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Language Competence and Usage among the Hoa Community in Dong Nai Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

Objectives: This article reports the results of a study on language competence and usage among the Hoa people community in Dong Nai province, Southeast Vietnam. Specifically, it examines their proficiency in Vietnamese, their mother tongue (Chinese dialect), and Mandarin Chinese. Additionally, the study explores the contexts in which the Hoa people use these languages—Vietnamese, their mother tongue, and Mandarin—and the extent to which these languages are used in their daily communication.

Methods: This study was conducted primarily through a field survey using a questionnaire, supplemented by observation and in-depth interviews, with the participation of 236 Hoa people in Dong Nai province, Vietnam.

Results: The findings reveal that 83.9% of the respondents are fluent in Vietnamese, largely due to their long-term residence in Vietnam. As a result, a significant portion of the Hoa community now self-identifies Vietnamese as their mother tongue, indicating a language shift from Chinese dialects to Vietnamese. Additionally, Vietnamese is the dominant language which is used in many different communication domains including: families, public and social settings, written communication, media consumption, and cultural activities.

Conclusions: The Hoa community in Dong Nai is experiencing a shift from bilingualism to Vietnamese dominance. As proficiency in Vietnamese grows, the use of Chinese dialects declines, resulting in fewer bilinguals and an increase in Vietnamese monolinguals.

Keywords: language competence; language choice; communication domains; Hoa people; Dong Nai province.

الكفاءة اللغوية واستخدامها بين مجتمع هوا في مقاطعة دونج ناي، فيتنام

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ملخّص

الأهداف: يتناول هذا المقال نتائج دراسة حول الكفاءة اللغوية واستخدامها بين مجتمع هوا في مقاطعة دونج ناي، جنوب شرق فيتنام. وعلى وجه التحديد، يدرس إتقانهم للغة الفيتنامية، لغتهم الأم (اللهجة الصينية)، والصينية الماندرينية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث الدراسة في السياقات التي يستخدم فيها شعب هوا هذه اللغات - الفيتنامية، لغتهم الأم، والماندرينية - والمدى الذي تُستخدم فيه هذه اللغات في تواصلهم اليومي.

الطريقة: أجريت هذه الدراسة في المقام الأول من خلال مسح ميداني باستخدام استبيان، مكمّل بالملاحظة والمقابلات المتعمقة، بمشاركة 236 شخصًا من شعب هوا في مقاطعة دونج ناي، فيتنام.

النتائج: تكشف النتائج أن 83.9٪ من المستجيبين يجيدون اللغة الفيتنامية، ويرجع ذلك إلى حد كبير إلى إقامتهم الطويلة في فيتنام. ونتيجة لذلك، فإن جزءًا كبيرًا من مجتمع هوا يحددون الآن أن الفيتنامية هي لغتهم الأم، مما يشير إلى تحول لغوي من اللهجات الصينية إلى الفيتنامية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تعد الفيتنامية اللغة السائدة المستخدمة في العديد من مجالات الاتصال المختلفة بما في ذلك: العائلات، والأماكن العامة والاجتماعية، والاتصالات المكتوبة، واستعمال وسائل الإعلام، والأنشطة الثقافية.

الاستنتاجات: يشهد مجتمع هوا في دونج ناي تحولًا من ثنائية اللغة إلى هيمنة الفيتنامية. ومع نمو الكفاءة في اللغة الفيتنامية، يتراجع استخدام اللهجات الصينية، مما يؤدي إلى انخفاض عدد ثنائيي اللغة وزيادة عدد الفيتناميين أحاديي اللغة.

الكلمات الدالة: الكفاءة اللغوية؛ اختيار اللغة؛ مجالات الاتصال؛ شعب هوا؛ مقاطعة دونج ناي.

1. Introduction

According to the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census, the population of Hoa people in Vietnam stands at 749,466, which marks a decrease of 73,605 people compared to the 2009 census. The majority of this population is concentrated in Southern Vietnam, with 506,947 people in the Southeast and 149,449 in the Mekong Delta. Ho Chi Minh City has the largest Hoa community, with 382,825 individuals, making up 4.25% of the city's total population of 8,993,082. In contrast, Dong Thap province has the smallest Hoa population, with just 971 people. Due to the long history of migration, influenced by various political changes in China, the Hoa community in Vietnam now lives intermingled with the Kinh people and other ethnic groups. While there are some neighborhoods and villages with higher concentrations of Hoa residents, they are generally dispersed, living alongside other ethnic groups. As a result of this residential pattern, a natural state of bilingualism has emerged and developed, while the role of the Chinese dialects has diminished (Hoang, 2015). Currently, dialectal Chinese, the mother tongue of the Hoa community, plays a much smaller role in most southern provinces and cities (Hoang, 2017). The phenomenon of mother tongue death is becoming more evident due to the small and dispersed Hoa population. On the other hand, provinces and cities with a large Hoa population provide favorable conditions for maintaining and promoting the use of the mother tongue (Hoang, 2017). For instance, in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Soc Trang, and Binh Duong, the Hoa community not only uses their mother tongue for communication within their families and their own community but also in entertainment venues, community festivals, public places, and even workplaces, especially in private Chinese businesses.

Dong Nai province, like other provinces and cities in Vietnam, is multi-ethnic and multilingual. According to the 2019 statistics, the province is home to 52 different ethnic groups. The Kinh people (Vietnamese) constitute the majority of the population (2,898,088 people or 93.57%), while several minority ethnic groups have populations exceeding one thousand, including the Hoa (87,497 people), Khmer (23,560 people), Nung (18,561 people), Cho Ro (16,738 people), Tay (16,529 people), Cham (8,603 people), Muong (6,257 people), Dao (4,910 people), Ede (3,209 people), Ma (2,695 people), Thai (2,546 people), Gia Rai (1,507 people), Stieng (1,387 people), and Tho (1,149 people). Each of these ethnic groups its own unique language and traditional culture, making the language situation in Dong Nai as rich and diverse as other regions across the country. As we know, when multiple ethnic groups coexist in the same locality, interaction and communication among them are inevitable. This raises the question of how people from different ethnic groups use their mother tongue and other languages to communicate.

The Hoa community is primarily concentrated in the districts of Dinh Quan, Tan Phu, Xuan Loc, Cam My, Trang Bom, Long Khanh city, and Bien Hoa city, with smaller Hoa populations present in other districts. Despite their relatively small population, the Hoa people, who reside throughout the province, live in close proximity to the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups. However, the limited number of people speaking Chinese dialects has negatively impacted communication, the preservation, and the maintenance of Chinese dialects in the region.

This article focuses on understanding language competence and language use patterns among the Hoa people community in Dong Nai province, particularly within family and social contexts. Specifically, it surveys language proficiency (Vietnamese, Chinese dialects, and Mandarin) and investigates which languages are used in various communication settings, along with the factors influencing language competence (mother tongue, Vietnamese) and language choice in different domains.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Language competence and communicative competence

Noam Chomsky (1965) was the first to introduce the concept of "linguistic competence," distinguishing it from "linguistic performance." According to him, linguistic competence refers to the innate knowledge that language users have about language, while linguistic performance is the actual use of this knowledge in specific contexts. Linguistic competence is an underlying ability that cannot be directly observed but can only be indirectly inferred through linguistic performance. Therefore, linguistic competence, as defined by generative grammar, refers to the internalized language system stored in

the minds of individuals who are considered proficient or competent in the language being studied. While linguistic competence is universal to humans, its degree varies among individuals.

Thus, with the view that linguistic competence is purely knowledge of grammatical rules—referred to as grammatical competence—Chomsky overlooked the social aspects of language. He failed to recognize the fundamental link between language and communication, treating linguistic competence (a psychological domain) as separate from communicative competence (a social domain).

Hymes (1972) criticized Chomsky's perspective, arguing that Chomsky idealized linguistic knowledge by claiming that linguistic competence is innate and that individuals involved in communication can understand and generate an infinite number of utterances, even ones they have never heard before, without considering the specific communication situations in which language is used. Hymes proposed that language encompasses not only grammatical knowledge but also the psychological understanding of social-cultural rules that dictate the appropriateness of language in context. Thus, he introduced the concept of "communicative competence," which is the integration of three components: linguistic/grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and contextual competence. In this way, Hymes expanded Chomsky's notion of competence to include psychological and social knowledge. Hymes' introduction of the concept of "communicative competence" sparked numerous debates around the relationship between linguistic and communicative competence, paving the way for new approaches to language teaching, where communicative competence became the primary goal.

Canale and Swain (1980) elaborated on the concept of communicative competence by analyzing it into four components: (1) Grammatical competence (knowledge of the rules of grammar, vocabulary, and phonology of a language); (2) Discourse competence (the ability to logically and coherently connect ideas); (3) Sociolinguistic competence (the necessary knowledge to use language appropriately according to the communication context, topic, and social relationships); and (4) Strategic competence (the ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to resolve communication conflicts). Bachman (1990) built upon and further developed this framework, proposing a more general theoretical model. He posited that communicative competence consists of several components used in language communication, which can be specified into three main elements: linguistic competence, strategic competence, and psycho-physiological mechanisms. Linguistic competence is understood as the knowledge applied during communication (which aligns somewhat with Hymes' "communicative competence"), consisting of two main subtypes: organizational competence and pragmatic competence.

Overall, both Canale and Swain's (1980) and Bachman's (1990) models aim to express the fundamental distinction between the pragmatic aspects of language use and the features related to linguistic encoding.

Widdowson (1972) also argued that communicative competence includes not only an understanding of the system of grammatical rules to generate correct sentences but also the rules that allow speakers to use them appropriately to perform rhetorical functions in specific social communication situations. This means that the ability to use language should be considered part of a speaker's linguistic competence.

Krashen (1982) concluded that humans have an innate ability to learn languages, and there is no significant difference between how we acquire a native language and a foreign language. According to Krashen, we develop linguistic competence (whether for the native or a foreign language) through the process of direct acquisition, not by memorizing vocabulary lists, grammatical rules, or completing exercises. For acquired language skills to become linguistic competence, the process of accumulation must be prolonged, and the input must be diverse and abundant. Thus, the theory of language acquisition demonstrates that linguistic competence is only formed and developed through activities such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, rather than through theoretical knowledge of language.

Halliday's (1973) concept of potential meaning largely aligns with Hymes' view of communicative competence. Halliday believed that separating the language system (system) from its use is a mistake, as this artificially implies that linguistic competence and linguistic performance are two separate levels of reality. Halliday emphasized pragmatic competence—the ability to use language in a socially appropriate manner to achieve communication goals or intentions.

According to Halliday's view, linguistic competence should be understood in conjunction with communicative competence, aimed at fulfilling three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. However, Halliday's approach to linguistic competence differs from that of Hymes and other scholars, as Halliday's framework is more socio-semantically oriented.

Most recently, Baker's (2006) theory of language competence presents it as a complex, multi-dimensional concept, encompassing a hierarchy of linguistic knowledge, cognitive abilities, and sociolinguistic factors. Linguistic competence includes components such as phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and discourse, along with cognitive abilities like concentration, memory, and processing speed, and sociolinguistic aspects such as pragmatic, discourse, and cultural competence. Within this framework, linguistic knowledge forms the base, with cognitive abilities and sociolinguistic factors building on top. This approach offers a comprehensive view of language competence and emphasizes the crucial role of linguistic knowledge, while acknowledging the influence of cognitive and sociolinguistic factors on overall language proficiency. The framework also highlights the importance of developing sociolinguistic awareness and understanding language in context (Kanwit, 2022). According to Deumert (2011) and Shardakova (2022), an individual is considered multilingual if they can use more than two languages within a society, including their mother tongue and two additional languages. Conversely, someone is bilingual if they possess competence in their native language and one other language.

Therefore, linguistic competence is a crucial element in multilingualism research at the individual level and forms the basis for classifying multilingual individuals. To accurately classify multilingual competence, a range of factors must be considered, including the independence of language codes, the ability to switch freely between language codes, the proficiency level in each language, and the functional use of the language. Based on these criteria, this study proposes the criteria for assessing the language competence of the Hoa people in Dong Nai on a five- point scale: (1) not able to understand at all, (2) able to understand, but not able to speak, (3) able to communicate but with difficulty, (4) able to communicate with other people, and (5) very fluent.

2.2 Language choice

Some scientists in their studies on language choice in bilingual or multilingual societies have divided communication domains into different groups in interaction with the used language. According to Schmidt-Rohr (1936), the communication domain is categorized into several groups: family domain, entertainment domain or street, school, church, text domain, press, military, court, and government domains. Communication domain in Barker and Barker's (1952) study on Mexican-Americans and American-Indians (Yaquii) was divided into four domains: familiar domains (family, friends); informal domains (church); formal domains (government) and close domains like group. Mackey (1962) divided the communication domains into five groups: family, community, school, press, correspondence, while Fishman (1971) divided the communication domains into: home, school, church and neighborhood.

Fishman (1971) and Fasold (1984) conceptualize "domain" as a multifaceted construct encompassing the communication topic, the relationship between participants, the physical setting, and the influence of social and cultural norms. Nguyen (1999) further elaborates, identifying three key factors shaping a domain: context (time, place, and cultural occasions), topic, and participants. Holmes (1992) highlights the significance of both the immediate social setting (e.g., husband-wife, buyer-seller) and the broader social context (e.g., family, workplace) in shaping language choice within a domain.

Holmes (1992) argues that minority migrants often face pressure to conform to the dominant culture's norms and behaviors, particularly due to language barriers and cultural differences. For instance, in English-speaking countries like the UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand, migrants who are proficient in English are more likely to receive social support and integrate into the mainstream culture. Conversely, those who lack English proficiency may experience social exclusion and pressure to assimilate, potentially leading to the erosion of their native language over time.

As such, there are various definitions of language choice in sociolinguistics. Bentahila (1983) described language choice as the selection of words, phrases, clauses, or other language structures from a speaker's linguistic repertoire. Similarly, Zaid and Mac (2017) defined it as the deliberate selection of a language by a speaker within a specific context. Generally,

language choice is based on the speaker's available linguistic repertoire. However, in inter-language communication contexts, this study also defines language choice as the selection made by a speaker from the languages they can speak, considering various influencing factors. For instance, Kramsch (2006) noted that multilingual individuals often choose a code that reflects their identity in such contexts. Meyer and Apfelbaum (2010) also found that a participant's level of linguistic competence significantly influences their language choice. Scholars have identified several factors that influence the language choices made by people from ethnic minority groups.

Researchers commonly employ surveys and in-depth interviews to gather data on language use, attitudes, vitality, shift, bilingualism, proficiency, preservation, and policy. Agheyesi and Fishman (1970) highlight the widespread use of questionnaires and interviews in social science research. Numerous studies, such as those by Otanes and Sibayan (1969), Gal (1978), Krueger (1986), Fishman (1971), Fuentes & Mojica (1999), Anonby (2004), Mann and Markowski (2005), Nahhas (2007), and Hoang (2015, 2017, 2019, 2021), have utilized these methods to investigate language-related phenomena.

This article focuses on studying the language proficiency and usage characteristics of Hoa people in family domain, social communication domain and in other communication domains. Specifically, the study examines their language proficiency in Vietnamese, mother tongue, and Mandarin Chinese. It investigates which of these languages the Hoa people in Dong Nai province commonly use in various domains, including: family, society, and others. The article also explores the extent to which these languages are used in their daily communication. Thereby, the article points out the factors affecting their language proficiency (both in their mother tongue and Vietnamese) and the reasons behind their language choices in various communication settings.

2.3. Mother tongue and language of daily use

According to Fishman (1991), mother tongue is the first language a person acquires from birth, usually learned naturally from parents or caregivers. It significantly influences an individual's identity, cultural understanding, and cognitive development. It is often the language of emotional expression and deep cultural ties. However, in multilingual societies, shifts in mother tongue identification can occur due to social, economic, and educational factors (Romaine, 1995).

Different from mother tongue, language of daily use, according to UNESCO (2003), refers to the language predominantly used in everyday interactions, including communication at home, in workplaces, schools, and public spaces. Language of daily use may change depending on an individual's societal integration, migration, or educational experiences. In multilingual communities, people may switch between languages for different settings, with one language being more dominant in formal contexts, while another prevails in familial and cultural exchanges.

Therefore, in this study, to ensure valid and reliable data, participants were initially informed about the difference between mother tongue and the language of daily use. This clarification was provided to ensure that participants fully understood the concepts, allowing them to accurately identify and differentiate between the two in their responses.

3. Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, this study was conducted primarily through a field survey using a questionnaire, supplemented by observation and in-depth interviews, with the participation of Hoa people in Dong Nai province, Vietnam. According to the 2019 census, the Hoa community in Dong Nai had a population of 87,497. Based on Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size calculation (see (1)), a sample of 398 participants is sufficient to represent the population with a 95% level of precision.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} = \frac{87{,}497}{1+87{,}497(0.05)^2} = 398 \text{ samples} \quad (1)$$

The participants were selected using a convenient random sampling method. However, only Hoa individuals aged 18 and above were selected, as they were assumed to have sufficient awareness of their language competence and usage. Therefore, the data collected from these participants are considered valid and reliable for this study. Additionally, the survey was conducted in three areas with a high concentration of the Hoa population: Long Khanh City, Bien Hoa City, and Dinh Quan District in Dong Nai Province, Vietnam.

The data collection process took place from November 2023 to September 2024. After ten months, a total of 236 completed questionnaires were received, including 134 men and 102 women. Although the number of collected questionnaires did not meet the targeted sample size, a sample of 236, calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula (see (2)), is sufficient to ensure a high level of representation. Specifically, 236 respondents account for approximately 94% of the population, with an estimated sampling error of around 6% (see (2)). This indicates that the survey results reliably reflect the opinions of the Hoa people in Dong Nai province.

$$e = \sqrt[2]{\frac{\frac{N}{n}-1}{N}} = \sqrt[2]{\frac{\frac{87{,}497}{236}-1}{87{,}497}} = 0.065\ (\approx 6\%) \quad (2)$$

The survey responses were coded and imported into SPSS Statistics 22 for analysis. Statistical procedures were applied to examine the distribution of participants' responses, providing insights into the Hoa people's self-perceptions of their language competence and usage. These analyses improved the clarity and quantifiability of the survey results, enabling a comprehensive discussion, interpretation, and presentation of the findings. In general, the participants come from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, education level, occupation, family structure, and marital status (see Table 1). These diverse characteristics are valuable for examining social stratification in language competence and usage among the Hoa people in Dong Nai province, Vietnam.

Table 1. Respondents' sociodemographic information

Variable	Distribution (%)
Gender	Men (56.8%), women (43.2%)
Age	≤30 (17.80%), 31-50 (27.10%), >50 (55.10%)
Educational level	Primary school (39.8%), secondary school (30.5%), high school (13.6%), higher education (16.1%)
Occupation	Traders (28.8%), workers (22.0%), staff members (22.0%), students (5.1%), other types of jobs (22.0%)
Forms of family	Families of 2 generations (16%), families of 3 generations (84%)
Marital status	Same-ethnic marriage (42.4%), men married to Vietnamese women (29.7%), Vietnamese married to Hoa women (8.5%), unmarried (19.5%)

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Self-identification of mother tongue among Hoa people

According to Sofu (2009), language shift is unavoidable when two or more languages come into contact. This study reveals a clear shift in the mother tongue of the Hoa community in Dong Nai province, where multiple languages are currently in contact (according to the 2019 Census). Only about 56% of respondents identified a Chinese dialect as their mother tongue, while over 40% reported Vietnamese as their first language (see Table 2). Notably, Mandarin, the original mother tongue of the Hoa people and a native language of China, has lost its status as the primary mother tongue among the Hoa community in Dong Nai province. Only around 4% of respondents reported Mandarin as their mother tongue. These findings indicates that Vietnamese, the national language of Vietnam, is gradually replacing Chinese dialects as the dominant mother tongue within the community. Furthermore, the shift is particularly evident across respondents of different genders, ages, and educational levels.

Table 2. Respondents' self-identification of mother tongue

	Total	Age group			Gender		Education level			
		≤30	**31-50**	**>50**	**Male**	**Female**	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**High**	**Higher**
Vietnamese	**96**	34	42	20	54	42	38	30	13	15
	40.7%	81.0%	65.6%	15.4%	40.3%	41.2%	40.4%	41.7%	40.6%	39.5%
Chinese dialect	**132**	6	20	106	75	57	53	40	18	21
	55.9%	14.3%	31.3%	81.5%	56.0%	55.9%	56.4%	55.6%	56.3%	55.3%
Mandarin	**8**	2	2	4	5	3	3	2	1	2
	3%	5%	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%	3%	5%
Total	**236**	42	64	130	134	102	94	72	32	38

In terms of age, Table 2 shows a decline in the number of Hoa people reporting Chinese dialects as their mother tongue with younger age groups. In other words, younger Hoa individuals are less likely to identify a Chinese dialect as their mother tongue. Specifically, among 42 respondents under 30, 81% identified Vietnamese as their mother tongue, while only 14.3% identified a Chinese dialect, and 5% reported Mandarin. Among 64 respondents aged between 31 and 50, 65.6% identified Vietnamese, 31.3% identified a Chinese dialect, and 3% reported Mandarin. In contrast, among 130 respondents aged over 50, only 15.4% identified Vietnamese as their mother tongue, while 81.5% identified a Chinese dialect, and 3% reported Mandarin.

Moreover, among the 96 out of 236 respondents who reported Vietnamese as their mother tongue, a higher proportion were male (54 respondents) compared to female (42 respondents) (see Table 2). Table 2 also shows that respondents aged 31–50 (42 respondents) were more likely to report Vietnamese as their mother tongue than those aged 30 or younger (34 respondents) or those over 50 (20 respondents). In terms of education, the majority had completed elementary or secondary education, with primary education being the most common (38 respondents), followed by secondary education (30 respondents). Meanwhile, among the 132 respondents (55.9%) who identified Chinese dialects (Cantonese or Hokkien) as their mother tongue, a higher proportion were male (75 respondents) compared to female (57 respondents) (see Table 2). Notably, the largest proportion of respondents identifying Chinese dialects as their mother tongue were those over 50. Specifically, among the 132 respondents, 106 were over 50, 20 were between 31 and 50, and only 6 were 30 or younger. A similar pattern was observed among respondents who identified Mandarin as their mother tongue.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that there is a shift in the self-identification of the mother tongue within the Hoa community in Dong Nai province. Specifically, Hoa people in the province are increasingly adopting Vietnamese as their mother tongue, reflecting a decline in the number of Hoa individuals speaking a Chinese dialect as their mother tongue. This finding aligns with Hoang (2015), who observed that the role of Chinese dialects in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, has diminished over time, and Hoang (2017), who noted that the mother tongue of the Hoa community plays a much smaller role in most southern provinces and cities. Moreover, Hoang (2025) recently found that Hoa people in Binh Duong Province, a neighboring province of Dong Nai, also self-identify Vietnamese as their mother tongue, further indicating a language shift from Chinese dialects to Vietnamese. Notably, studies by Morita (2003) and Morita (2007) in Thailand also revealed that many Thai Chinese no longer speak Chinese, having shifted to Thai due to government assimilation policies, reduced Chinese education, and favorable attitudes toward Thai society and language. Notably, this shift is more pronounced among younger generations, as the study found that the younger the Hoa people are, the less likely they are to self-identify Chinese dialect as their mother tongue. In contrast, the number of Hoa people reporting Vietnamese as their mother tongue increases with younger age groups, meaning that the younger the Hoa people are, the more they self-identify Vietnamese as their mother tongue. This finding aligns with Li et al. (2016), who observed a language shift from Mandarin Chinese to English among younger generations.

4.2. Hoa people's language competence

In terms of the Hoa people's language competence, we primarily focused on their proficiency in Chinese dialects and Vietnamese because Chinese dialects are their mother tongue, while Vietnamese, the national language, is the common language spoken by all ethnic groups in Vietnam. In the survey, respondents were asked to self-assess their language competence in both Vietnamese and Chinese dialects using a five-point scale: (1) not able to understand at all, (2) able to understand, but not able to speak, (3) able to communicate but with difficulty, (4) able to communicate with other people, and (5) very fluent. The data on Hoa people's language competence were analyzed from the perspectives of gender, age, and occupation to gain further insights into the examined issue. In general, the result (see table 3) shows that most Hoa people in Dong Nai province are bilingual because, as they reported, their proficiency in both Chinese dialect and Vietnamese are strongly high. In particular, over 76% of the respondents self-assessed that they are fluent in Chinese dialect (see Table 3), while around 84% are fluent in Vietnamese (see Table 4). These findings indicate that Hoa people in Dong Nai province are more fluent in Vietnamese, the national language of Vietnam, than in Chinese dialects, their mother tongue. This finding is consistent with Hoang (2025), who discovered that the Fujianese Hoa community in Binh Duong generally exhibits strong proficiency in Vietnamese, often accompanied by bilingualism in both Vietnamese and their Chinese dialect. Compared to Ting's (2016) study, this research highlights some differences. Specifically, in Malaysia, all CEOs of family businesses are fluent in their Chinese dialects, Mandarin, and other Chinese dialects. Their proficiency in English and Malay, however, varies by age. This suggests that the Hoa people in Malaysia have a strong awareness of the importance of preserving their mother tongue. Additionally, in this study, the difference in language competence is particularly evident across respondents of different genders, ages, and occupations.

Table 3. Respondents' competence in Chinese dialect

	Total	**Age group**			**Gender**		**Occupation**				
		≤30	**31-50**	**>50**	**Male**	**Female**	**Trader**	**Workers**	**Staff**	**Student**	**Others**
(5) very fluent	**180**	29	48	103	108	72	54	41	41	3	41
	76.3%	16.1%	26.7%	57.2%	60%	40%	30%	22.8%	22.8%	2%	22.8%
(4) able to communicate with other people	**50**	12	14	24	22	28	14	11	11	3	11
	21.2%	24%	28%	48%	44%	56%	28%	22%	22%	6%	22%
(3) able to communicate but with difficulty	**6**	1	2	3	4	2	-	-	-	6	-
	2.5%	17%	33.3%	50.0%	67%	33%	-	-	-	100%	-
(2) able to understand, but not able to speak	**-**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(1) not able to understand at all	**-**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	**236**	42	64	130	134	102	68	52	52	12	52
	100%	17.8%	27.1%	55.1%	56.8%	43.2%	28.8%	22%	22%	5.1%	22%

Table 4. Respondents' competence in Vietnamese

	Total	Age group			Gender		Occupation				
		≤30	31-50	>50	Male	Female	Trader	Workers	Staff	Student	Others
(5) very fluent	198	42	49	107	118	80	68	52	52	12	14
	83.9%	21.2%	24.7%	54%	59.6%	40.4%	37.8%	28.9%	28.9%	7%	7.8%
(4) able to communicate with other people	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(3) able to communicate but with difficulty	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(2) able to understand, but not able to speak	38	-	15	23	16	22	-	-	-	-	38
	16.1%	-	39.5%	60.5%	42%	58%	-	-	-	-	100%
(1) not able to understand at all	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	236	42	64	130	134	102	68	52	52	12	52
	100%	17.8%	27.1%	55.1%	56.8%	43.2%	28.8%	22.0%	22.0%	5.1%	22.0%

4.2.1 From the perspective of gender

In terms of competence in Chinese dialect, the survey findings (see Table 3) reveal that all respondents have some knowledge of Chinese dialects. Only six of the 236 respondents (2.5%) reported difficulty communicating in Chinese dialects, with males (67%) exhibiting a higher rate of difficulty than females (33%). These individuals typically know only basic greetings and familial terms. Fifty of the 236 respondents (21.2%) reported being able to use Chinese dialects to communicate with people from the same local community. Interestingly, females (56%) were more likely than males (44%) to report this level of proficiency. However, males significantly outperformed females in terms of fluency in Chinese dialects. Specifically, 60% of male respondents and 40% of female respondents reported fluency in Chinese dialects. These finds are relatively consistent with Hoang (2025), who found that among Hoa people in Binh Duong pronince, a neighboring province of Dong Nai, men typically show greater proficiency in Chinese dialects compared to women. This gender disparity can be attributed to differences in communication patterns within the ethnic group. Males often engage in broader communication within their community, while females tend to be more reserved, primarily using Chinese dialects within the family domain.

In terms of competence in Vietnamese, in Dong Nai province, 100% of the Hoa people community reported knowing Vietnamese at varying levels. Vietnamese proficiency within this community is generally high, with 198 out of 236 respondents (83.9%) demonstrating strong proficiency (see Table 4). Male respondents (59.6%), on average, exhibit higher proficiency in all Vietnamese skills compared to female respondents (40.4%). This can be attributed to factors like a greater focus on studies and more frequent social interactions, which contribute to improved speaking fluency in Vietnamese. Only 38 of the 236 respondents (see Table 4), who are able to understand but not speak Vietnamese, are older than 80 and were born in China. These individuals may have limited Vietnamese proficiency due to less interaction with Vietnamese speakers and a lack of formal Vietnamese education in the past. They primarily learned Vietnamese through natural exposure. The percentage of females who can understand Vietnamese but cannot speak it is higher than that of males.

4.2.2 From the perspective of age

In this study, Hoa respondents were divided into three age groups: those 30 years old or younger, those between 31 and 50, and those over 50.

All respondents indicated some levels of proficiency in Chinese dialects, with no one reporting no knowledge at all. Out of the 236 respondents, 180 (76.3%) reported fluency in Chinese dialects. Among the fluent speakers, those over 50 years old accounted for 57.2%, followed by the 31-50 age group at 26.7%, and the under-30 age group at 16.1% (see Table 3). These findings are largely in line with Hoang (2025), who observed a correlation between age and Chinese proficiency, noting that older Hoa individuals in Binh Duong Province—a neighbor of Dong Nai—tend to have higher fluency levels compared to younger generations.

The level of Chinese dialect proficiency among the Hoa people varies significantly by age. Those over 50 tend to be the most fluent, and this proficiency generally decreases with younger generations. As a result, younger Hoa people often have weaker Chinese language skills. Chinese dialects within the Hoa community are rarely used by descendants. While there are multiple factors contributing to this, the main reason is that these dialects can be different and inconvenient for communication. Additionally, many young Hoa people are not motivated to learn Chinese dialect, believing it to be primarily for preserving traditional culture and ethnicity. This lack of interest may be partly due to their busy lifestyles and partly because Chinese can be challenging to learn and retain.

Moreover, young Hoa people are seldom taught Chinese by their parents, as many older family members are also not fluent in Chinese dialects. Exceptions include families where grandparents have a high level of education, value their heritage language, and actively communicate with their children in Chinese.

Consequently, the older the Hoa person, the higher their proficiency in Chinese dialects, with a gradual decline as they age. This decline is often attributed to less frequent use. Those who do recognize Chinese dialects typically rely on speaking and listening skills, which often indicates limited literacy.

Most Hoa people in Southeast Vietnam, including the Hoa community in Dong Nai province, are proficient in Vietnamese. Many Hoa people speak Vietnamese more fluently than their mother tongue, Chinese dialects. Most Hoa people have stronger Vietnamese language skills than Chinese language skills, especially in reading and writing. In Dong Nai province, 83.9% of Hoa people are fluent in Vietnamese. Table 4 also shows that 23 out of 130 respondents (17.7%), who are over 50 years old, can understand Vietnamese but cannot speak it due to limited interaction with the outside world.

4.2.3 From the perspective of occupation

Students have the lowest oral proficiency in Chinese dialects compared to other professions, with only 3 out of 180 respondents reporting fluency. This is because they focus on learning Vietnamese in school and may not have the time or motivation to learn Chinese. The data (see Table 3) show that 82 respondents, who are both staff members and workers, are proficient in all Chinese skills. However, in terms of oral communication skills, Hoa people who are businessmen and housewives tend to have better listening and speaking skills in Chinese than those in other occupations.

In terms of proficiency in Vietnamese: 100% traders, workers, staff, and students are good at all Vietnamese language skills (see Table 4). These are the two groups who have learned Vietnamese throughly and systematically.

While the survey results show that many Hoa people in Dong Nai maintain their Chinese dialect as their mother tongue, the Hoa community also has strong Vietnamese language skills. Proficiency in Vietnamese helps the Hoa community integrate into the local society and facilitates their business activities.

4.3. Characteristics of language usage among the Hoa people

4.3.1 Family communication language usage

While Chinese dialects, Vietnamese, and Mandarin are all used within families, Vietnamese is the primary language of communication. This contradicts previous studies that suggested ethnic minority languages are almost exclusively used within families of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. However, the situation is different for the Hoa Chinese community in the

Southeast, including Dong Nai province. On average, Vietnamese is used about 60% of the time within families, Chinese dialects are used less than 30% of the time, and both Vietnamese and Chinese are used about 10% of the time.

The choice of language (Chinese dialect, Vietnamese, or a combination) used within Hoa families depends on various factors, including language proficiency, gender, age, education level, and occupation. Hoa women are less likely than Hoa men to use Chinese dialects with family members. Older generations are more likely to use Chinese dialects with family members than younger generations. Illiterate people are more likely to use Chinese dialects with their grandparents compared to those with formal education. Interestingly, while all Hoa people who graduated from university identify Chinese dialects as their mother tongue, none of them use Chinese dialects with their grandparents, parents, or children. This raises questions about the concept of 'mother tongue' and self-identity.

Most Hoa people in Dong Nai, regardless of their profession, use Vietnamese with family members of all generations. Businesspeople, due to the nature of their work, often use Chinese dialects with other Chinese people and local groups. Their extensive communication with Vietnamese and Chinese people from various backgrounds has helped them become proficient in both languages.

Hoa men are more likely to use Chinese dialects with other Hoa people than Hoa women. This may be due to a stronger sense of cultural heritage among Hoa men. However, Vietnamese remains the primary language of communication within the Hoa community in Dong Nai.

Hoa people over 50 years old are more likely to speak Chinese with other Hoa people than those under 50. Many older Hoa people have strong Chinese language skills and frequent interactions with the local Hoa community, which helps them maintain their Chinese proficiency. In contrast, younger Hoa people primarily use Vietnamese to communicate with friends and relatives, as they often have limited or no knowledge of Chinese dialects. Many young Hoa people believe that speaking Chinese dialects with other Hoa people is unnecessary in today's Vietnamese-dominant society. While most Hoa people in Dong Nai can speak Vietnamese fluently, their use of Chinese dialects is limited, especially among younger generations. Chinese dialects are primarily used within families and for simple greetings among close friends and neighbors.

Language choice varies depending on the job. Younger Hoa people, many of whom do not know Chinese dialects due to the widespread use of Vietnamese, primarily use Vietnamese in their professional lives. In Dong Nai, many workers and businesspeople can switch between Vietnamese and Chinese, despite limited proficiency in either language.

Older Hoa people (over 50 years old) who live in the Dinh Quan district, where the Hoa community is more concentrated, tend to use their mother tongue more frequently within their families compared to Hoa people in other areas of Dong Nai province. Many Hoa families in Dinh Quan district encourage their children to learn Mandarin, believing that while dialects may differ, all Hoa people worldwide use the same Chinese characters.

4.3.2 Social communication language usage

All Hoa people in Dong Nai province, regardless of gender, education level, or literacy, use Vietnamese at community meetings. While most Hoa people speak fluent Vietnamese, their Chinese language skills are generally weak, especially among younger generations. Chinese is only used in certain private meetings within the Hoa community, and even then, Mandarin is often used and translated into Vietnamese. Chinese dialects are not considered the mother tongue of most Hoa people and have limited use, primarily within families and among members of the same local group. The level of Chinese dialect use varies within families based on the generations involved.

In informal communication, including private meetings with people from the same or different ethnic groups, most Hoa people use Vietnamese. The use of Chinese in private meetings is limited, and those who do use Chinese are typically older and have higher levels of education. Conversely, younger Hoa people, especially those with university degrees, rarely use Chinese in private meetings.

4.3.3 Language usage in other communication domains

The language used in various contexts, such as phone conversations, note-taking, reading, listening to the radio,

watching television, praying, and participating in cultural activities, reflects the language competence of the Hoa people. Therefore, this survey is necessary to investigate the language use of the Hoa people in Dong Nai province.

When investigating the characteristics of the Hoa people community, we focus on written language skills. We also collect information about personal cultural activities, such as religious practices and folk song singing. The results indicate that Hoa people rarely use Chinese when speaking with other Hoa people, especially those under 50 years old. Even when communicating with Hoa people from different dialect groups, Chinese is seldom used. When talking on the phone with Kinh people, Hoa people never use Chinese. If any Chinese is used, it is typically initiated by Kinh people who know Chinese.

Due to limited Chinese literacy among the respondents, most Hoa people use Vietnamese for their personal records. However, some older Chinese people who can read and write Chinese characters prefer to use Chinese for confidential records, such as bookkeeping. Additionally, about 25.4% of Chinese people over 50 years old use Chinese characters to write diaries and record their life experiences, including memories of their homeland in China. They believe that writing in Chinese characters helps them connect with their homeland.

Although the Hoa people in Vietnam speak different Chinese dialects, they use the same set of Chinese characters. This means that the same set of Chinese characters can be read and understood by speakers of various Chinese dialects, including Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, and Hakka.

The Hoa people often sing in Vietnamese for cultural activities or lullabies. Due to limited Chinese literacy, few people can read folk songs or songs in Chinese.

For some Hoa people who are fluent in both Chinese and Vietnamese, language choice for prayers and religious ceremonies is flexible. Vietnamese is used for prayers related to business, while Chinese dialects are used for prayers honoring ancestors. However, people under 50 years old tend to use Chinese dialects for prayers and religious ceremonies instead of Vietnamese. This indicates that Vietnamese has infiltrated the spiritual life of the Hoa people in Dong Nai province.

Chinese dialects and Mandarin are used in festivals. Mandarin is generally used for spiritual activities among the Hoa people in Dong Nai province.

Most Hoa people (except illiterate persons) read newspapers in Vietnamese (79%). This is understandable, as few Hoa people here can read and write Chinese characters. Only a few Hoa people born in Vietnam can read Chinese language newspapers like the 'Sai Gon Giai Phong' due to their education in Chinese schools.

The Vietnamese language skills of the Hoa community in Dong Nai are generally strong. Nearly 90% of surveyed Hoa respondents reported understanding Vietnamese television programs. However, students and other professionals often struggle to understand Chinese television broadcasts due to their limited Chinese language proficiency. Some Chinese officials and workers who are involved in the Hoa community have strong Vietnamese and Chinese language skills and can understand Chinese television programs well.

The Hoa people primarily use their Chinese dialect in informal communication, such as within families and among members of the same local group. The elder generation of Hoa speaks Vietnamese poorly. The younger is better. It is common for Hoa people to speak Vietnamese now. These findings are similar to those by Hoang (2017). Vietnamese, on the other hand, is used in both formal and informal settings, including education, administration, family life, community interactions, and spiritual and cultural activities. The Hoa people have a strong ability to learn Vietnamese, but their proficiency in their mother tongue is primarily limited to listening and speaking. Only a small percentage (about 25%) of Hoa people can read and write Chinese.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the survey results provide three key insights into language competence and usage among the Hoa community in Dong Nai Province, Vietnam. First, there is a shift in the self-identification of mother tongue within the Hoa community. Increasingly, Hoa individuals are adopting Vietnamese as their mother tongue, leading to a decline in those who identify a

Chinese dialect as such. This shift is particularly pronounced among younger generations, with findings showing that the younger the individual, the less likely they are to consider a Chinese dialect their mother tongue. Second, most Hoa people in Dong Nai are bilingual, speaking both Vietnamese and a Chinese dialect fluently. However, they are generally more proficient in Vietnamese, the national language of Vietnam. Notably, 100% of Hoa individuals under 30 speak Vietnamese fluently. This indicates that Hoa people' proficiency in Vietnamese increases significantly from older to younger generations, while proficiency in Chinese dialects declines significantly in the same way. This finding reinforces the conclusion that younger Hoa individuals are more likely to self-identify Vietnamese as their mother tongue. However, from a gender perspective, males tend to have better Chinese language skills than females. Third, Vietnamese is the dominant language in Hoa families, with younger generations increasingly favoring it over Chinese dialects. In public and social settings, Hoa people primarily use Vietnamese, while Chinese dialects are mostly confined to private interactions and older generations. Written communication, media consumption, and cultural activities are predominantly in Vietnamese, with only a small percentage of Hoa individuals retaining literacy in Chinese. While Vietnamese is widely understood, proficiency in Chinese dialects is steadily declining, especially among younger and more educated Hoa individuals.

These insights indicate that the Hoa community in Dong Nai is shifting from bilingualism to Vietnamese dominance, as a significant number of Hoa individuals now identify Vietnamese as their mother tongue. In other words, bilingualism within the Hoa community is weakening as they become more proficient in Vietnamese while gradually losing their Chinese dialects. Vietnamese has become the dominant language, creating an imbalance in the bilingual landscape. This means that the number of Vietnamese-Chinese bilingual individuals in Dong Nai has declined, while the number of Vietnamese-dominant monolinguals has risen. As Vietnamese proficiency increases, the use of Chinese dialects decreases, leading to fewer bilingual speakers and a growing number of Vietnamese monolinguals. Various linguistic and social factors contribute to this decline, including younger Hoa individuals (born in the 1970s and 1980s) preferring to communicate in Vietnamese due to limited interest in Chinese dialects and little knowledge of Mandarin.

Therefore, to preserve Chinese dialect proficiency among the Hoa community in Dong Nai, a multi-faceted approach is needed, focusing on education, community engagement, and media initiatives. Schools should integrate Chinese dialect classes into their curricula or offer extracurricular programs, while community-led weekend language classes can provide additional learning opportunities, especially with elder native speakers as instructors. Encouraging bilingual family environments and organizing cultural festivals, storytelling sessions, and language exchange programs can strengthen intergenerational transmission. Digital media, including YouTube channels, podcasts, and social media groups, can make learning more accessible and engaging for younger generations. Additionally, bilingual publications, community radio programs, and interactive mobile apps can help maintain regular exposure to Chinese dialects. By fostering a supportive language-learning environment, the Hoa community can slow the decline of Chinese dialect proficiency and promote a more balanced bilingual identity.

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