

# Khmer Language Status in a Vietnamese - Speaking Context: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions

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**Abstract**—This study explores the use and promotion of the Khmer language by Khmer teachers and students in schools, at home, and within the community to provide a comprehensive understanding of their linguistic practices. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire with an open-ended question was employed to elicit responses from 16 Khmer teachers and 60 Khmer students in an ethnic boarding junior high school in Vietnam. The study, besides, conducted semi-structured interviews to triangulate the study's data. The result showed that while teachers used more Khmer in the community, students used more Khmer at home, and Khmer was used the least at school by both groups. The study also discussed the participants' proposed approaches to promoting Khmer.

**Index Terms**—Khmer, Khmer teachers, Khmer students, minority language

## I. INTRODUCTION

The coexistence of languages in a region is indispensable, and this phenomenon helps develop people with diverse language backgrounds in many ways. For example, by recognizing each other's language, people of different ethnicities can become closer and build and promote a constructive relationship between the two ethnic groups. An individual can have plenty of opportunities in society when he or she knows more than one language.

In recent years, scientists have begun to show that the advantages of bilingualism are even more fundamental than conversing with a broader range of people. Being bilingual makes an individual more innovative. "It can profoundly affect one's brain, improving cognitive skills unrelated to language and even shielding one against dementia in old age" (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 1). Sorace (2007) said, "In modern industrial societies, growing up with more than one language is regarded as special" (p. 193). Bilingual children develop the ability to control attention and ignore misleading information earlier than monolinguals, even when the two groups are operating with the same basic knowledge of the domain (Bialystok, 2007). Minority languages can also serve as sustainable tourism resources, which help strengthen the sense of pride and identity of minority members (Lonardi et al., 2020). However, at the same time, more languages have been lost for many reasons. For example, people stop speaking their minority and other languages for broader communication (Sallabank, 2012).

This phenomenon can be seen in many places, especially when their population is too small to preserve and promote their language in a majority-language society. Without preservation efforts, up to 90% of the world's 7,000 languages could vanish by the 21st century, with Indonesia losing 20 languages (Krauss, 1992). Another data was collected from Whaley (2003), who stated that at least half of the world's 6000-7000 languages would not exist or be on the brink of disappearing (cited in Grenoble & Whaley, 2005). Adinolfi et al. (2022) highlighted challenges in South Asian countries like India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, where language policies must balance local, regional, and international languages to promote educational equity. However, exclusionary bilingual policies risk language extinction.

This study was conducted because no previous research has explored how the Khmer language is spoken and promoted in Tra Vinh province, Vietnam. The Khmer population accounts for 31,62% of the provincial population (Nguyen, 2017). Thus, it was conducted to see how frequently Khmer people use Khmer in various contexts: at home, school, and in the community. In addition, it aims to see how they promote their language when they live in a context where their language is not used as an official language in the country's system. The result can be used to reflect on their current use and promotion of Khmer people, and from there, Khmer people can adjust themselves regarding the use and promotion of their language in such contexts. At the same time, the government can use the result to consider allocating more hours for teaching Khmer and opening more bilingual teaching classes for those in need. The following three research questions are devised to determine the study's aims.

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1. To what extent do Khmer students use Khmer at school, home, and community?
2. To what extent do Khmer teachers use Khmer at school, home, and community?
3. What do Khmer teachers and students think about how Khmer should be promoted?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Background

According to Thu Vien Phap Luat (2023), an online platform for Vietnamese law, to be considered a minority group, the group members are fewer in number than those in the leading group; a majority group is a group whose population accounts for over 50% of the national population. The Khmer minority group is one of the fifty-four minority groups in Vietnam (Thu Vien Phap Luat; Nguyen, 2019). According to Hai and Thanh (2020), Khmer people preserve solidarity and mutual assistance in their community and significantly contribute to the service of Buddhist pagodas. Pagodas and monks are greatly respected spiritual symbols of the Khmer community. Most Buddhist pagodas mainly teach Khmer to Khmer people (Fergusson & Masson, 1997). Recently, Khmer has been taught in state schools where many Khmer people reside. According to the Ministry and Training (2020), Khmer is taught in primary school for five years at Level A1, in secondary school for four years at Level A2, and in high school for three years at Level B to ensure all Khmer students are Khmer literate.

### B. Khmer People

According to Nguyen (2017), “Tra Vinh có dân số chung là 1.015.284 người, trong đó dân tộc Kinh 686.009 người, chiếm tỉ lệ 67,56%; dân tộc Khmer 321.084 người, chiếm tỉ lệ 31,62%” [Tra Vinh has a population of 1.015.284 of whom the Kinh accounts for 686.009 people with 67,56%, and the Khmer makes up of 321.084 people with 31,62%] (p. 116). According to updated statistical information by Vietnam (2022), “Trà Vinh có gần 32% dân số là đồng bào Khmer, với khoảng 320.000 người sống tập tại các huyện Trà Cú, Cầu Ngang, Châu Thành, Cầu Kè, Tiểu Cần” [Tra Vinh constitutes approximately 32% of Khmer population with about 320.000 people gathering in Tra Cu district, Cau Ngang district, Chau Thanh district, Cau Ke district, and Tieu Can district]. Khmer people mainly reside in rural districts. It also added “tỷ lệ hộ nghèo Khmer giảm nhanh với mức bình quân hàng năm giảm 4,17% và đến cuối năm 2021, tỷ lệ hộ Khmer nghèo của tỉnh còn dưới 4%.” [The poverty rate of Khmer households showed an annual reduction of 4.17%, and it continued to show poverty rate reduction of below 4%]. This newspaper also informed that “Trà Vinh có khoảng 2.500 sinh viên, học sinh dân tộc Khmer theo học ở các bậc: Đại học, Cao đẳng, Trung cấp; duy trì khoảng 70.000 học sinh dân tộc Khmer ở bậc Mẫu giáo, Tiểu học, Trung học Cơ sở, Trung học Phổ thông (chiếm 34% so với học sinh chung). [Tra Vinh has around 2.500 Khmer students at universities, and vocational schools, and 70,000 Khmer pupils attending state primary, secondary, and high schools, accounting approximately 34% of the overall national students].

### C. Bilingual Education Context

Fishman (1976) stated that 110 countries worldwide implement bilingual education programs. When do people become bilingual? According to Levy (1985, p. 114), “The dominant economic group has voluntarily acquired second language ability as a form of cultural enrichment while those at the bottom of the economic ladder usually become bilingual due to conquest or coercion.” The statement can be true for many people who fall into this category. However, to promote bilingualism in a place, the government must promote it in the educational system, putting it into practice, as concerned by Gogolin (2021). In addition, it is challenging for minority people to grow up in a majority language context where they struggle to optimize their minority language education and use it in nonfamilial settings and schools (Leivada et al., 2023).

Bilingualism is a good sign to develop. Nonetheless, when a minority language meets a majority language, it is vulnerable; the majority can easily overshadow a minority in many forms. When languages come into contact, they often borrow words, phrases, and grammatical structures. Nevertheless, it tends to happen that when minority children are not educated in their language well, they borrow the majority language words or phrases during their communication in their language. This code-switching can be seen more in the works by Haspelmath (2009), Muysken (2020), Myers-Scotton (2017), and Winford (2010).

### D. Awareness

Scheier and Carver (1981) defined awareness in two forms depending on which standard they adopt to control their behavior: public or personal. Fejfar and Hoyle (2000) referred to the personal form as the self from an opinion, while they regarded the public form as awareness of the self from the imagined look from other people. This study does not aim to explore the two forms differently but wants to use the participants' awareness as a general notion for languages used in their context.

### E. Related Studies

The study emphasized the context of how minority languages are used and promoted by minorities, so this literature was reviewed mainly in Vietnam.

Nguyen (2021) studied eight college students with diverse language backgrounds (five ethnic minority groups in Vietnam Central Highlands). They have deemed bilinguals as those who speak their home language as L1 (minority language), talk to Vietnamese as L2 (the mainstream language), and study English as a foreign language at school. The researchers interviewed the participants about their language practices, beliefs, and management related to, e.g., value, usefulness, ethnicity, schooling, or bilingualism. It uncovered that the participants preferred to use their minority language and limited Vietnamese at home. However, their parents accepted a mixed language (Vietnamese and English) at home. At school, they chose Vietnamese to speak as their friends were mainly the Kinh (Vietnamese people), and others came from other minority language backgrounds. Moreover, Vietnamese is the means of instruction in all classes, so they must know and use it fluently.

Regarding language belief, they considered English and Vietnamese as functional languages and their mother tongue to show their ethnicity. Most of them regarded Vietnamese as more valuable than their language, but they still affirmed that their mother tongue was to help them keep their cultural value and ethnicity. Regarding language management, a person of a different language background must learn to speak his spouse's language after marriage. At home, their parents prefer family members to use their mother tongue for communication.

Nguyen (2019) investigated the trans-identity of a group of ethnic minority students (with different L1s) in Vietnam by conducting interviews with them. The participants were college students and their family members. The results showed that they saw themselves as having dual, multiple, and neutral identities. They tend to change their L1 (their first language/minority language) to Vietnamese (the majority language) rather than from Vietnamese to their minority/L1 language. Through this result, when ethnic people see themselves as dual or multiple identities, they can develop both their minority language and the majority at the same time.

Nguyen and Hamid (2018) explored the attitudes of 28 college students toward bilingualism and language policies. Participants spoke first languages like Rengao, Bahnar, and Jarai, with Vietnamese as their second language, and some also studied foreign languages such as English, French, and Laotian. Their study revealed that students viewed Vietnamese as the societal language, which overshadowed their minority languages, and they considered religion and community teachings as strategies for preserving their native languages. The study also noted perceptions of linguistic diversity, with some students acknowledging benefits like broader social connections.

In interviewing Vietnamese school students' bilingual identity and their parents regarding language practices and beliefs, Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) found that Vietnamese and English were both valued. Knowing Vietnamese helped foster cultural solidarity, while English provided them with opportunities for mobility. When envisioning their future, students prefer to study English and are aware of the instrumental value of bilingualism. Nguyen and Hamid (2016) explored a group of ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands to see how they express their identity through their attitudes towards languages and maintaining their first language. The participants speak their home language as L1, Vietnamese as L2, and regard English as a foreign language at school. It revealed that the participants spoke of their minority as having cultural and ethnic values. One participant also said, "I spoke Vietnamese to the Kinh, and they did not know I was a minority, but when I spoke to my ethnic group, they recognized me".

Furthermore, most participants said they had to speak their minority language (L1) as much as possible. They even confessed that they spoke Vietnamese (the majority language) better than their mother tongue in speaking and writing. A person said he rarely spoke his mother tongue and was considered to have lost his roots. However, when asked about their perception of whether they should not know their minority language, they disagreed. Some other cases reported that they used Vietnamese as a common language to speak to other minority groups, and they considered knowing Vietnamese helped them make friends, widen their circle of acquaintances, have more comprehensive contact, and get a job.

The promotion of minority languages can also be found in many other studies. It can be helpful to provide adequate language policy directions to educate the minority language; it is essential to explore how society behaves toward that minority language and see how it is used in the educational system and how it is used in daily life (Gataullina et al., 2018). Likewise, Watson (2007) said governments play an essential role in preserving minority languages. Still, the task can be challenging because, at one time, a language is threatened due to the influence of the economy and politics. At the other time, globalization has led to uniformity in the languages used.

Furthermore, minority languages can be threatening in the multilingual context, and a unified national language can be proposed (Sharma, 2022). Like Watson, Giri (2011) posits that the government plays a decisive role in shaping the language policy to appropriately respond to local, national, and international languages. An individual's or a community's attitude toward their language and other languages can affect how they learn and use it, which can influence the status of a language (further development or extinction) (Yun, 2017).

To sum up, minorities found in literature tend to regard themselves as having dual or multiple identities. Because they fear losing their language, they are aware of preserving their minority language by prioritizing using it mostly with their family and/or community members. Next, simultaneously, they must be fluent in the majority language for other purposes. For example, they learn Vietnamese for educational, cultural, and social solidarity purposes. When they must learn a third language, such as English, they tend to learn it for instrumental values, such as improving their economic aspect and worldwide knowledge.

### III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Design

The study employed a mixed method, as guided by Edmonds and Kennedy (2016), using both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data on the participants' perceptions. The questionnaire delivered to both groups of participants consisted of 15 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question.

### B. Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in March 2023 at an Ethnic Boarding Junior High School in a rural district in southwest Vietnam. The study's participants recruited 16 Khmer teachers and 60 eighth and ninth Khmer graders at this school. This type of school enrolls 95% of Khmer students. It enrolls around 5% of Kinh students (Vietnamese students), who must be awarded standard grades in their fifth grade (at the elementary education level) to qualify for a secondary education seat in this school type. The education program in this school is like that of a regular public school; the only difference is that the students have Khmer lessons taught in school; this is just like teaching English as a foreign language subject in Vietnam.

### C. Instruments

The study employed a Five-Point Likert scale questionnaire (written in Vietnamese) to collect the information from both groups of participants on a five-scale measurement (1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for no idea, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree). It has 15 closed-ended questions to elicit answers for the first two research questions. Then, the last open-ended question in this questionnaire aimed to elicit qualitative objective ideas from the two groups of participants to answer the third research question. The authors developed questionnaires based on Levy's (1985) concerns about the domination of the majority language over minority languages and Nguyen and Hamid's (2016) previous investigation of a minority used in various contexts, such as at home.

### D. Procedure

The questionnaire was developed and handed to a senior Khmer teacher and a Vietnamese-speaking English teacher to receive their ideas about the questionnaire. The senior Khmer teacher has much hands-on experience working with Khmer people. The Vietnamese teacher of English has taught English to Khmer and Vietnamese students for over ten years, so they are considered qualified feedback-givers for the questionnaire. After receiving feedback, the authors removed two questions regarding Khmer used at home, such as talking with a spouse, girl, or boyfriend at home, as some participants might not get married or have a sweetheart. The questionnaire was then delivered to three Khmer colleagues for a trial survey to see their opinions about the questionnaire content and flow of the items in the questionnaire. When the survey went smoothly, the authors invited the participants to participate. They all accepted the invitation by writing their names on the questionnaire. The authors explained to the teachers and students that their responses were confidential and used only for this study's purpose.

### E. Data Processing

After collecting all the data, the authors began processing the data using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 22). The authors tested the internal reliability of both questionnaires and analyzed the individual responses for the mean scores. Then, the authors compared the mean scores of the two groups to see if there were any statistical differences between the two groups' opinions regarding Khmer spoken at school, at home, and in the community. Then, concerning Question 16 (open-ended question), the authors transcribed the responses based on themes and counted the number of similar responses to each theme for convenience. To triangulate the data, the authors also conducted four interviews with four randomly chosen students and four randomly selected teachers. The analysis focus of the interview responses was based on the topics displayed in the questionnaire.

The internal reliability of each set of questions for the student group is 0.878 (at school), 0.968 (at home), and 0.913 (in the community). The internal reliability for the teacher group is 0.936 (at school), 0.984 (at home), and 0.972 (in the community), which are all qualified for further analysis.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. The First and Second Research Questions

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis of responses from students and teachers regarding using the Khmer language at school, at home, and in the community. In the table, 'St' represents students, and 'T' represents teachers.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

At school	N of St	Min	Max	Mean (M)	SD	N of T	Min	Max	Mean (M)	SD
Q1. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer classmates/teacher in class whenever possible.	60	1.00	5.00	3.383	1.1802	16	1.00	5.00	3.062	1.1814
Q2. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer classmates and friends in recess.	60	1.00	5.00	3.416	1.2114	16	1.00	5.00	3.375	1.1474
Q3. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer classmates and friends at school events whenever possible.	60	1.00	5.00	3.116	1.1363	16	1.00	5.00	3.062	1.3400
Q4. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer visitors at school.	60	1.00	5.00	3.516	1.2280	16	1.00	5.00	3.500	1.1547
Q5. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer classmates' or friends' parents at school.	60	1.00	5.00	3.366	1.2346	16	1.00	5.00	3.562	1.3149
Total means:			3.360			3.313				
At home										
Q6. I prefer to speak Khmer with my parents at home.	60	1.00	5.00	3.616	1.3789	16	1.00	5.00	3.687	1.4008
Q7. I prefer to speak Khmer with my siblings/cousins at home.	60	1.00	5.00	3.750	1.3976	16	1.00	5.00	3.625	1.3601
Q8. I prefer to speak Khmer with my uncles/aunts/grandparents at home.	60	1.00	5.00	3.766	1.3450	16	1.00	5.00	3.625	1.3601
Q9. I prefer to speak Khmer with my Khmer neighbors at home.	60	1.00	5.00	3.583	1.3056	16	1.00	5.00	3.187	1.2230
Q10. I prefer to speak Khmer with other Khmer visitors to my home.	60	1.00	5.00	3.766	1.3066	16	1.00	5.00	3.437	1.4127
Total means:			3.697			3.513				
In the community										
Q11. I prefer to speak Khmer when meeting Khmer people in the streets.	60	1.00	5.00	3.616	1.1802	16	1.00	5.00	3.687	1.3022
Q12. I prefer to speak Khmer to other Khmer people at parties (e.g. weddings and birthday parties).	60	1.00	5.00	3.500	1.1860	16	1.00	5.00	3.375	1.3601
Q13. I prefer to speak Khmer in community meetings (e.g. village meetings and traditional village ceremonies).	60	1.00	5.00	3.133	1.2684	16	1.00	5.00	3.437	1.3149
Q14. I prefer to speak Khmer when meeting Khmer people in religious practice places (e.g. pagodas).	60	1.00	5.00	3.783	1.2768	16	1.00	5.00	3.875	1.3601
Q15. I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer people in commercial places (e.g. markets and shops).	60	1.00	5.00	3.416	1.2661	16	1.00	5.00	3.562	1.3149
Total means:			3.490			3.588				

At first glance, the overall mean scores for students' use of Khmer are achieved as follows (at school:  $M= 3.360$ , at home:  $M= 3.697$ , and in the community:  $M= 3.490$ ). The mean score for Khmer used at home is the greatest, showing that students have more chance to use their minority language at home, and no items are observed to have a mean score below 3.400, meaning they tend to agree with all the items in this group. The mean score for Khmer used at school is the lowest, with  $M=3.360$ , showing that the students tend to have little chance to speak Khmer at school. "I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer classmates and friends at school events whenever possible" has a minor agreement, with  $M= 3.116$  and "I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer visitors at school" shows the greatest in this group, with  $M=3.516$ . Students seem to speak Khmer outside of school and at home, too. In this item group, "I prefer to speak Khmer in community meetings (e.g. village meetings and traditional village ceremonies) has the least agreement in this item group,  $M=3.133$ , meaning that they tend to be bewildered about the number of Khmer they use in such places. "I prefer to speak Khmer when meeting Khmer people in religious practice places (e.g. pagodas)" has  $M= 3.783$ , showing that they tend to speak more in religious practice institutions.

If the students have more opportunities to speak Khmer at home, the teachers tend to speak more Khmer in the community, with  $M= 3.588$ . The slightest agreement in this item group is "I prefer to speak Khmer to other Khmer people at parties (e.g. weddings)", with  $M=3.375$ , suggesting that they tend to use less Khmer in public parties. The highest mean score is "I prefer to speak Khmer when meeting Khmer people in religious practice places (e.g. pagodas)", meaning that they tend to have more opportunities to speak Khmer in religious gatherings.

Like the students' responses, the teachers have less opportunity to speak Khmer at school, with an overall score of 3.313. The lowest mean score in this group belongs to "I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer students in class whenever possible" and "I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer colleagues in academic meetings/events whenever possible", with the same mean score of 3.062, indicating they have fewer opportunities to speak Khmer in class and academic gatherings. "I prefer to speak Khmer with Khmer students' parents at school" has the highest mean score, meaning they tend to speak Khmer with students' parents in that situation.

The overall mean score for Khmer used at home is 3.513, showing that the teachers tend to use more Khmer at home. The item with the lowest mean score is “I prefer to speak Khmer with my neighbors at home”, indicating they might speak both Khmer and Vietnamese.

Table 2 below displays the differences in the overall mean scores of the two participant groups regarding their use of Khmer at school, at home, and in the community.

TABLE 2  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST FOR MEAN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
At school								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.283	.596	.168	74	.867	.04750	.28345	-.5172	.61229
Equal variances not assumed			.157	21.848	.877	.04750	.30238	-.5798	.67484
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
At home								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.000	.991	.513	74	.610	.18417	.35931	-.5317	.90010
Equal variances not assumed			.502	23.032	.620	.18417	.36667	-.5742	.94262
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
In the community								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.414	.522	-.313	74	.755	-.09750	.31166	-.7184	.52349
Equal variances not assumed			-.283	21.048	.780	-.09750	.34408	-.8129	.61796

Table 2 presents the differences between the two groups' mean scores regarding Khmer used in three places: school, home, and community. The indexes shown in Table 2, in terms of Khmer used at school with the *p*-value ( $F = .283$ ), Sig. (2-tailed) of .867, in terms of Khmer used at home with *p*-value ( $F = .991$ ), Sig. (2-tailed) of .610, regarding Khmer used in the community with *p*-value ( $F = .414$ ), Sig. (2-tailed) of .755, all greater than a level of 5% significance ( $p < .05$ ), which indicates that the mean scores obtained in the two groups are not statistically different.

*B. The Third Research Question*

Table 2 below shows the responses provided by the two groups of participants. The authors translated their responses into English, originally written in Vietnamese. The answers with “no idea” or left with “a blank” for this answer were not counted in the table. The themes were also developed based on their responses (six themes were found in the student group and five in the teacher group). The students' and teachers' responses were put into themes and counted for convenient analysis by giving each theme percentage.

TABLE 3  
WAYS OF PROMOTING THEIR MINORITY LANGUAGE BY THE TWO GROUPS

Themes (students' responses with N= 60)	Number of responses	Sample texts
Education at school	1 (1.7%)	Offer Khmer classes at primary school.
Education in other places	1 (1.7%)	Pagodas.
Ministry of Education and Training	1 (1.7%)	Need to design Khmer textbooks and curricula, and other benefits for Khmer teachers to promote Khmer education.
Promoting communication in Khmer	42 (70%)	Use Khmer as a means of communication when they gather.
Promoting Khmer customs and culture	3 (5%)	Introduce Khmer customs to other people from different backgrounds.
Self-study	5 (8.3%)	Read books and make an effort to learn Khmer.
A need for more Khmer teachers	1 (1.7%)	Should be more Khmer teachers to teach Khmer.
Themes (teachers' responses with N=16)	Number of responses	Sample texts
Education at school	4 (25%)	Offer Khmer at school (from primary to high school education).
Education in other places	2 (12.5%)	Pagodas.
Promoting communication in Khmer	6 (37.5%)	Use Khmer as a means of communication when they gather.
Promoting Khmer as a second language	2 (12.5%)	Should make Khmer a second language.
Self-study	1 (6.25%)	Develop motivation to learn Khmer.

As observed, students promote Khmer by frequently using it in their daily conversations, making up 70% of the sample. Interestingly, the percentage for this theme in the teacher group is also the highest, accounting for 37.5% of the sample.

### C. Interview Questions

To triangulate the data on the use and promotion of Khmer, the study also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight randomly selected participants (four from each group), all of whom agreed to participate. Three key questions guided the interviews: 'When do you speak Khmer?', 'Who do you usually speak Khmer with?' and 'What do you do to promote Khmer?'. The discussion, therefore, focuses on these three main points.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, as many participants were not proficient in English. However, Khmer was also used when speaking with some students who occasionally required explanations to ensure they fully understood the questions. Their responses were recorded verbatim, but unrelated data was later removed for clarity. Translations were provided to the participants for their feedback. The authors carefully read the English translations aloud to ensure the interviewees fully understood and accurately conveyed their intended meanings. All participants reviewed and agreed with the translated texts in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS USED TO ASK THE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Students	Teachers
<i>Interviewee 1</i> I use Khmer to communicate with people like parents and relatives. Introduce people to Khmer classes and make people curious about Khmer people's unique identity and traditions so they can learn Khmer.	<i>Interviewee 1</i> I speak Khmer with people who can always speak Khmer. Khmer people should try to use it as much as possible when they can.
<i>Interviewee 2</i> I tend to speak Khmer when I see the conversers know Khmer, and I speak Khmer with friends, parents, grandparents, and relatives. I teach people Khmer and try to make them believe that Khmer is an exciting and easy language to learn.	<i>Interviewee 2</i> I always speak Khmer with my parents, my neighbors, and anyone who can speak Khmer. I speak Khmer whenever I can. Then, I also send messages in Khmer to encourage people who know Khmer to use it.
<i>Interviewee 3</i> I use Khmer in the Khmer language subject class when talking to Khmer friends, and I usually speak Khmer to friends and Khmer teachers. I try to promote Khmer by posting Khmer texts on social networking platforms.	<i>Interviewee 3</i> I speak Khmer in my free time and break time. I use it to converse with friends and Khmer colleagues. I also teach Khmer and promote the use of it on social networking platforms when sharing Khmer customs, culture and tradition.
<i>Interviewee 4</i> I speak Khmer with my parents, siblings, neighbors, friends, and teachers, and I usually speak Khmer to my classmates and teachers. To promote Khmer, pagodas and ethnic boarding schools should be the places to promote it.	<i>Interviewee 4</i> I speak Khmer all the time except at work. However, sometimes, if I meet Khmer people at work, I like to use Khmer for our conversations. I usually speak Khmer with my neighbors and relatives. To encourage people to use Khmer, we must educate people on the importance of using Khmer if they must use it at home, so it is remembered. Parents should let their children speak Khmer from a young age, and if children learn it from a young age, it is easier for them to learn it later. Parents should take their children to temples to learn Khmer because temples are the best environment.

The study presents participants' responses to the interview questions to facilitate a more comprehensive discussion of the results. As observed, all interviewees agreed that they use Khmer to communicate with their relatives as much as possible. Many also suggested various approaches to promote its use, particularly in interactions with close family members. Additionally, they considered parents' role in encouraging their children to speak their minority language from an early age.

All responses aligned with the themes presented in the questionnaire. The results indicate that the participants were aware of the importance of their language, demonstrating self-awareness as described by Fejfar and Hoyle (2000). This self-awareness regarding language preservation plays a significant role in reminding and encouraging them to use their language actively. Some participants even suggested that the government introduce more Khmer language classes at the early education level in public schools. Furthermore, members of the Khmer minority highlighted the importance of religious institutions, where they can develop their language skills alongside their religious practices.

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. The First and Second Research Questions

The mean scores for each item group (school, home, and community) indicated no statistically significant differences between the two groups. Among students, the lowest mean score was observed in the school setting ( $M = 3.360$ ), suggesting a neutral stance. For instance, Q3 ( $M = 3.116$ ) reflected limited opportunities to speak Khmer at school events, while Q5 ( $M = 3.366$ ) indicated that students rarely used Khmer with classmates and their friends' parents. Similarly, Q1

( $M = 3.366$ ) suggested fewer opportunities to speak Khmer in class. These findings align with Nguyen and Nguyen (2017), who highlighted the tendency to prefer languages that provide immediate benefits.

Students had the greatest opportunities to speak Khmer at home ( $M = 3.697$ ), followed by the community ( $M = 3.490$ ), where Khmer was more commonly used. Interview responses supported the questionnaire findings, highlighting key themes such as speaking Khmer with fluent speakers and promoting its use in schools and monasteries. Consistent with Nguyen and Hamid (2016), the results emphasize that minority speakers value their language for its cultural significance and as an expression of their identity.

Like students, teachers had limited opportunities to speak Khmer at school ( $M = 3.313$ ), as most educational materials—except for Khmer language textbooks—are in Vietnamese. Teachers primarily instruct in Vietnamese, requiring Khmer students to develop proficiency for adequate lesson comprehension. However, outside the classroom, teachers used Khmer more frequently, as reflected in Q4 ( $M = 3.500$ ) and Q5 ( $M = 3.562$ ), demonstrating their efforts to promote the language.

Teachers had more opportunities to use Khmer at home ( $M = 3.513$ ) and in the community ( $M = 3.588$ ). However, Q9 ( $M = 3.187$ ) and Q12 ( $M = 3.375$ ) indicated that they often spoke other languages with neighbours or at public gatherings, primarily due to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of those involved. Interview responses supported these findings, emphasizing teachers' efforts to promote Khmer through initiatives such as school-based programs and teaching in pagodas.

Although the Ministry of Education and Training (2020) introduced a Khmer education program, large-scale implementation remains limited due to the predominantly rural distribution of Khmer communities. As cultural hubs, pagodas and temples play a vital role in preserving Khmer identity, consistent with studies by Fergusson and Masson (1997) and Hai and Thanh (2020). In line with Nguyen (2021), the use of minority languages is context-dependent but remains essential for maintaining ethnic identity. Participants strongly emphasized the importance of preserving Khmer, recognizing that language is central to their cultural and ethnic heritage.

#### *B. The Third Research Question (Open-Ended Question)*

An open-ended question allowed participants to share their perspectives to enhance the study's data triangulation. Teachers and students suggested offering Khmer classes in Buddhist pagodas to promote and preserve the Khmer language. In southwest Vietnam, Khmer pagodas play a dual role as centers for religious practice and cultural preservation. This result is according to that of Nguyen and Hamid (2018). Religion can help protect minority languages. In this study, Khmer Buddhists believe that without pagodas, their culture, customs, and language are at risk of being lost. Pagodas also serve as spaces where Khmer people regularly speak their language, contributing to its preservation. Nguyen and Hamid (2016) suggest that strengthening minority language education can be achieved through additional language lessons, encouraging students to engage in self-directed learning, and integrating these languages into state school curricula. Bringing Khmer students together in shared classrooms can also help improve language proficiency and support sustainable linguistic preservation.

Interestingly, as seen in the result, both groups mainly suggest communicating in Khmer when they meet (70% in the student group and 25% in the teacher group). Such solutions help tackle the challenges mentioned by Leivada et al. (2023), who found that language speakers tend to prioritize their use of language when they have a chance. Finally, the current study also found that Khmer minorities promote Khmer culture, tradition, and customs as one of the approaches to promoting their minority language, as mentioned by Lonardi et al. (2020), who found that language and culture are intertwined and cannot be separated. Thus, preserving one's culture is also one way to preserve one's language.

To sum up, both the teachers' and students' views of using and promoting their minority language are much aligned. Although the mean scores of the two groups are slightly different, they have no statistically significant difference in terms of Khmer spoken at school, at home, and in the community. They tend to speak their language at home and in their community. The results of this study align with that of Nguyen (2021), who also found that the participants like to use their mother tongue and rarely speak the Vietnamese language (the majority) when they come in close contact with their group, which reflects the individuals' positive attitudes toward their language (Yun, 2017). Regarding Yun's idea, language attitude can motivate one's use and promote one's language.

## VI. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

### *A. Limitations*

As with any study, certain limitations are unavoidable. This research is the first to be conducted in a rural district, focusing on a group of Khmer teachers and students at an ethnic boarding school. Consequently, the sample size is relatively small. Initially, we intended to conduct the study on a larger scale across the Mekong Delta; however, we could only carry out the research in a single province due to time and budget constraints. Ideally, future research could expand to examine Khmer students' and teachers' perceptions of language use and promotion in ethnic boarding schools nationwide. A broader sample would help improve the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, this study captures the perceptions of Khmer teachers and students regarding their minority language, but the questionnaire may not fully represent Khmer people from diverse backgrounds.

Future research could examine policies designed to promote Khmer and other minority languages, particularly how they contribute to language preservation efforts in Vietnam. Another important area to explore is how Khmer students use their native language in different situations, whether with friends, teachers, or family members. Do they naturally begin conversations in Khmer, or is it a conscious decision? Which language do they feel most at ease using? When speaking Khmer, do they mix in Vietnamese words, or do they do the opposite when speaking Vietnamese? It would also be worth investigating how students feel about their Khmer language classes. Do they find these classes meaningful and effective? Do these Khmer language lessons align with what students hope to gain? Do they help reinforce their connection to the Khmer language and culture? These questions could provide insight into how language preservation efforts affect Khmer communities.

### B. Conclusions

This study examines how Khmer teachers and students use and promote their minority language in different contexts. Conducted at an ethnic boarding junior high school in a rural area, the research found that both groups held relatively similar views on using and promoting Khmer. Students reported using Khmer most frequently at home, while teachers used it primarily in the community. The second most common setting for Khmer use among students was the community, whereas, for teachers, it was at home. Among both groups, Khmer was used the least in school. Despite these patterns, statistical analysis showed no significant difference between the two groups regarding their agreement on Khmer usage at school, home, and community. Both students and teachers recognized the importance of maintaining their minority language and were firmly committed to using it as often as possible in daily communication. The study also revealed a shared desire among participants to introduce Khmer as a subject in state schools as early as possible. The study also found that the participants in both groups wanted to bring the Khmer language subject to state schools as early as possible. To promote the language, related stakeholders should teach the Khmer language in places where religious practice is practiced, such as village temples and Buddhist pagodas. Parents can help children use their minority language from the earliest age. In addition, Gogolin (2021) mentioned it earlier - emphasizing the role of the government in preserving minority languages, too, so the government also plays a vital role (Giri, 2011; Watson, 2007). Finally, it is remarkable that both groups provided the study with many valuable ways to promote their minority language and minority language development, as Cohen and Wartofsky (2012) mentioned, such as using the language frequently in various contexts.

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