

Dynamic Perceptions in Learning Vietnamese: A Case Study of Vietnamese Majors at a Chinese University

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Abstract

As a key educational hub linking China to Southeast Asia, Yunnan constitutes an important strategic space for cultivating foreign language talents of Southeast Asian languages. Following Duff's multiscalar approach of theorizing language socialization (2019), this study examines the Vietnamese language learning experiences of Chinese students in Yunnan. By selecting nine participants majoring in Vietnamese for different length of periods, this study reveals a series of challenges confronting Vietnamese majors at micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The study also shows that Chinese students mobilize their linguistic, social and cultural resources to overcome their learning challenges and shape their perceptions towards learning Vietnamese. The findings of the study can contribute to a better understanding of how language learning is mediated in the broader process of the socioeconomic transformations between China and Vietnam.

Keywords: learning Vietnamese, Yunnan, Southeast Asia, language socialization

1. Introduction

Linked by mountains and rivers, China and Vietnam are close economic and trade partners, Since the implementation of China's B&RI in 2013 and the gradual promotion of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism in 2014, the economic and trade cooperation between China and Vietnam has been continuously deepened and achieved tangible results. Vietnam is China's largest trading partner in ASEAN, and China has remained Vietnam's largest trading partner for many years in a row. Chinese enterprises' direct investment in Vietnam has maintained a growing trend over the years (China news, 2022). What's more, after the closing of the 20th CPC National Congress, the General secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee is the first foreign countries' top leader to visit China. Five years ago in November, Vietnam was also chosen for the first overseas visit after the 19th CPC National Congress. This is a testament to the long-standing special friendship and close exchanges between China and Vietnam. Based on the background, the deeper cooperation has not only caused the economic success but also provides the opportunities for the revival of LOTE (language other than English) in China especially in the border areas. In 2018, there were 492.2 thousand of international students coming from 196 countries and areas to study in China, over 50% of them were from countries listed in China's B&RI (Ministry of Education, 2018). Recent years, the Ministry of Education and other governmental institutions attached more importance in LOTE education. Yunnan as the largest number of universities offering south Asian and southeast Asian language, is always on the spot. In recent years, colleges and universities in Yunnan Province have not only offered non-lingua franca majors by combining languages with majors, but also offered non-lingua franca as college foreign languages. Yunnan Province is in the forefront of the whole country with its practice. At present, some colleges and universities in Yunnan, such as Yunnan University, Yunnan Agricultural University, Yuxi Normal College, Kunming Metallurgical College, have taken College Vietnamese, College Thai and College Laotian as public compulsory courses instead of college English. Southwest Forestry University opened college Vietnamese in 2010; Yunnan Agricultural University introduced College Vietnamese to some students in 2010 as an alternative to college English (Zhang, 2016). At the same time, Yunnan which is located in southwest China has Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos as its neighboring countries. This geographic advantage provides various languages resources. As we can see the setting goal in the file made by Ministry of Education, in the next three years, Yunnan will strive to increase the number of small language students to 100,000, and the number of students learning Southeast Asian and South Asian languages to 20% of the total number of students. Yunnan's education Department will set up a leading group to strengthen guidance and

inspection on the training of minority language talents in universities. (Ministry of Education, 2013). Vietnam is a vital neighbor for China, so the research of learning Vietnamese is meaningful to deeply studied.

This study mainly talks about the perceptions and experiences of Vietnamese learning students in different levels in Yunnan University, with the way of participant observation and semi-constructed interview, how they treat and value Vietnamese learning and what resources and access can Vietnamese students be received are analyzed. And based on the findings, the study further reveals the myths and reality for learning Vietnamese so as to make contributions to promoting the identification for languages other than English (LOTE) learning.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars have the studies on foreign languages and the publications and researches are abundant. However, it is apparent that the studies on foreign language are mainly surrounded by the English or French learning or teaching. For the studies that focus on Vietnamese learning, the results are still limited.

As we can see, the studies that focus on learning English get a lot of tractions over the years. For example, Wen Qiufang used quantitative research methods to investigate the controllable factors of English majors enrolled in Nanjing University in 1996, including the changes of motivation, concept and strategy and their relationships. The results show that the relationship among motivation, concept and strategy has high stability. Motivation affects concept and strategy, and concept also affects strategy. This paper makes a rigorous analysis of the relationship between all three of the English major students (Wen, 1996). Then, Motivation plays an indispensable role in education because it directs students' behavior toward goals, Ruth has an investigation of English learning motivation of the underprivileged students to analyze the meaning of learning English and why do they need to get English Language education (Ruth, 2022). Feng Huanhuan discusses the effects of nonintellectual factors on English learning. She indicates that nonintellectual factors mainly embrace four factors which are the motivation, interest, personality and anxiety (Feng, 2021).

Thus, the studies on English learning are so abundant that it seems that there is some ignorance in studying the LOTE learning before. However, the economic cooperation raised the language interactions, in recent years, more and more scholars try to study the language other than English (LOTE).

With the proposal of Belt and Road Initiative, the revival of the LOTE has bright future in all walks of life. Thus, quite a lot of Chinese Scholars have conducted the study of researching the experience of learning LOTE, whether from the views of teachers, students or from other opinions. However, as we can find, the studies in LOTE mainly focus on the teacher's effect, factors and influence of learning process, or incentives or strategies of learning experience. For the studies of teachers' effect, Tianyi Wang indicates that although interest in learning languages other than English has increased, there is still little research on how to cultivate learners' motivation to learn LOTE. Its teaching implications emphasize the effectiveness of near peer role modeling in developing learners' self-identity as future LOTE users or multilinguals (Wang, 2022). For the incentives and strategies of learning experience, Zheng explains the Chinese university students' multilingual motivations. The students are voluntarily chosen to learn one of six languages other than English (LOTE) as a second or third language with a focus on the motivational variations across different target languages (Zheng, 2021). What's more, Kristopher made the survey to explore the positive and negative factors in the learning experience on languages other than English. The results tell us that the factors for learning the LOTE and LOTE anxiety are complex (Kristopher,2020). Based on Vietnamese learning studies, we find the results is limited.

For the other studies, taking traditional foreign languages universities as examples and using detailed data, Wang and Zhao attempted to analyze the current situation in the discipline setting, enrollment, talents cultivation and faculty of nonuniversal languages majors (Wang & Zhao, 2017). Su indicates that in the process of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, foreign languages, especially non-common languages, play an increasingly prominent role as the strategic fulcrum and will play a key role in the overall implementation and promotion of the initiative. How to serve the Belt and Road Initiative construction, the most important task is to provide talent support and intellectual support, for us is the language support. TO put the LOTE into phases, Liu said that Chinese universities LOTE has experienced two periods of vigorous development. One is 1950s to 1960s. The development of new China's diplomacy has urged the construction of LOTE with huge demand for talents. On the other hand, since the beginning of the new century, the state has set up nine training bases for undergraduates of LOTE in institutions of higher learning, which has promoted the development of LOTE majors. The implementation of the Belt and Road strategy has brought new opportunities for LOTE, and we will enjoy better and faster development (Liu, 2016).

Nowadays, all countries in the world place the promotion of cultural soft power in a special strategic position, and China urgently needs to form a cultural soft power corresponding to its international status. For a long time,

foreign language colleges and universities have taken on the important task of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. They pay special attention to “introducing the world to China” and have made outstanding contributions to China’s comprehensive understanding of the political and economic, cultural and social development of countries around the world. In comparison, “introducing China to the world” has not done enough and the foundation is relatively weak. Today, with the rapid development of China’s economy and the rapid enhancement of China’s national strength, China’s status in the world is getting higher and higher. China has become a major country of great importance in international relations. It has become a new mission of foreign language universities to actively promote the external communication of Chinese culture and introduce China to the world at the important historical juncture when China goes global. Now that China has entered a new era of public diplomacy, it is urgent for China to spread its own path and values to the outside world, especially to the world in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is also urgent for China to establish closer, deeper and broader cultural ties with the vast number of third world countries. In the process of promoting the communication of Chinese culture to the outside world, LOTE can serve the country and society at multiple levels, and the strategic position of LOTE translation talents is increasingly prominent.

This study focuses on exploring Chinese students’ dynamic perceptions toward Vietnamese learning processes at the most famous Chinese border university in Yunnan. The following research questions are mainly answered:

- 1) What are the factors that impact the learning experiences of Vietnamese majors across various social levels?
- 2) What are the dynamic inter-relationships within and across different levels?
- 3) How are the perceptions of learning Vietnamese shaped and reshaped across time and space?

3. Methodology

3.1 Yunnan University as Research Site

Yunnan university is seen as the famous Chinese border university which gives a lot of concerns for Vietnamese language education and fostering. Here we choose Yunnan university as our research site. Yunnan University has been selected as the research site for the following reasons. Firstly, for its geography advantages, Yunnan university is located in Yunnan Province, where in southwest China, is the frontier of China, bordering Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos. Its great geographical location provides a platform for China to strengthen political and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asian countries. Yunnan University, as the university at China frontier, has been unquestionably constructed as a model to cultivate Vietnamese language talents who can serve ASEAN, disseminate Chinese culture to go global, and provide ideas for further cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Vietnam. We can say Yunnan is the window and gateway of China to Southeast Asia and South Asia.



Figure 1. The policy of Yunnan province and Yunnan university

There are 11 educational bases for fostering international personnel and more than 10 non-English foreign language majors having been set in Yunnan’s colleges and universities (Xinhua News Agency). Secondly, the policy advantage, Yunnan Province strives to build Yunnan into a radiation center facing Southeast Asia and South Asia. Driven by the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative and the construction of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Yunnan Province strives to build a new pattern of all-round opening up in Yunnan, connect the three major markets of China, Southeast Asia and South Asia, and establish mutually beneficial and win-win cooperative relations with neighboring countries. So, Yunnan University as the only Double First-Class

University in Yunnan province, can provide many LOTE language learning resources with different majors such as Vietnamese because of its national policy support. By January 2014, 43 colleges and universities in Yunnan Province had offered 62 minor language majors, among which 24 undergraduate colleges and universities had 30 specialties, and 19 vocational colleges and universities had 32 specialties. There are 26 Thai, 7 Lao, 11 Burmese, 16 Vietnamese, 2 Cambodian. Among them there are 11 specialties which are provincial key construction. (Zhang, 2016).

3.2 Participants

Participants include nine students majoring in Vietnamese in Yunnan University, three are first year undergraduates, three are fourth year undergraduates and three are postgraduates. I choose the three grades' Vietnamese students as my participants to explore how the different time experience pose the influence to their studying. With the acronym P to stand for their name respectively from P1 to P6, their basic information is presented below the table. The nine students are divided into three groups, postgraduate group, senior group, and freshman group. The comparisons among the three groups are easily to see. So, the findings also based on their different groups to analyze.

Table 1. The basic information of all participants

	Participants	Age	Gender	Self-choice or not	Education background	Vietnamese proficiency	English proficiency
Postgraduate	P1	23	Female	No	Yunnan Agricultural University	Level-8	CET-6
	P2	23	Female	No	Yunnan normal University	Level-8	CET-6
	P3	24	Female	No	Yunnan university	Level-8	CET-6
Senior	P4	22	Female	No	Yunnan University	Level-8	CET-6
	P5	23	Male	Yes	Yunnan university	Level-8	CET-4
	P6	22	Male	No	Yunnan university	Level-8	CET-4
Freshman	P7	18	Female	No	Not yet	None	None
	P8	18	Female	No	Not yet	None	None
	P9	17	Female	No	Not yet	None	None

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The study selected nine students as participants, they are all Vietnamese major from Yunnan university. There are three postgraduates, three senior students, and three freshmen. Based on the comparison of the nine participants' different time experience, this paper used the semi-structured interview, online talking, participant observation, audio-recording and other relevant materials to collect the data. The six students provide different and complementary views for us to further explore the Vietnamese experience. So before writing the paper, several questions are prepared to make the interview smoothly and fluently.

The interview questions are below:

What are your perceptions of Vietnamese learning at first?

What are your attitudes and your parents' attitude toward Vietnamese language?

Did you choose Vietnamese as your major by yourself or assigned by the university?

During the study, what challenges have made you frustrated?

During the study, what have you got for learning Vietnamese?

Now what your perceptions of Vietnamese learning?

How you shift the attitude and perception?

4. Theoretical Framework

An academic group called the Douglas Fir group (DFG) was formed in 2016. They propose an interdisciplinary framework for the study of second language acquisition in a multilingual world. Inspired by the ecological framework of human development, DFG (2016) proposes their SLA framework, which distinguishes three levels of interdependent influence and integrates a representation of the multilevel complexity of L2 learning. The Douglas School proposed the superdisciplinary framework of second language acquisition, which effectively gets rid of the limitation of the cognitive perspective of second language acquisition and provides a

multi-dimensional social perspective for understanding the phenomena of second language acquisition. Based on the superdisciplinary framework of second language acquisition and its theoretical perspective based on different disciplines, the connotation of the super disciplinary framework of second language acquisition is described in detail from the micro, meso and macro dimensions (DFG, 2016). Duff is one of the members of DFG. According to Duff, second language acquisition is an ongoing process. It starts from the micro level of social activities, as individuals use their own nervous system and cognitive and emotional abilities to carry out activities and communication in multilingual situations. These situations are within meso-level socio-cultural institutions and communities, such as families, places of worship, political parties, online forums, and so on. It is worth mentioning that institutions and communities at the meso-level are heavily influenced by socio-political, cultural, religious and political situations. Finally, at the macro level, there is a society-wide ideological structure that influences attitudes towards language use and learning at both the meso and micro levels. Although the three levels shown in the figure have their own characteristics, they do not exist independently. They interact with each other. So, in this study, we draw on Duff's multilingual socialization in second language acquisition as theoretical framework to find the learning experience of different grades students majoring in Vietnamese language. In Duff's theory the social dimensions and processes in second languages are mainly discussed. For the social aspects of second language acquisition (SLA), Duff found that the social dynamics of learning languages are common in learners' experience. Duff's paper examines how social experience is currently theorized in SLA and in related fields, thus, the dynamic relationship within and across the macro-level, meso-level, and micro level are contained. Duff also analyzed the social dimensions and differences in instructed SLA (Duff, 2017). Besides Duff, Ortega (2019), De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor (2007), they all have the same research as Duff in multilingualism in SLA. So, this study also uses these as the reference.

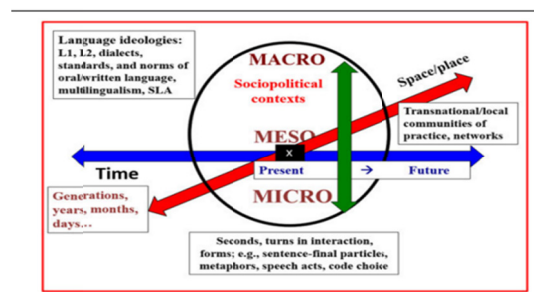


Figure 2. Duff's theory

5. Findings

5.1 Learning Vietnamese at Macro-Level

Firstly, from the macro level, learning Vietnamese is an important part of B&RI. With the implementation of China's B&R, the cultivation of Vietnamese personnel at China's border provinces has been attached great importance. Students, teachers, human resources all give its new meanings. It is for China's global expansion, for national security and defense, for national policy strategy and for global market economy. Secondly, learning Vietnamese has geographical, cultural advantages and powerful policy preference. Vietnam, one of China's 14 neighbors, has the same socialist system as China, and is part of a Confucian cultural circle that has been influenced by China for thousands of years, which means that Chinese students have a unique advantage in learning Vietnamese, both geographically and culturally. What's more, from the Ministry of Education, it is obvious to see that our country attached great importance for small language learning. The countries and regions along the Belt and Road have multiple languages and cultures, and the common language or official language of many places belongs to the "minority language". Currently, our minority language reserves are relatively short, and the need to accelerate and optimize the training of talents is becoming more and more important. Foreign language professionals, including those in minority languages, can better participate in building platforms and channels for the Belt and Road Initiative (Pepole.com, 2022). Thirdly, learning Vietnamese is for social and economic needs. In recent years, China-Vietnam cooperation which is based on the Belt and Road Initiative and the Two Corridors and One Economic Circle has yielded fruitful results. The political exchanges between China and Vietnam have been smooth and the heat of economic and trade exchanges has decreased. Various economic exchanges and cooperative exchanges promote the learning of Vietnamese. These friendly exchanges not only

require a large number of language talents, but also a large number of language learners. All these promote the increase of jobs related to Vietnamese, and the number of Vietnamese learners also becomes more and more.

5.2 Learning Vietnamese at Meso-Level

According to Duff's framework, he considered sociocultural institutions and communities as the meso-level factors shaping the practices of language teaching and learning. At the meso-level, identity, power and agency were depicted as part of socio-institutional roles. University, institution cultivation and improvement are as the spotlight to think about. Since the Belt and Road Initiative's being proposed in 2013, the training of the talents with languages other than English (LOTE) needs promotion on quantity and quantity in China. To meet these demands, the government and quite a few universities are making efforts. Take Yunnan university for example, the talents training of small languages is attached great importance in the university from all aspects.

Firstly, for preaching the promising discourse of learning Vietnamese, this preaching phenomenon is commonly to be seen in the class. As we can see, teachers, as the main instructors of students in the university, play a vital role in the process of students' identification with what students are learning the language. Here is the excerpt by P8.

Excerpt: In class, the teacher often told us some policy guidance for minority languages, which made us more motivated to learn Vietnamese, and more confident about the future of Vietnamese learning (interview with P8)

However, there is also the limitations. For the university and institutional resources, they are suffered from the limited resources to Vietnamese whether in school or in the society. It can be easily got the idea that Vietnamese learning materials are less comparing with English, French and other popular languages. For example, for searching a word, it is hard to find a Vietnamese word to translate in Chinese especially the terminology word. However, quantities of words are easily to be clicked to get the answer. What's more, there are limited information and accesses about Vietnamese and Vietnamese related lectures, these are still inadequate for Vietnamese leaning students. Finally, as we can see the online talking App, the English Channel is so much like the Hello Talk, Tandem which provides the way to speak online for practicing oral English, but for Vietnamese it is hard to find these apps to communicate.

5.3 Learning Vietnamese at Micro-Level

1) The low expectation on Learning Vietnamese

Learning the Vietnamese languages seems to be not so popular as other languages such as English, French or Spanish. The basic understanding for learning a language in our daily life really makes the expectations or the perceptions not so good in Vietnamese learning. Here we can easily get these opinions. After the interviews, we found that before entering the university, nearly all of the participants had low identification with Vietnamese and were lack of interest in learning Vietnamese at the micro level. Here are two excerpters from three interviewers' recording.

Excerpter2: My first feeling is that I don't know how to learn Vietnamese, and I have never been exposed to this language before, so I don't know whether I can learn it well. I even have a little resistance. My parents don't support me to learn Vietnamese (Interview with P1).

Excerpter3: I was surprised to be transferred to Vietnamese, when I knew that I was opposed to learning Vietnamese, and I didn't really want to learn it. After entering the university, I thought that I should learn it first, and then I planned to change my major to economics. My parents also thought that learning Vietnamese had no future, and they wanted me to change my major. There is no need for colleges to make it a major (Interview with P8)

Excerpter4: I am from the Hubei province of China, where there are few positions for Vietnamese majors. If I major in Vietnamese, it would be almost impossible for me to go back to work in my hometown. (Interview with P8)

After further talking, their resistance attitude can conclude to three basic reasons. The first reason is that they think Vietnam is a small country, compared with China, they have less preference for learning Vietnamese. The second reason is that there is an unprofitable and limited employment for Vietnamese majors in the future. The third reason is Vietnamese as the border language makes trouble for the students who are not in the border province. These personal reasons cause that students' enthusiasm is greatly affected in the process of learning Vietnamese, and their recognition of Vietnamese is low for a long time.

2) High accomplishments after the exposure

However, after the exposure for a long time, their perceptions have dynamic change. From micro-level to

analyze, it has following explanations. Firstly, learning Vietnamese means more opportunities for academic success. According to the findings, it is found that the students who pursue the accomplishments in learning Vietnamese for the longer time, the higher academic success they will get. It is estimated by the participant 1 and participant 2 who get the opportunities for exchange abroad and being a postgraduate in Yunnan University, participant 4 who has the access to get the postgraduate recommendation in Beijing Foreign Studies University.

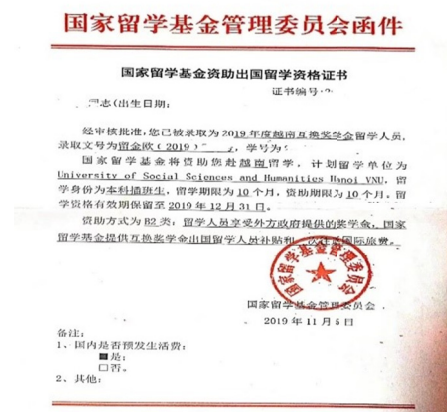


Figure 3. The accomplishment by the participant

Secondly, Learning Vietnamese means profitable employment prospect, The Guangming Daily said that the small languages may sound 'small', but they may be 'big' for future development (2014). In addition to the high employment rate, many official reports also highlight jobs in government offices, colleges and universities, news media organizations working in foreign languages not commonly used by large foreign enterprises and joint ventures, which helps to build a promising job outlook for them.

3) The dynamic shift of learning process

It is obvious that the students who are in Vietnamese majors have great shift toward the attitude for learning Vietnamese. Based on the findings, we found that there are nine students in total, but eight students are forced to choose their major, not for their self-choice. They are adjusted by the system in the college entrance examination. Their parents' s views on Vietnamese basically are all negative for the reason that it is just a small language and not popular as other language such as English, French. The parents also put their opinions on their children, so the resistance perceptions are normal and ubiquitous. However, after long term learning, the results make us surprise, academic success, exchange abroad, better employment, higher wage these profitable reasons make dynamic shift for their perceptions for learning Vietnamese. Here are two students' s changing process.

P1: I am not interested in learning Vietnamese, my mom even let me to transfer my major to other majors.

Now she is a postgraduate, she also got the CSC.

Attitude change: now she really like Vietnamese, learning Vietnamese make her change character and in the future, she wants to be a teacher to teach Vietnamese

P4: I have been suffered the pain for learning Vietnamese, the pronunciation, the memory of words all make me feel hard to learn

Now she is admitted by BFSU

Attitude change: thanks to Vietnamese, she feels lucky to learning

6. Discussion

This study uses Duff's theory as theoretical framework, discussing the Vietnamese learning from macro, meso, and micro levels. Choosing Yunnan University as the research site, there are six participants to make their interviews. Through the deep interviews, it can be seen that how the students have perceptions and attitudes towards learning Vietnamese and after the exposure how they change their opinions. By employing Duff's language socialization, we can find learning Vietnamese is not a simple process, but a complex process which has various factors. Based on the findings, although students have low expectations in learning Vietnamese, the

perceptions experience dynamic shift after the long-term learning. The change has different factors to affect. In general, the macro level mainly provides the national identification for learning Vietnamese, the meso level gives preaches and propagandas so that the learning expectations change. The micro level is surrounded with individual's grow, the life experience, the practice and the actual using Vietnamese in daily life. In a word, once students encounter the Vietnamese learning, they will mobilize all of the resources to improve, it is a dynamic process, the shift is being done in a super invisible and nuanced way.

7. Conclusion

This paper aims to find the learning experiences of students who are majoring in Vietnamese language in Chinese border university, Yunnan university. Based on the findings we have talked above, it is acknowledged and easily found that Chinese students' perceptions of learning Vietnamese have experienced dynamic shift. From the perceptions at the beginning and the attitudes after learning, the learning experience are influenced by kinds of factors. The study researched three dimensions, shaping the dynamic process of learning Vietnamese language, which is a complex process. Base on Duff's theory, the paper discusses the factors that influence Vietnamese learners from three levels, macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level which gives us an all-sided comprehension of the process that how they learn and how they experience. For macro-level, it mainly talks about learning Vietnamese as the part of B&RI, its policy preference and social and economic needs. For meso-level, university, institutions are concentrated. For micro-level, individual as the key role to learn Vietnamese, their initiatives and incentives cannot be ignored. The students' different perceptions for learning Vietnamese provide us both the learners and teachers with the understanding that language acquisition is a complex and moving process, which should be paid a lot of attention for its changes. Learning language is not only learning for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Second language learners and language teachers can broaden their horizons and encourage students to engage in a range of social, cognitive, and emotional activities in a multilingual society. Language learning is mediated in the broader process of the socioeconomic transformations among countries, like Vietnamese learning, it is about China and Vietnam. With the implementation of the strategy of Yunnan Provincial Party Committee and provincial government to build an international gateway, the formation of the Greater Mekong Sub-region economic cooperation and the China-Asian free Trade area, Yunnan Province will become the radiation center facing South Asia and Southeast Asia and the front position of China's opening to the outside world. Therefore, multi-professional LOTE talents will become the urgent talents for the strategic planning of The Belt and Road Initiative. So, more attention should be paid to the learning or teaching in Vietnamese, whether from the government, institutions, or the universities and colleges.

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