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Zhenzhou Zhao

Trilingual Education for Ethnic Minorities: Toward Empowerment?

Abstract: *Trilingual education (encompassing ethnic minority languages, Chinese, and English) for minority students gains popular support from local ethnic communities to redress educational inequality issues affecting majority and minority groups in China. This paper explores the uses of these three languages on two university campuses, representative of an ethnic study program and a regular study program, respectively, and describes how trilingualism relates to minority student participation and further empowerment. The findings suggest trilingual proficiency improves student confidence and expands opportunities for competition with their Han peers. But English is primarily used for the purpose of evaluation and carries little practical function for student studies and their university lives. This paper argues that trilingual education alone, without substantial structural reforms, offers only "imagined" empowerment.*

Language is not simply a medium of communication but also reflects power relations (Glastra and Schedler 2004). Within a nation-state, the policy of linguistic unification establishes and permeates relations of domination while shaping a linguistic market wherein languages display unequal distributions of capital (Bourdieu 1991). For members of minority groups, knowledge of a majority language leads to an accumulation of human capital or, in other words, better socioeconomic status in mainstream society (Pendakur and Pendakur 2002). Yet the issue of power relations becomes complicated for marginalized groups in neocolonial societies such as China.

The government in China, a multiethnic nation, is committed to fostering linguistic unification while also actively pursuing international venturing. In such a milieu, it is argued that ethnic minority languages are put at the bottom of a hierarchical language system (e.g., Bilik 1998).

The past decade has witnessed growing demand for trilingual proficiency among ethnic groups, although the state does not coerce minority students to learn an international language (usually English) as they do the Han majority. The driving force is that the acquisition of majority or global languages may constitute an investment in human capital and further empower minority members. Based on the life experiences of trilingual minority students at two universities, this paper discusses how China's trilingual education, as a self-determination initiative taken by a local ethnic community, informs empowerment of non-Han ethnic individuals.

Language Instruction for Ethnic Minorities in China

China is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Apart from a huge variety of Han Chinese dialects, there are at least sixty officially recognized languages among minority groups. More precisely, there are 80 to 120 spoken languages and forty-seven writing systems (Stites 1999). Except for the Hui and Manchu who speak the Han Chinese language, ethnic minorities in China have distinct languages, and some even have

more than one.

Generally speaking, the state offers two types of educational programs designed to meet ethnic student needs at the primary and secondary school levels. Type I is to attend the regular study program (*minkaohan*) together with their Han peers. Students attend the same classes in which Chinese is used as the medium of instruction and are given the same examinations. An international language (usually English, but sometimes Japanese, Russian, or other languages) is a compulsory course for all. But minority students are accorded bonus points in college entrance examinations. Type II is to enroll in the ethnic study program (*minkaomin*), which establishes bilingual (the minority and Chinese languages) curricula and offers an optional subject of international languages (also usually English) based on specific contexts.

However, in reality, Chinese and ethnic languages are accorded different status (Adamson and Feng 2009). Based on the case of Tibetans in Qinghai, Upton reveals, “The language of officialdom remains Chinese and, with the exception of formal translation work, there is little opportunity for the use of Tibetan in the public sphere” (1999, 311). As a consequence, minority students increasingly prefer Type I. As Hansen (1999) points out, based on her study of minority groups in southwest China, minority students were fully aware of the fact that minority language, culture, and history play a minor role in their success in the educational system.

With China’s opening up since the 1980s, ethnic minority languages have increasingly faced an assault from English challenges. Acquisition of an international language has been strongly embraced by the state government for the purpose of modernization and economic development. Although the term “trilingual education” (ethnic language, Chinese, and English) has not yet been overtly referred to in official state policies and rhetoric, it increasingly receives widespread attention among ethnic groups. A primary reason is that parents, ethnic intellectuals, and local government officials worry that denial of international languages may exacerbate educational inequalities between the majority and minority groups (Beckett and MacPherson 2005).

Groups including Tibetans, Kazakhs, and Mongols have made attempts to implement trilingual courses in primary and secondary schools, generally called an “experimental trilingual class.” This innovative program also receives criticism. Some say minority students have more burdens than the Han, others claim their achievements in Chinese and English come at the expense of their mother tongue, and it has been said that there are shortages of qualified teachers and teaching materials (e.g., Ji’ensi 2004).

This paper will concentrate on the case of Mongols, who have made an initial attempt at promoting trilingual proficiency since the 1990s. The autonomous government of Inner Mongolia initiated a program of building English subjects starting from junior secondary education in 2001. This paper will explore the uses of the three languages on university campuses and how trilingualism relates to minority student participation and further empowerment.

Research Settings

The population of the Mongols, one of fifty-five designated ethnic groups, numbers more than 5 million. They live mainly in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) and autonomous counties in other provinces/regions within the territory of China. Despite the decline of Mongol power, the Mongolian language has remained in use for more than 800 years.

As China moves toward an industrialized, developed, and modern nation, the language, cultural practices, and traditional religions of minorities including the Mongolian people are in serious decline. Student enrollment in Mongolian schools has plummeted dramatically since the 1980s. An essential reason for this is that ethnic schools cannot ensure well-paid employment for their graduates (Tuke 1997). Moreover, these students have limited choices when applying to a university, in that most Chinese universities offer only Chinese language study programs and English is required for graduation. Even in the IMAR, the Han are the majority, and consequently there are few worksites or colleges needing Mongolian monolinguals (Khan 1995). Ma (2007) indicates that Mongols have a stronger motivation to learn Chinese than Han have to learn Mongolian in pastoral areas of the IMAR, let alone urban areas. Outside the autonomous region, the Chinese language is a necessity for making a living in political and economic centers (Bilik 1998).

The data presented in this paper came from narrative interviews with twelve Mongol students who graduated from the Experimental Trilingual Class in the IMAR and attended two mainstream universities: Beijing Normal University (BNU) and South China University for Nationalities. These represent universities with the regular study program and the ethnic study program, respectively. The fieldwork was conducted in 2004.

A university under the Ministry of Education, BNU is located in Beijing, a modern cosmopolitan city. Han students comprised the majority of total undergraduates, whereas minority *minzu* students comprised barely more than 10 percent. South China University for Nationalities, mainly financed and managed by the Ethnic Affairs Bureau, is a special university for training minority members in Hubei province. Although ethnic minority students comprised barely a majority (54 percent), most were highly Sinicized and had lost their own cultural practices.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are categorized based on three language domains: the ethnic language (Mongolian), Chinese, and English. I will present how multilinguistic proficiency relates to minority student participation in and out of the classroom.

Mongolian

Uses of the Mongolian language are mainly manifested in class note-taking (although the medium of instruction was Chinese at the university), subscribing to Mongolian-language

journals from the IMAR, bringing Mongolian books to the university from home, or reading Mongolian literature at the Central University for Nationalities. But generally speaking, Mongol students had few opportunities to use their mother tongue in the public domain. Students from other minority groups face a similar situation. Because of less usage, Mongol students reported their native language competency worsened, particularly in writing ability.

Compared with counterparts who had been fully assimilated into Han society in the regular study program, Mongol students who attended the trilingual ethnic programs to some degree formed a clique and spoke Mongolian in their private domain. After class, these students often had meals together and chatted in their mother tongue. During holidays, they went to parks or organized social activities. This frequent use of the minority language led to dissatisfaction toward Mongols by the Han. Minority students explained that using the Mongolian language was a habit that they could hardly change. But their explanation could not overcome misunderstandings.

Speaking the Mongolian language seemed to be an essential criterion for gaining access to the group. Mongols who could not speak their ethnic language were regarded as “fakes” and excluded from the community. Given the fact that a great number of minority members attend the regular study program and had lost their mother tongue, mastery of ethnic language creates a boundary dividing minority students from different educational programs. Yolk, a Chinese-speaking Mongol, described an incident occurring between her and Mongol peers who studied in the ethnic study program that shed light on their interactions.

> Once while playing volleyball, I met several male students from the department of English. After learning that I came from the IMAR, they asked whether I was a Mongol. I answered “yes.” Then they quickly continued to ask whether I could speak the Mongolian language. I shook my head. They looked very disappointed. I could catch their meaning, “You are a Mongol, but cannot speak the Mongolian language.” Because I could not speak the Mongolian language, we did not talk a lot.[1]

Some Mongol students also looked for group members from the Republic of Mongolia. The shared language makes minority Mongol students establish relationships with foreign students from this independent nation of Mongols, which is adjacent to the IMAR and split from China in the 1920s. Also, the students loved rock music from Mongolia.

Apart from the ethnic language’s function as a symbol for ethnic identification, trilingual Mongol students employ their mother tongue as symbolic capital in their dedication to cultural representation to attain personal and institutional recognition. At the annual welcome party for freshman students held by the department at BNU, Mongol students collectively performed ethnic songs and dances. However, they had lost most cultural traditions, including knowledge of their history, religion, and customs. Compared with their peers who had lost their mother tongue (i.e., those in the regular study program),

this type of Mongol student maintains a stronger Mongol identity and makes an effort to struggle for cultural recognition.

Chinese

After enrollment at the university, trilingual participants reported that they encountered relatively few Chinese language barriers, except when faced with the course "Chinese Language and Literature." It was hard for them to comprehend ancient Chinese literature because they had never learned it before. In addition, these students had to spend more time adapting to learning in the Chinese language. More specifically, they needed to match past knowledge learned in Mongolian with new knowledge in Chinese and became accustomed to reciting in the Chinese language.

Because of their relative strength in academics, trilingual Mongols did not report having as many feelings of inferiority, confusion, or frustration as their bilingual counterparts, although they also complained that their ethnic language was of no use in larger society. Yet the Mongolian language, unlike the logographic Mandarin script, is a phonographic script based on Sanskrit. Mastery of the mother tongue may facilitate minority student learning of some international languages from the same family, such as Japanese.

Most trilingual participants enjoyed positive inclusion in social activities on campus because of their excellent Chinese proficiency. They attended all sorts of student organizations and associations (such as the Student Union and Student Art Troupe) and became student cadres at the university, department, and class levels. Some even assumed important positions, including secretary of a class branch of the Chinese Communist Party, vice chairperson or division head of the Student Union, and head of a student association. Occasionally, some students were awarded scholarships and department honors.

Compared with Tibetans and minorities from Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, trilingual Mongol students did well in terms of contact with others. In actuality, members of the former groups are often perceived as class skippers, smokers, and those who communicate only among themselves. It appeared that ethnic Mongols got along well with students from all groups and tried their best to adapt well to university life. Their strategy was to get along well with others while trying to preserve their own cultural practices.

The findings show that the trilingual education program (minority languages, Chinese, and English) helps to foster minority student participation at the university. Owing to the language advantage, these minority students tend to be better able to compete with their Han peers and do well at the university. But the "triumph" of trilingual education relies on the fact that it expands opportunities for competition with Han peers and therefore improves student confidence.

English

Compared with the shrinking usage of ethnic languages on campus and in larger society, English is widely promoted by the university and considered an important standard for ranking students. Moreover, the university artificially created many English-speaking circumstances, despite the fact that there were actually very few native speakers on campus.

Campus media (i.e., radio, TV, and other student publications) delivered programs about English learning or in English. There were several newspaper boards to display the latest newspapers on campus. One of them is *China Daily,* an English-language newspaper. Even some notices and posters were only in English. More often than not, there were activities and English competitions designed to improve student language proficiency. This was in contrast to the fact that no programs were broadcast in ethnic languages. Moreover, a great number of university publications (for example, the library introduction) are bilingual (Chinese and English) because Chinese universities aspire to obtain international recognition.

As mentioned above, trilingualism helps to tangibly improve minority student participation on campus. But it also has a payoff. Because of the time spent with English, trilingual minority students have to encounter intangible academic obstacles at the university. The Experimental Trilingual Class required students to finish a three-year English course during senior middle school, which requires six years for their counterparts in the regular study program at secondary school. For this reason, the trilingual students had less time to study other subjects. These Mongol students appeared to be less well-read in their interactions with others at the university. As Liankhua said,

> In our senior middle school, English was of great importance. Therefore, our English is good. But we did not study physics, chemistry, and biology because we were liberal arts majors. We did not study them even in the first year of high school. We study only politics, geography, history, mathematics, Mongolian language, Chinese, and English. Now, when my roommates mention electric circuits and biological or physiological phenomenon they studied in secondary school, they all know it, but I do not know it at all. This was a weakness of the Experimental Trilingual Class.
> I only studied physics in junior middle school for two years and chemistry for one year. Currently, I feel it is hard to study the course called eco-economy, because it relates to chemistry. Aiming to compete with Han students in examinations, the experimental class did not emphasize our all-around development.[2]

Another student's comment at BNU is also illustrative:

> Among the Mongol students, only those from the experimental class are capable of competing with Han students. However, our weakness is that we have learned little in social sciences and humanities. Although competing with Han students, we do not have any advantages. In chatting with the Han, I feel very embarrassed when they mention something that I do not know. That is really a very big regret.[3]

In the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, a founder of China's economic reforms, proposed that education should be geared to modernization, the world, and the future. Since then, international languages have been gradually constructed as a prerequisite for successful competition in educational tracks and for high-paying jobs. A systematic examination of the campus context illuminates that students, from both majority and minority groups, in fact have few real chances to use English in classroom practices and their daily lives. English is a compulsory course for all undergraduates and postgraduates, but it is still seldom used in subject learning. However, students reported they had spent much time studying English. Some proudly told me they had obtained English certificates such as the College English Test Band 4 and 6 or a Business English Certificate. Competition for these certificates is stiff and poses similar challenges for the Han.

But there are few native English-speaking staff members and students on campuses. Statistics from across China in 2006 show there were 9,464 international staff members in higher education institutions and 17,407 overseas students (75.7 percent from Asian countries).[4] As there are approximately 4,000 higher education institutions (including private schools) nationwide, it can be estimated that there are rather small numbers of English speakers on campuses. Furthermore, little international media, including newspapers, TV, and radio, are permitted in China. Students—like all Chinese—can access several English-language newspapers published only by Chinese themselves and Central China TV Channel 9 (the only official English TV channel). Most English contexts on campus are arbitrarily constructed without "real" audiences.

Despite the fact that English has been adopted as a ranking criterion for students and professional personnel, only a small number of Chinese citizens need to use it for their work and daily lives. Zhao and Campbell (1995) also contend that the primary function of English in China is not for international communication but for social and economic mobility. The exposure and use of English in reality lag far behind the Chinese government's international passion.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings show that trilingual Mongol students face fewer obstacles than those from Mongolian-Chinese bilingual streams. Because ethnic minority languages possess the least linguistic capital (compared with national and international languages), acquisition of an international dominant language seems to be able to balance their accumulation of human capital in interethnic competition and endow minority students with power in social relations. But is this substantial empowerment?

In the post-Mao era, the Chinese have been keen to develop a modern, prosperous, and strong nation. Education plays an essential role not only in cultivating talent with capacity for competing in international settings but also for shaping student visions about their motherland as an influential, global player. Unlike colonial regions, China has seen a rapid expansion of English driven by the government as part of a state-building project

for economic prosperity. Since 2001, the State Ministry of Education has required all students to start learning this language in the third grade.

Yet ethnic minority students are excluded from this project. Although the policy may be well intentioned (given the fact that minority students are also required to learn a second language, Chinese, at the same time), it has triggered a struggle among ethnic minorities for empowerment through participation. This is explicit in a Mongolian saying: “You can go around the grassland if you master the Mongolian language, you can go around China if you master Chinese, and you can go around the world if you master English.”

This paper suggests that trilingual education facilitates minority citizens to envision empowerment through shifting, unequal power relations in mainstream society and obtain equal opportunities for global participation. Yet it cannot be replaced by substantive ways of promoting empowerment among minority students, as proposed by Cummins (1995). They include incorporation of student culture and language, inclusion of minority communities in the education of their children, pedagogy, and assessment.

Only restructuring curricula, transforming campus culture, and changing examinations and university entrance requirements can ultimately help minority members generate a substantial sense of confidence and facilitate their full participation in school settings (see also Adamson and Feng 2009). On the other hand, trilingual proficiency alone offers minority citizens an “imagined” empowerment, which is part of an international outlook shaped by the state government and is meanwhile inseparable from English linguistic hegemony around the world.

The findings of this study have some implication for the centralization of China’s language policy. Some domestic scholars suggest minority members should learn English without learning Chinese for the purpose of reducing difficulties in international interaction and absorbing knowledge from abroad (see Ma 2007). The paper shows that minority students benefit from trilingualism but in the process are put at a disadvantage. The question is not English, but the fact that nearly all Chinese citizens (both majority and minority group members) are required to learn English and are using it as a “one-size-fits-all” criterion. Given the linguistic strength of minority groups, diversification of international language learning among ethnic groups can empower non-Han members and help boost China’s global competence.

Notes

1. Yolk is a female Mongol postgraduate student specializing in physics at BNU. She was educated in the regular study program before admission.
2. Liankhua was a female Mongol student in the department of economics at South China University for Nationalities.
3. Odval was a female Year 3 student. She graduated from a trilingual experimental class in the IMAR and majored in English at BNU.
4. Data come from the Ministry of Education Web site, www.moe.edu.cn, accessed July 30, 2009.

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