainly focuses on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, when it comes to real-life practice, there aren't many opportunities. There are some activities, but actual practice is pretty

limited, and we don't get to communicate with native Vietnamese speakers as much as we'd like. (Interview with P1, 29/7/2024)

Faculty strength plays a crucial role in the success of these programs. While universities typically boast well-established language departments with faculty members holding advanced degrees and extensive experience in Vietnamese language and culture, challenges remain in recruiting qualified personnel. The shortage of experienced instructors can result in suboptimal language instruction, particularly in areas such as the cultural nuances of the language, tonal variations, and regional dialects. Furthermore, the lack of professional development opportunities for faculty members limits the continuous improvement of teaching methods, which is critical for maintaining high standards of language education.

我们学校的越南语老师其实还是不是很多的，研究生导师选择也很有限，我们只能有限的选择，给我们上课的老师数量也不是很多，只有几位。

At our university, there actually are not that many Vietnamese language teachers. The options for choosing a graduate advisor are pretty limited too. We don't have a lot of teachers overall—just a few who teach our classes. (Interview with P3, 9/7/2024)

In terms of student development, there has been notable progress in recent years, driven by the increasing demand for professionals proficient in Southeast Asian languages as China strengthens its economic and diplomatic ties with countries in the region. Despite this, students often encounter difficulties in mastering the language, primarily due to the absence of immersive learning environments. Most students have limited chances to practice their language skills outside the classroom, which restricts their ability to communicate effectively in real-world situations. Moreover, the academic focus on language mastery often leaves little room for students to delve into the cultural aspects of language learning, which are essential for fostering cross-cultural understanding and communication.

While students exhibit strong motivation to learn Vietnamese, their progress is often hindered by a lack of exposure to native speakers and opportunities for practical language use. This highlights the need for initiatives like exchange programs or collaborations with universities in Vietnam, which could help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

The cultivation of Vietnamese language talent plays a vital role in China's broader modernization efforts, especially given its expanding engagement with Southeast Asia. As the Belt and Road Initiative (BR) progresses, there is an increasing demand for professionals who can navigate the linguistic and cultural complexities of neighboring countries. Vietnamese language proficiency is becoming an asset for students pursuing careers in diplomacy, international business, and trade. However, to fully meet the demands of China's global ambitions, the current state of Vietnamese language education requires substantial improvement. This includes enhancing curriculum design to integrate language with cultural and practical knowledge, expanding faculty resources, and providing more

opportunities for students to engage with the language in authentic settings.

In summary, while Vietnamese language education in Chinese universities has made significant strides, it faces several challenges that need to be addressed in order to better align with China's modernization objectives. By enhancing curriculum development, faculty training, and student engagement, China can strengthen its pool of language talent and improve its ability to engage effectively with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries in the future.

5.2. Contribution of Vietnamese Language Talent to China's Modernization

Previous research on foreign language learning has emphasized the central role of English and its global influence. Our study on Chinese university students majoring in Vietnamese reveals a similar trajectory of future-oriented contribution, albeit through a different linguistic medium. In the context of China's increasing integration with Southeast Asia, the learning of regional languages—Vietnamese—has become increasingly valued and recognized [12]. The Vietnamese majors in our study express a strong desire to construct identities that reflect their contributions, utilizing their language skills both within and beyond the university environment.

Firstly, Vietnamese language speakers are increasingly acknowledged as essential resources for large-scale international events. These language talents have played critical roles in exhibitions such as COP15, the China-South Asia Expo, trade fairs, and tourism expos (see **Figure 1(a)** & **Figure 1(b)**).

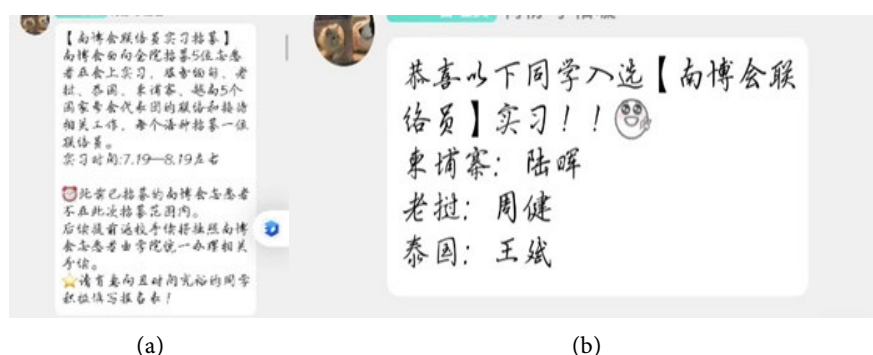


Figure 1. The recruitment of Vietnamese language talents in the international event.

Through their volunteer work, they not only embody the spirit of public service but also act as cultural mediators—representing China's values of energy, enthusiasm, and attentiveness. The interview below shows how they perceive their contribution in the international events.

我们学校经常会有一些大型活动的志愿机会，我是越南语的研究生，越南语的语种还有研究生的学历带给我很多这样的志愿参与机会，我参加过南博会，中越交流会很多类似的会议，在这样的会议中我感觉我是对国家有贡献的，因为平时其实感觉就是普通的学习，但是就是在这样的

活动中，我感觉我是中国的一部分，是为中国代言的一份子。

My university often has volunteer opportunities for big events, and being a Vietnamese language graduate student has given me many chances to get involved in such activities. I've participated in events like the South China Expo and China-Vietnam exchange conferences. During these events, I feel like I'm making a contribution to the country. Normally, it feels like just regular studying, but at these events, I really feel like I'm part of China, representing China and speaking on its behalf. (Interview with P1, 29/7/2024)

During the South China Expo, 11.8% of volunteers were postgraduate students, 16% were English majors, and 10% were from minority language programs. These figures highlight the growing institutional reliance on non-dominant language speakers and their strategic importance in meeting linguistic and diplomatic needs during high-profile international events.

In multilingual and multicultural settings, minority language speakers serve as indispensable communication bridges. Their presence is not only practical but also symbolic, reflecting China's commitment to linguistic and cultural inclusivity. This is evident in upcoming international events, such as the Hangzhou Asian Games, where the role of minority language talents continues to be crucial in facilitating cross-border understanding and international cooperation.

Additionally, the attitudes of postgraduate students toward studying Vietnamese are influenced by several external factors, including governmental policies, educational institutions, and societal discourse.

我是云南人，云南有很多越南务工的人，特别是在政策影响下，像一带一路啊，带给我们越南语小语种挺多机会的，这也是我提高学历的一个原因，之后我凭借我越南语研究生的身份做到更多。

I'm from Yunnan, and there are a lot of Vietnamese workers here, especially with policies like the Belt and Road Initiative creating more opportunities for people who study less commonly taught languages like Vietnamese. That's actually one of the reasons I decided to pursue a higher degree. With my background as a Vietnamese language graduate student, I hope to do even more in the future. (Interview with P2, 1/7/2024)

Support from the Chinese government, reflected in policies implemented by the Ministry of Education, has fostered the development and promotion of minority language programs. Geopolitical strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and various cross-border exchange programs have strengthened China's collaboration with Southeast Asian countries. These initiatives have not only elevated the status of regional languages within China but also reinforced students' sense of purpose and relevance in studying languages like Vietnamese.

6. Discussion

The training of Vietnamese language talents is not only the imparting of language

knowledge, but also a platform for the integration and exchange of Chinese and foreign cultures and the fierce collision of ideology and culture. Under the background of promoting the BR, it is imperative to train a large number of high-level foreign language talents in order to better promote cross-cultural communication and conform to the trend of featuring peace, development, cooperation and win-win results. With the establishment of China's trans-regional belt economic cooperation zone, the continuous surge of China's export trade, and the more frequent technical and cultural exchanges with countries along the BR, the demand for talents with Vietnamese language education background and multilingual skills has surged. Although common language majors such as English can play an important role as a medium, with the increasing demand for language localization products and services in the global economic market, it has become an undisputed consensus that learning the language and culture of the local market can obtain the qualification to enter the local market. The international market makes it imperative for us to develop new talents with both professional knowledge and "key languages" as soon as possible. In order to further expand international cooperation and exchanges, it is suggested that the government strengthen top-level design, actively support universities along the border to participate in the "Silk Road" Chinese government scholarship personnel training program, and increase financial support for outstanding students from countries along the BR to study in China; Strengthen educational exchanges with countries in the BR region, promote cooperation between language education and countries along the BR, and organically combine "going out" and "bringing in" through inter-school exchanges, cooperation in running schools, and exchange of teachers and students, so as to lead the new pattern of reform and opening up in the new era.

7. Conclusion

In multilateral economic, political and cultural exchanges, language plays a role in connecting the participating countries and regions in communication and exchange, and international foreign language talents are indispensable for the cooperation between different countries. The implementation of the BR Initiative has promoted more frequent personnel exchanges between countries along the route, and various in-depth cooperation is increasing, which requires a large number of talents who are proficient in the main languages of countries along the route and related regional languages. Vietnamese language talents who are proficient in the language, have certain research on the target country, and have accumulated professional knowledge in international economy and trade, law, finance, etc., are the most scarce nowadays. The linguist not only needs to be proficient in the main language and related regions, and even the tribal language of the countries along the route, but also should be familiar with local culture, systems, customs and geography, and have international perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills to meet various complex language needs. Focusing on the cultivation of core knowledge and skills of foreign language majors and facing the needs of interna-

tional organizations, schools need to build a scientific and reasonable professional personnel training system, formulate personnel training programs that meet the rules of professional personnel training and the development requirements of The Times, and strengthen students' key abilities such as language ability, learning ability, critical thinking ability, innovation ability, vocational ability and cooperation ability. Enhance core qualities such as cultural character, thinking quality and international perspective. In addition, the introduction of new minority foreign language teachers, professional construction funds, and adjustment of the per capita expenditure coefficient also need the government's preferential policies and strong support. With the development of China's economy and opening up to the outside world, more and more foreign-funded enterprises are entering the Chinese market, including many non-English speaking enterprises. Therefore, the society has a great demand for foreign language talents in minority languages. This paper puts forward several suggestions on the training of minority language talents (taking Vietnamese as an example), such as expanding the enrollment of minority language majors, combining theory and practice, and emphasizing practical ability Culture, etc.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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