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The Impact of Language Policy on the Development of Bilingual Education for Minorities in China

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Abstract

This article talks about the development of language policies that were established since the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949. We consider that the language policy as the implementation of governing party's linguistic sovereignty, which is related to political, educational, economic and social construction. As one of a number of multi-ethnic countries in the world, China has to face the problems of improving the quality and effectiveness of bilingual education for minorities. Compared with mass education, the bilingual education has specific purpose not only basically to transmit universal knowledge and educate its youth, but also to make a contribution for a harmoniously multicultural society via the benefit of maintenance of language diversity, language practice and language planning.

According to the different languages used in bilingual education, normally bilingual education is distinguished into two categories in China, bilingual education for minorities and bilingual education for foreign languages. Hereby we are going to discuss

the bilingual of minority language and Mandarin. Specifically, we take the development of bilingual education of Tibetan areas in west of Sichuan Province as a case study, analysing the connection between the main four phases of bilingual education for Tibetan and the implementation of language policy in past sixty years.

Obviously, the national policy has an important effect on the use of minority languages for their education and family life. Although the bilingual education cannot be improved only by legislation, still the complete laws allow the educational activities for minorities' languages and culture to obtain more public recognition to retain it. The implementation of national bilingual education should have specific national goals, educational purpose and language achievement, therefore giving it clear direction for a successful outcome.

Key words: Language policy; Bilingual education; Minority languages; Legislation; Language diversity; Language planning

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INTRODUCTION

As one of a number of multi-ethnic countries in the world, China has to face the problems of improving the quality and effectiveness of bilingual education for minorities. Compared with mass education, the bilingual education has specific purpose not only basically to transmit universal knowledge and educate its youth, but also to make a contribution for a harmoniously multicultural society via the benefit of maintenance

of language diversity, language practice and language planning. Johnson and Chhetri (2002) indicated that minority culture and ethnic identity are too often victimized in the development of mass education in multicultural societies, and that the culture of dominant language is established at the expense of those linguistic minority children. At present, there are various issues of languages in China, such as the effect of Putonghua (Mandarin) on dialects, the endangered minority language, single foreigner language education etc.. Therefore, it is very important to analyse the impact of language policy on the development of bilingual education for minorities in China.

China is a country, which is comprised of one majority Han group and 55 ethnic minority groups. That minority population occupies about 8% of the total population. In China, each group has its own specific language differing from others in various complexities. There are some 120 spoken languages among these ethnic groups. About 60 languages of these are known to be used by less than ten thousand people and about 20 languages are used by less than one thousand people (Li, 2006). Relevant research indicates that languages are used by less than one thousand people are close to extinction. Even if more than one thousand peoples use it, it doesn't mean this language has an exuberant vitality and survival continuance. Most of these minority languages in China are in crisis. The bilingual education for minorities in China plays key roles on maintaining multilingual self-esteem and cultural identification.

1. A BRIEF ON LANGUAGE POLICY IN CHINA

1.1 Language Policy and Language Planning

This article talks about the development of language policies, which were established since the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949. The definition of Language Policy and Language Planning is often misunderstood. Bratt Paulston (2003) defined language policy as a subfield of language planning. Phillipson and Skutnabb-kangas (1997) argued that language planning refers to the more technical aspects of language policy. Kennedy (1982) defined language planning as the planning of deliberate changes in the form or use of a language (or a variety), or languages (or varieties). In this essay, we consider the language policy as the implementation of governing party's linguistic sovereignty, which is related to political, educational, economic and social construction.

1.2 The Main Language Policy in China

After the collapse of Qin Dynasty, there were huge debates in Chinese linguists about the reform of the Chinese language. The core problems can be summarized

into 3 aspects: the vernacular literature reform, the Chinese characters reform and the standard language in China. The vernacular literature reform is special because it was not literally sponsored by government but by scholars in 1919. Since 1949, language planning was actively adopted by the Chinese government. The national language committee, as the carrier of most Chinese language affairs, was the responsible agent of language policy in China. At that time, Chinese people just came out of a long period of warfare and the country was faced with low literacy among the population. According to Norma (1988), there was approximately 70 percent of the Chinese population who spoke at least one Chinese dialect. Most of the Chinese dialects were not mutually intelligible. The two main tasks of the committee were the simplified Chinese characters (Corpus planning) and the Standardisation of Chinese Mandarin (Status planning).

Basically we regard the language policy in China has three main stages since 1949. The situation of minorities' languages in China is very special. Zhou (2001) illustrates that the minority's language policies in bilingual education were changeable. He divided this bunch of policies since 1949 into three stages: The first stage is the period from 1949 to 1957. The pluralistic, as he called it, was that the government, identified minorities' language rights, established infrastructures for minority education, and developed prototypes of bilingual education. The second stage is Chinese-monopolistic from 1958 to 1977. Through this period the government unified language policies for Mandarin and minority languages, promoted Mandarin education over minority languages in education and limit the scale of bilingual education in minority schools. The third stage is second pluralistic stage since 1978. After the openness of the China's economy, the China's authority has legislated for bilingual education, revived it, and helped minority to expand the scale of their language wellbeing. But this situation also had some disadvantages. The periods of three stages appear as the same as the Mandarin promoting steps. As one of the most influential policies, Mandarin promoting also had a huge impact on both Minority languages and the Chinese dialects. At the first stage, before the notion of Mandarin was raised, the attitude of CCP to Minorities was to keep the boundaries of Han and other ethnics (Zhou, 2001). It was still monolingual in the schools in minority regions. However, at the second stage of minorities' policy, after the project of 'Mandarin Promoting' began, the power centre changed attitude to minority language policy. Mandarin was not only taught in Han schools but also became the official language in school instruction in minority regions. The language policy went to assimilation in the bilingual education (Lin, 1997; Zhou, 2000). Nelson (2005) even believed that the change of policy was because of Mao's

suspicion that the minorities' self-consciousness might have conflict with socialism. This attitude lasted about 20 years until the end of the Great Culture Revolution and Mao himself. In the constitution in 1982, minority rights, especially language and education right, were emphasized frequently. This change means the third stage drove the language policy slightly back to the first stage, yet not quite like before, because the minority language education was only allowed in the schools of ethnic autonomous regions. The minorities who lived out of ethnic autonomous regions can only have the monolingual education of Mandarin.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR MINORITIES IN CHINA

According to the type of language used in bilingual education is different, in normal circumstances, bilingual education in China is distinguished into two categories: bilingual education for minorities and bilingual education for foreign languages. Hereby we are going to discuss the former one, referred to as the minority language and Mandarin.

As Teng (2010) puts it, using bilingual languages of minorities in China has four different types: (a) For the member of a minority group, who masters in its own minority language and the official national language (Mandarin); (b) For the member of a minority group, who masters in its own minority language, as well as one or more other minorities languages; (c) For the member of Majority group, who masters Mandarin and also knows how to use one or more other minorities languages; (d) For a specific minority group with two or more different languages, a part of members master in using these minority languages. We therefore define the bilingual language for minorities in this essay as "Education for minority language and Mandarin" and refer to the first type pointed above. The main feature of this kind of education is that the students often use their own native minority language in daily life, however during their studies at school, they have been taught in Mandarin and in minority language. There are three purposes in education, firstly, improving the ability of students for using minority language and Mandarin; secondly, giving a expanded opportunity for the bilingual students (whose native language is not Mandarin) to have equal skill and achievement in all subjects compared with non-bilingual students, breaking the barrier of language use; the last point, fostering the bilingual labour force.

According to Zhou (2001), from the 1980s, a bilingual educational policy began to be implemented in ethnic territories with a series of legislative instruments. In 1984, the Compulsory Education Law required promotion of Mandarin as the national common speech at primary and secondary schools and the use

of commonly adopted minority language as the first language when the student body is mainly minority. The new period of bilingual education for minorities in China has been established again from 1980s, the legislations on bilingual education have gradually been completed. During 1979 to 1988, the main local autonomous governments in China have published the bills or notifications on the educational problems with the intended purpose to assist minorities for studying Chinese, minority language and bilingual teaching etc., including Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Guangxi, Hunan, Sichuan. For example, in 1987, Education Commission of Sichuan Province and Ethnic Commission of Sichuan Province published "The Opinions on Bilingual Education in Primary School and Middle School for Yi and Tibetan People". At this stage, from the provincial level to the country level, the governing party has launched a series of regulations on bilingual education in their jurisdictions.

With the growing awareness of the importance of bilingual education in China, the development of bilingual education for minorities has moved gradually towards a normative field. As of 1995, 23 ethnic groups have been teaching the students both in their own language and Mandarin at schools, especially several large ethnic groups in China (Mongolians, Tibetans, Koreans, Uygur, and Zhuang etc.). Eight provinces have set up their own press for publishing textbooks for minority schools (People's Daily, 1997). This is the most populous bilingual learners around the world in China. According to the sixth census in China 2010, the number of ethnic population is 123,330,000, accounting for 8.5 % of the total population, there are 1/3 minority groups using their own languages and Mandarin, six groups almost shift to use Mandarin in daily life. There are 40 minority groups masters in Mandarin and their own languages, with some 18,060,000 people, occupying about 37.7% of minority language users.

According to statistics published by Ministry of Education of China in 2005, 21 minority languages have been used for bilingual education in minorities primary and secondary schools, more than six million students across the national range in 10,000 bilingual schools are receiving education in both Mandarin and ethnic languages. More than 3,000 textbooks compiled in 29 languages annually for the schools, ranging from kindergartens to high schools, reported by Xinhua News Agency.

From 1990s to the early 20th century, research on the theory and curriculum resources in bilingual education has developed. Various monographs in this field have been published, for example the book 'Research on the use of minority languages in China' initiated a literature review on the issue of bilingual education for minorities in China during the past 10 years. The central government and local government allocated more

budgets to support the development of education on ethnic areas, including specific research funding. These series of practical regulations not only promoted the scale of bilingual education but also formed the principle of bilingual education in China. From the period onwards, abundant accomplishment of research on the field has published out, an indication of the flourishing development of bilingual education in China.

3. THE CURRENT PREDICAMENTS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR MINORITIES IN CHINA

The bilingual education for minorities in China in particular the school education has been developed since 1950s, but has gone through an initial unstable developing stage from 1950s to 1980s, and a somehow stagnating phase in the late 1980s, then a slowly recovery stage in the early 1990s to the flourishing phase since early 20th century. However, from the perspective of linguistic status, we have to admit that most people in China believe that Mandarin is more competitive language compared with other minority languages. As such, a dilemma of bilingual education development for minorities in China and the choice of language in education, more likely to be “Bi Min Qu Han” (Prefer to learn Mandarin to minority language). It is an understanding that Han regions are considered more developed than ethnic areas in both economic and urban fields, with more opportunities for skilled Chinese users, this is why some ethnic parents would rather send their children to schools where only Mandarin is taught.

Johnson and Chhetri (2002) pointed out the current problems of bilingual education for minorities in China have three main aspects. In the first place, a highly centralized curriculum caused by a pyramid-shaped administrative system in education, with very few autonomous rights for adjustable management of local bilingual schools even for the native curriculum and making local teaching plan. Therefore local knowledge of minorities is seldom incorporated into the bilingual education for minority students. Secondly, the problem is lack of resources of textbooks in minority language. Most reference books and educational materials are in the Mandarin, one reason is experts of textbook who are generally qualified of training and research work in official language, another reason is the potential market of minorities' textbook publication is smaller, which is not good for profitable business. The third problem is a severe shortage of qualified teachers and the effective training for minority teachers is not good enough.

Specifically, take the development of bilingual education of Tibetan areas in west of Sichuan Province as an example, where the author has done extensive investigation. Under the influence of the different social

factors, like natural environment, ethnic residential community, Chinese and minorities mixed residential community, urban and rural development etc., the situation of bilingual education in this area was arbitrary and poorly planned, normally just take directly the model of teaching from Han schools for minorities, the sightless implementation of massive teaching then hardly improved the quality of bilingual education. Since the middle of 1970s to the early of 1980s, the bilingual education in Tibetan areas has somehow recovered and developed, where the Tibetan-Chinese bilingual teaching has been equally practised. Until the middle of 1990s, two types of bilingual education were basically formed, one mainly teaching students in Tibetan then have Mandarin as an attached language course; another is teaching students in Mandarin and Tibetan as a secondary language stream.

As we progress through the 21st century, central government and provincial government attached greater importance to the development of bilingual education in Tibetan areas with more and more support in the way of regulation and finance. For example, the “Ten Years Action Plan of Educational Development in Sichuan Province for Minorities” was implemented in 2001 by Sichuan provincial government. In the following few years, a number of policies have been launched, such as “Plan of Two Basics Action in Western Region of China”, “Distance education in rural primary and secondary schools”, “Construction of boarding Schools in Rural Areas” etc., which made a great contribution to the development of bilingual education in this area.

Although bilingual education in Tibetan region has resulted in some key achievements, there remains some key critical challenges:

(a) High mobility of teaching staff. Tibetan regions are located at high altitude area with difficult living natural conditions and inconvenient transportation. Normally teachers working there do not have good pay, causing the frequently outflow of talents and the added difficulty of supplementing the lack of teachers. In past few years, many rural schools could not justify the rational rate of the total amount of teachers.

(b) Even if there are enough teaching staff in some schools, there is still a lack of bilingual teachers in all subjects. In particular, in the field of history, geography, politics and sciences. The worst shortage of bilingual teacher is in the Science, currently most teachers of Science in Tibetan areas do not have professional training or qualification on Science, they are not well equipped in principle knowledge, as well as cannot deal with adequate bilingual translation in the teaching, thus the quality of bilingual education in Tibetan regions has been affected negatively.

(c) The link of language for pupils is insufficient before and after the entrance to primary school. Early childhood is a critical period for language learning, most

children of Tibetan do not have enough linguistic exposure to Mandarin before entrance to schools, and the lack of kindergarten in Tibetan areas also make the situation of language linkage worse, therefore a difficult time at the beginning of school education.

(d) Study obstacle is caused by the low skills of Mandarin for Tibetan students. The local students of primary and secondary schools basically come from the alpine pastoral area, the quality of education is relatively poor, and thus the students they have more difficulties in studying than their counterparts on the mainland. Tibetan family with good economy was happy to pay their children good education for Chinese Mandarin, and said that speaking good Chinese Mandarin was like possessing national rice-tickets (Clothey, 2005).

(e) Mobility and drop off of students caused by cultural and seasonal reasons. It is very common in Tibetan areas that the outflow of students seasonal from schools, like the time for activities of valuable herbal medicine production (digging *Cordyceps sinensis*, *Fritillaria* with their family). Sometimes, the native religious activities are important reason for students' out of classes. Admittedly, special irregularly mobility of local students has severely affected the management of bilingual education there. Therefore the regulation of the local school should have a different timetable of terms as inner land in China.

4. ORIENTATIONAL EFFECT OF LANGUAGE POLICY TO BILINGUAL EDUCATION

As a multi-language country, bilingual education for minorities in China is the implementation of national language policy. It is a complicated social activity that involves with political, cultural, social, economic elements. Promoting national language (Mandarin) through bilingual education needs to be carried thoughtfully, because the minority languages stand for not only a native tongue title but also the identity of culture and regions. As the explanation from a different context of languages by Conversi (1997), there is no any national policy can exist independently without the context of culture.

Obviously, the national policy has an important effect on the use of minority languages for their education and family life. Although the bilingual education cannot be improved only by legislation, still the complete laws allow the educational activities for minorities' languages and culture to obtain more public recognition to retain it. The implementation of national bilingual education should have specific national goals, educational purpose and language achievement, therefore giving it clear direction for a successful outcome.

The conflict of language selection in bilingual education

needs to be solved by rational language planning. In new century, the National Language Committee put forward a new concept about "Build a Harmonious Language Life in China. In the context of bilingual education for minorities in China, we must point out the issues of languages in teaching at present: including the uniqueness and diversity of teaching language, and the unequal status of languages in school.

There are three aspects of language planning to lead the teaching language in education. The first one is planning on language status. For example, making a policy to provide the equal status of Mandarin and Minorities languages as teaching language for bilingual education in ethnic regions, and encourage people to use bilingual language for their daily life in the field of education and media. The second part is planning to teaching language norms in school. For example, there is a same problem of normalizing both Mandarin and minority language, including elaborate planning of phonetics, phonology, lexicon, vocabulary, grammar of speaking, and writing etc.. The last part is planning of language function. Language policy needs to distinguish different levels of language use, appropriate teaching students in Mandarin, minority languages and dialect in different levels of function, in order to play the proper role of different language and culture.

CONCLUSION

Through making language policy, we will strengthen the linkage of language for preschool children in minority areas, to provide more friendly language environment for minority youth, which will greatly improve the effect of bilingual learning motivation. In addition, traditional cultural elements of minorities should be introduced to bilingual education system. We should connect the school education with people's life to meet the needs of local existence and development by their own social, geographical, historical and cultural conditions and change the wrong idea among them of 'school education is useless for minorities'.

As for the issue of the shortage of bilingual teachers in minority areas, through language policy to ensure the well treatment for them is feasible action, which improves the current situation of insufficient and unqualified of bilingual teacher resource in the areas. To improve the conditions for teachers' political and living conditions, to create a good environment for teachers, to attract more college graduates to work in the minority areas, to strengthen the training for them both in pre-service and in-service stages, all are considered to be an effective way to improve the quality of bilingual education for minorities in China.

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