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Language Competence and Choice of Vietnamese-Thais in Thailand[1]

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Abstract

This article aims to study language competence and language choice of Vietnamese-Thai people in Udon Thani Province. The sample included 70 participants who were divided into three age groups. Data were gathered through questionnaires, in-depth interviews and observation. Analysis was done by using sociolinguistic concepts. The study found that language competence varied according to age group. The oldest age group was more competent in speaking many languages than the two younger groups. The older groups were also more competent speaking Vietnamese and Isan, while all age groups were similarly competent in speaking Central Thai. Age, interlocutor and place were the three factors that significantly influenced language choice. Language is an important aspect of the preservation of culture and identity. Moreover, the use of both Vietnamese and Isan is diminishing among Vietnamese-Thais because of the transition and use of Central Thai in the formal sector throughout Thailand. Therefore, in order to preserve the identity and culture of Vietnamese-Thais in Thailand, the need and importance of language and culture should be taught and emphasized to future generations. We suggest formal implementation of relevant language policies in favor of both Vietnamese and Isan languages in order to support the diversity of languages and cultures in Thai society.

Keywords: Language competence, language choice, Vietnamese-Thai, Isan, Northeast Thailand

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาความสามารถในการใช้ภาษา และการเลือกใช้ภาษาของคนไทยเชื้อสายเวียดนามในจังหวัดอุดรธานี มีกลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวน 70 คน แบ่งเป็น 3 ช่วงอายุ เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูล ได้แก่ การสังเกตการณ์ การสัมภาษณ์ตามแบบสอบถาม และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้แนวคิดทางภาษาศาสตร์สังคม ผลการศึกษาด้านความสามารถในการใช้ภาษา พบว่า ความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาของกลุ่มตัวอย่างลดน้อยลงตามกลุ่มอายุ กลุ่มสูงอายุเป็นกลุ่มที่สามารถพูดได้หลายภาษามากที่สุด ตามด้วยกลุ่มวัยกลางคนและกลุ่มอายุน้อย กลุ่มสูงอายุสามารถใช้ภาษาเวียดนามและภาษาอีสานได้ดีที่สุด รองลงมาคือกลุ่มวัยกลางคนและกลุ่มอายุน้อย ซึ่งส่วนมากไม่สามารถใช้ภาษาเวียดนามและภาษาอีสานได้ ส่วนภาษาไทยกลางนั้นทั้งสามกลุ่มสามารถใช้ได้ดีในระดับเท่าๆ กัน ด้านการเลือกภาษาพบว่า อายุ คู่สนทนา และสถานที่เป็นปัจจัยทางสังคมที่มีผลต่อการเลือกใช้ภาษา การที่ภาษาเวียดนามและภาษาอีสานถูกเลือกใช้น้อยลงและภาษาไทยกลางกลายเป็นภาษาหลักของกลุ่มคนไทยเชื้อสายเวียดนามรุ่นใหม่ ทำให้เห็นแนวโน้มของการสูญหายไปของภาษาเวียดนามและภาษาอีสานในอนาคตอันใกล้ จึงจำเป็นต้องการมีนโยบายและการดำเนินการรักษาภาษาสองภาษานี้เพื่อส่งเสริมความหลากหลายทางภาษาและวัฒนธรรมของสังคมไทย

คำสำคัญ: ความสามารถในการใช้ภาษา การเลือกภาษา คนไทยเชื้อสายเวียดนาม อีสาน ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ ประเทศไทย

Introduction

The Northeastern region of Thailand, also known as Isan, has a large population of ethnic Vietnamese-Thai people who are typically divided into two main groups. The first group (old Vietnamese) immigrated to Thailand in 1920 when France had colonial control over Vietnam. The second group (new Vietnamese) moved to Thailand when France returned to occupy Indochina in 1945-1946 after World War II. Both waves of Vietnamese immigrants initially resided in or near Thai-Lao border provinces, such as Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Sakon Nakhon and Nong Khai. Subsequently, many moved to Udon Thani, a larger and more developed province in the Isan region (Channarasaka, 2002:

108-109). Data provided by Vu Duy Chinh (2015), president of the Vietnamese-Thais of Udon Thani Association, revealed that there were approximately 15,000 Vietnamese-Thai individuals from 1,300 families residing in the province as of December 20, 2015. The majority of the Vietnamese-Thai population identified themselves as second- and third-generation and they lived near one another in Ban Chic Village, Sichomchun Road, Muang District. Others were dispersed in other nearby areas of Muang District. They strengthened their relationships by remaining in close contact and engaging in many Vietnamese-centered group activities.

In the past, Vietnamese-Thais residing in Thailand were prohibited from working freely under the Control of Foreigners Acts passed by the Thai government. Therefore, they tended to live in close proximity to one another for the sake of community and assistance (Siphan and Trinh Dieu Thin, 2005). Moreover, because Vietnamese-Thais were not permitted to attend school like other Thais, the Vietnamese-Thai community organized classes to teach their children the Vietnamese language in order to maintain their mother tongue and culture. Nowadays, Vietnamese-Thais can enter the Thai educational system and receive a higher education. Furthermore, they can work freely like other Thai citizens. Many are now operating their own businesses or restaurants, or are engaging in trade. However, the educational level and language use between older and younger Vietnamese-Thais differs significantly.

Decades after their initial migration to Thailand, Vietnamese immigrants have adjusted well to every aspect of Thai society, while simultaneously preserving their traditions, culture and language. They have done this by speaking Vietnamese with one another, maintaining and organizing traditional Vietnamese holidays and celebrating in their traditional costumes. Additionally, they continue to uphold their traditional practice of respecting ancestors and elders, eating traditional Vietnamese cuisine, practicing Buddhism and emphasizing the virtues of hard work, patience and perseverance. They also celebrate traditional Vietnamese holidays and festivals, including Vietnamese

New Year, Independence Day, and Ho Chi Minh's birthday. Vietnamese-Thai elders prefer to speak Vietnamese when conversing with one another at these types of gatherings. However, as a whole, they have varying language competencies and may choose to speak a language depending on certain social factors, such as interlocutors or situations. They are considered multilingual and can choose a language in accordance with certain social contexts. This phenomenon, referred to by sociolinguists as language choice or code choice, often takes place in multilingual societies whose members can speak more than one language at a similar level.

The present research focused on sociolinguistic concepts of linguistic competence and language choice. Noam Chomsky (1965) defined linguistic competence as the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language, as opposed to language performance, which is the actual use of language in concrete situations. Linguistic competence constitutes knowledge that is tacit and implicit, meaning that people do not have conscious access to the principles and rules that govern the combination of sounds, words and sentences; however, they recognize when those rules and principles are being violated. For example, when a person judges that the sentence, '*Nick said that Bon help him*,' is grammatically incorrect, it is because the person has tacit knowledge of the grammatical principle that reflexive pronouns must refer to a noun phrase in the same clause. Language choice, according to Brace et al. (2001: 11), is a tool of communication between speakers and listeners. It is a social phenomenon that occurs when individuals select different languages for different purposes in different social contexts. Social context is a key factor behind language choice. Although individuals are not fluent in a language, they may try to speak it in order to encourage those who speak that language in other communities.

Language competence and choice are important components of culture and identity. Social and anthropological studies have been conducted on Vietnamese-Thai people in fields such as immigration history and identity. Other studies include the phonetic system of the Vietnamese language spoken by Vietnamese-Thais. However, there

have yet to be any studies regarding language competence and choice among Vietnamese-Thai people. Therefore, our research aimed to study the language competence of Vietnamese-Thais and provide a better understanding of the Vietnamese-Thai people, especially in regard to how they have adjusted in Thai society.

Language shift and maintenance result from language choice after a certain period of time (Fasold, 1984: 213). Language shift shows how a language is disused by the speech community in favor of another language. Language shifts can occur when members of a language community collectively prefer a new language rather than the original (local or mother language). By contrast, in language maintenance, speakers of the community collectively decide to maintain use of the current language or the language traditionally spoken. Therefore, the study of language choice will allow us to predict the use of languages by Vietnamese-Thais and may help us to find solutions related to language maintenance. In addition, the study will enhance the knowledge and understanding of Vietnamese-Thais through linguistics, and encourage further research on the Vietnamese-Thai and other ethnic communities in Thailand.

Methodology

This sociolinguistic study aimed to examine language competence and choice regarding three languages - Vietnamese, Central Thai and Isan - among Vietnamese-Thais in Muang District, Udon Thani Province. The study was based on three variation factors: age, interlocutor and place. Data collection was accomplished through the use of questionnaires, in-depth interviews and observation. Various methods were used simultaneously. The samples included 70 participants who were divided into three age groups: young adults (22 persons, 15-35 years old), middle aged-adults (22 persons, 40-60 years old) and older adults (26 persons, 65-85 years old). Interlocutors included the following: spouse, descendant, Thai friend, Vietnamese-Thai friend and stranger. Places included home, office, local market, restaurant, shopping mall, bus terminal and government office.

Muang District was chosen because of its large Vietnamese-Thai population of both "old Vietnamese" and "new Vietnamese." These people live together in Ban Chic village, Sichomchun Street and nearby areas of Muang District, Udon Thani Province. Vietnamese-Thais in this area keep in touch with each other by frequently joining group activities, which give them other opportunities to continue speaking Vietnamese. This was a mixed qualitative and quantitative research study and the results will be presented through descriptive analysis.

Language competence

Language competence was analyzed based on: 1) competence in using each language, evaluated by counting the number of people in each age group who can speak Central Thai, Isan, Vietnamese or another language, and then calculating the percentage of people who can speak each language in each group; and 2) competence in using many languages, determined by counting the number of people who can speak the same number of languages and then calculating the percentage of people in each group who can speak one, two, three or more languages.

Language competence data comprised of data on the use of each language and data regarding competence in using many languages are summarized in the tables below.

Table 1 Competence in speaking multiple languages by age group

Number of languages	**15-35 years old**		**40-60 years old**		**65-85 years old**	
	number of people	percentage	number of people	percentage	number of people	percentage
1 (T)	0	0	0	0	0	0
2 (T and I or E)	14	63.64	1	4.55	0	0
3 (T, I, V)	7	31.82	20	90.9	23	88.46
4 (T, I, V and E or C)	1	4.54	1 (E)	4.55	3 (C)	11.54
Total	22	100	22	100	26	100

(Note: T: Central Thai; I: Isan; V: Vietnamese; E: English; C: Chinese)

Table 2 Competence in speaking each language by age group

	Central Thai	Isan	Vietnamese	Others
15-35 years old	22 (100%)	20 (90.91%)	5 (22.73%)	4 (18.18%) (English)
40-60 years old	22 (100%)	22 (100%)	21 (95.45%)	1 (4.55%) (English)
65-85 years old	26 (100%)	26 (100%)	26 (100%)	3 (11.54%) (Chinese)

Tables 1 and 2 show that all participants were competent in speaking at least two languages. The majority of the young adult group could speak two languages - Central Thai and Isan or English (63.64 percent); followed by those who could speak three languages - Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese (31.82 percent); and finally, those who could speak four languages - Central Thai, Isan, English and Vietnamese (4.54 percent). In regards to the competence in speaking each language, all young adults or 100 percent were competent in speaking Central Thai, while 90.91 percent of the group were competent speaking Isan and only 22.73 percent could speak a little Vietnamese. Moreover, 18.18 percent of the young adult group were competent in speaking English.

The majority of the middle-aged group (90.9 percent) were competent in speaking three languages - Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese. This was followed by 4.55 percent who could speak two languages - Central Thai and Isan. A similar number could speak four languages - Central Thai, Isan, Vietnamese and English. Regarding competency, all middle-aged adults could speak Central Thai and Isan; 95.45 percent could speak Vietnamese; and 4.55 percent could speak English.

Concerning the older adult group, the majority (88.46 percent) could speak three languages - Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese and 11.54 percent were competent speaking these languages as well as Chinese. All older adults had the highest competence in speaking each language. They could speak Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese. Among these, 11.54 percent were also competent speaking some Chinese.

When comparing language competence among all three age groups, it was found that the older adult group was the most competent as all group members could speak at least three languages, followed by the middle-aged adult group, in which the majority could speak three

languages, and the young adult group was the least competent (only two languages). All older adult participants were competent speaking Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese fluently. All middle-aged adults could speak Central Thai and Isan well and the majority could speak good Vietnamese. All young adults could speak Central Thai fluently, many could speak Isan, and just a few could speak Vietnamese.

Language choice

Language choice in this article means the choice of the following languages: Central Thai, Isan, and Vietnamese of Vietnamese-Thai people residing in Muang District, Udon Thani Province. Data were analyzed descriptively through percentages and grouped according to age, interlocutor and place. The results in the table below summarize how Vietnamese-Thais choose language in their everyday life in Northeast Thailand.

Table 3 Language choice by interlocutors

		Language chosen					
Interlocutors	Age group	V	T	I	3 languages	T and I	Total
Spouse	Young	-	28.57%	-	14.29%	57.14%	100%
	Middle-aged	5%	5%	-	90%	-	100%
	Older	52.17%	-	-	47.83%	-	100%
Descendant	Young	-	85.71%	-	-	14.29%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	75%	-	10%	15%	100%
	Older	4.35%	26.09%	13.04%	56.52%	-	100%
Thai Friend	Young	-	68.18%	-	-	31.82%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	50%	13.64%	-	36.36%	100%
	Older	-	23.08%	46.15%	-	30.77%	100%
Vietnamese-Thais Friend	Young	-	63.64%	-	9.09%	27.27%	100%
	Middle-aged	4.55%	4.55%	-	90.91%	-	100%
	Older	46.15%	-	-	53.85%	-	100%
Stranger	Young	-	100%	-	-	-	100%
	Middle-aged	-	90.91%	4.55%	-	4.55%	100%
	Older	-	80.77%	3.85%	-	15.38%	100%

(Note: V: Vietnamese; T: Central Thai; I: Isan)

Table 4 Language choice by places

		Language chosen					
Places	Age group	V	T	I	3 languages	T + I	Total
Home	Young	-	36.36%	-	18.18%	45.46%	100%
	Middle-aged	9.09%	-	-	90.91%	-	100%
	Older	26.92%	-	-	73.08%	-	100%
Office	Young	-	50%	-	4.54%	45.46%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	-	-	54.55%	45.45%	100%
	Older	11.54%	7.69%	11.54%	57.69%	11.54%	100%
Market	Young	-	63.64%	-	-	36.36%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	9.09%	36.36%	40.91%	13.64%	100%
	Older	3.85%	3.85%	11.54%	73.07%	7.69%	100%
Shopping Mall	Young	-	95.46%	-	-	4.54%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	81.82%	-	-	18.18%	100%
	Older	-	69.23%	-	-	30.77%	100%
Restaurant	Young	-	90.91%	-	-	9.09%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	59.09%	18.18%	13.64%	9.09%	100%
	Older	-	38.46%	23.08%	19.23%	19.23%	100%
Bus Station	Young	-	86.36%	-	-	13.64%	100%
	Middle-aged	-	72.72%	13.64%	-	13.64%	100%
	Older	-	57.69%	19.23%	-	23.08%	100%
Government Office	Young	-	100%	-	-	-	100%
	Middle-aged	-	100%)	-	-	-	100%
	Older	-	76.92%	-	-	23.08%	100%

As tables 3 and 4 demonstrate, the language choice of each age group can be summarized and determined by the factors below.

Language choice of young adults

We found that the young adult group chose to speak Central Thai the most, particularly when speaking to strangers, followed by Isan, which they spoke primarily with their family members. However, most young adults mixed Isan with Central Thai. Very few chose to speak Vietnamese. These results reflect findings similar to the language competence of the young adult group.

We found that the place influenced the language choice of the young adult group. However, it was not the most significant factor. Young adults in particular chose to speak Central Thai, no matter the place. However, some mixed Isan and Central Thai when speaking at home and at work. No young adult chose to speak Vietnamese at home, even with their parents and grandparents who prefer speaking Vietnamese. The main reason is that young adults could not speak Vietnamese well enough for effective communication.

Language choice of the Middle-aged Group

In regard to the interlocutor factor, the tables show that the middle-aged group chose to speak Vietnamese when speaking with an interlocutor who could speak Vietnamese well (i.e. parents, spouses or elderly Vietnamese-Thais). However, most mixed Vietnamese with Central Thai or Isan. Central Thai remains the most commonly chosen spoken language followed by Isan, when speaking with local people who prefer to speak Isan.

The middle-aged group chose to speak different languages depending on place. They predominantly chose to speak Central Thai in government offices, bus stations and shopping malls. This was followed by Isan in local markets. The middle-aged group chose to speak Vietnamese at home and in restaurants where many Vietnamese-Thais were present.

Language choice of the older adult group

The older adult group chose to speak Vietnamese throughout most of their daily life, particularly when speaking with their spouses and Vietnamese-Thai friends. They chose Isan when speaking with their local friends (who prefer to speak Isan) and Central Thai when speaking with strangers and young interlocutors.

Depending on place, the older adult participants of our study chose languages differently from the young and middle-aged groups. They chose Vietnamese when speaking at home the most, followed by restaurants where many Vietnamese Thais gather. However, they often mixed Vietnamese with Isan and Central Thai. Older adults chose to speak Isan the most when speaking in local market settings. They chose Central Thai when speaking in other places, such as shopping malls, bus stations, and government offices.

According to Ms. Bui Thanh Huong (2016), vice president of Vietnamese-Thais in Udon Thani Association, the older adults want to use Vietnamese as much as possible when conversing with other Vietnamese-Thais. Therefore, they speak Vietnamese with their spouses and Vietnamese-Thai friends in order to preserve and maintain their mother tongue. Apart from using Vietnamese at home and restaurants, Vietnamese-Thais speak Vietnamese as their main language when conversing with each other during their meetings or conference gatherings through the Vietnamese-Thais Association and during their traditional Vietnamese festivals.

Comparison of language choice between age groups

When comparing the language choices among groups, we found that the daily use of Vietnamese language for Vietnamese-Thais decreased with youth; lower age groups speak less than older age groups. Vietnamese was spoken more frequently by the older adult group, particularly when speaking at home with their spouses, followed by the middle-aged group in restaurant settings with their Vietnamese-Thai friends, and finally the young adult group who rarely spoke Vietnamese.

For Isan language, we found that the language was spoken by the old adult group the most, particularly when speaking with local people at local markets, followed by the middle-aged group, who also spoke Isan with local people at local markets, and finally the young adult group who spoke Isan the least. The young adult group noticeably mixed Isan with Central Thai, with no individual speaking Isan language alone.

Central Thai was predominantly spoken by the young adult group. They spoke Central Thai as their main language no matter where and to whom they were speaking. They were followed by the middle-aged group who chose Central Thai when speaking with strangers, young people in official places (i.e. government offices, bus stations and shopping malls). Older adults chose to speak Central Thai the least. In conclusion, the use of Central Thai increased when the age of speakers decreased. Individuals chose to speak Central Thai more with strangers and young interlocutors at formal places and spoke it less when with familiar interlocutors in informal places or settings.

Conclusion and Discussion

The young adult group was the least competent group in speaking numerous languages. The majority of them could speak only two languages - Central Thai and Isan. Through in-depth interviews, we found three leading factors. First, the new generation of Vietnamese-Thais had fully become Thai citizens. They were born and raised in Thailand speaking Thai or Isan in their daily life. Second, the daily life activities of the young adult group, such as working and studying, created an environment of meeting and communicating with Thai people who spoke Central Thai as the main language. They did not join group activities led by the Vietnamese-Thai community and rarely spoke Vietnamese. And finally, the Thailand-born young adults received a standard Thai language and cultural education and were not able to learn and value Vietnamese as the previous generations did. In addition, Central Thai is the official language of Thailand and is preferred over Isan language, the dialect specific to the Isan region.

In-depth interviews and observations were the methods used to classify the middle-aged group as the age group that could speak Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese well because of their opportunities to speak all three languages in their daily life with local people and with other Vietnamese-Thais who can speak these three languages. Although born in Thailand, they speak Vietnamese because they were taught to speak Vietnamese by their parents when they were young. Nowadays, the middle-aged Vietnamese-Thais have the opportunity to speak Vietnamese when conversing with their parents or Vietnamese-Thai elders.

Older adults reported the highest competence in speaking multiple languages. They were able to speak all three languages well - Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese. These results demonstrate the ability of the Vietnamese-Thai people to adapt to a new society through language learning. This group was also able to retain their original language out of their desire to maintain their culture, history and traditions for the next generations. It is important to note that the Vietnamese they speak is slightly different from the language currently spoken in Vietnam, particularly regarding vocabulary. Vietnamese-Thais still use old Vietnamese words and phrases used during the time of their immigration to Thailand many decades ago, but which are no longer presently used in Vietnam.

In regard to language choice, we found that age group dictated the choice of language. The older adults used Vietnamese and Isan more than the middle-aged adults. The young adults rarely spoke either language, but instead chose to speak Central Thai. This language choice was consistent with the pattern of language competence by age group. Furthermore, it was in accordance with social contexts and settings. Adults often stayed at home, went to local markets, Vietnamese restaurants or the Vietnamese-Thai Association and spoke with people who preferred to speak Vietnamese and Isan over Central Thai. The middle-aged adults were of working age and had opportunities to meet and speak all three languages with different groups of interlocutors in different places. The young adults often spoke with their same age

interlocutors at formal places or public places such as schools, universities and shopping malls.

The interlocutor and place factor did not have much influence on the language choice of the young adult groups. The young adults chose to use Central Thai as their main language with all interlocutors in all places. Isan was used as their sub-language particularly when speaking with local people who generally speak only Isan in informal places like local markets. However, the young adults only used Isan when mixed with Central Thai. Vietnamese language was used by a minority of the young adult group with some simple words or sentences. This result was in accordance with the young group's language competence study result.

The middle-aged group chose to use languages according to the interlocutor and place of speaking factors. This was also based on the competence level of speaking all three languages for the middle-aged adults. The high level of language competence and choice of the middle-aged group was due to their habit of meeting and conversing with people who spoke these different languages in daily life, such as parents, elderly Vietnamese friends, local people, business partners, descendants and other young interlocutors such as friends of their descendants.

The older adults spoke Central Thai, Isan and Vietnamese in daily conversations according to interlocutor and place factors. Remarkably, this age group spoke Vietnamese quite frequently, due to the fact they could speak all three languages well. They also had greater opportunities to meet and converse with Vietnamese-Thai friends in their daily life (i.e. at home, in Vietnamese restaurants or the Vietnamese-Thai Association office, or at traditional Vietnamese festivals). They had a strong desire to preserve Vietnamese traditions and language for their children; therefore, they made a greater effort to speak the language as much as possible in their daily life. They chose Central Thai when speaking in formal places such as government offices, shopping malls or bus stations. Isan was chosen when speaking with local Isan people, mostly in the market.

The results of the language competence study are consistent with previous studies, such as that of Watthana (2006) in Buriram, which found that the older age groups of all ethnic groups (i.e. Khmer, Thai Korat, and Lao) were competent in speaking and listening to multiple languages, followed by the middle-aged group and the young group. Likewise, the work of Chunthawithet (1988) in Sisaket reported that the language competence of people from varying ethnic groups in one village differed according to age, with older individuals speaking at least three languages and younger age groups speaking only two.

The language choice findings are consistent with the earlier work of Suwanawat (2003), which found that Plang people in Chiang Rai used their mother tongue in the intra-group. He reported Central Thai was used for education, trade and official government domains, while Tai Yai was used mostly in the religious domain. The oldest age group and those with no education used Plang language more than other groups, while teenagers used Central Thai. Panichakul (2011) found that in Lopburi, Mon language was used predominantly by the oldest age group (46-65 years old), followed by the second oldest group (25-45 years old), and least frequently by the youngest age group (5-25 years old). In contrast, the youngest age group used Central Thai most frequently, followed by the second oldest group, and the oldest group, respectively. A study by Sensai (2013) in Nakhon Ratchasima demonstrated that the Khmer dialect was spoken most frequently among family members or friends inside their village communities, while Central Thai was used most frequently with strangers in formal or governmental places such as district offices, schools and hospitals. A study by Ton Van Trang (2015) found that elderly Chinese-Vietnamese women in the Cho Lon community of Ho Chi Minh city could speak Chinese more fluently than Vietnamese and Chinese was the only language used in their homes. The middle-aged Chinese-Vietnamese women could converse with Vietnamese people in Vietnamese easily and spoke Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese very fluently. They spoke Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese at home. While the young Chinese Vietnamese women could speak and

understand Chinese, they could not read or write Chinese characters. They favored the use of a mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese, but more Vietnamese than Chinese.

The issue of the potentially diminishing nature of a group's mother tongue is of key importance for Vietnamese-Thai people in this study. The results of language loss are consistent with results of previous studies which found that villages were going through changes in their main language due to the loss of interest by younger generations who naturally become more interested in the widely-spoken Central Thai over their less-frequently spoken ethnic dialect (Watthana, 2006).

The findings of our study reveal the ability of Vietnamese-Thai immigrants in adapting to a new society where adjusting language is an integral component of integration. However, the findings also reveal the tendency of language loss among future generations of Vietnamese-Thais in Udon Thani Province. Central Thai has become the main language among the younger age groups, while Vietnamese and Isan have taken a back seat and may gradually disappear from daily life conversations of this group of people. This issue extends beyond Udon Thani and Northeast Thailand because of the growing number of Vietamese-Thai people throughout the country. Therefore, in order to maintain traditional Vietnamese language and culture, Vietnamese-Thais must recognize the problem and create the means to spark interest among the new generation in preserving Vietnamese culture through language. Furthermore, we recommend the collaboration of Thai language policy makers to stipulate relevant language policies in favor of both Vietnamese and Isan language in order to preserve multi-ethnic culture and diversity in this modernizing era of Thai society.

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