

## Trilingual education in minority regions in China

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### Introduction

In recent decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has instigated language policies in education ostensibly designed to foster trilingualism in ethnic minority groups. The policies, which vary from region to region, encompass the minority group's home language, Chinese, and English. As the minority groups tend to live in relatively remote and poorly resourced areas of the country, the promotion of trilingualism and trilingual education presents a range of challenges to communities in general and primary schools in particular. How these challenges are addressed is the subject of a research project that we are currently undertaking in collaboration with nine teams of researchers in different parts of China. Using data arising from interviews, ethnographic field notes, documentary analysis and secondary sources, this project is examining the tensions behind these trilingual education policies by comparing the implementation of policies for minority groups in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Jilin, Gansu, Qinghai and Guangdong. It seeks to identify some of the facilitators and barriers that affect the achievement of trilingualism, and to make some suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of the trilingualism policy.

### Research Design

To make the data generalisable for a country with 55 officially recognised minority nationalities, we have adopted what methodologists such as Yin (2003) call multiple-case studies. The case studies cover minority autonomous regions or prefectures where the minority nationality groups live, in isolation in remote areas or in mixed communities together with the majority Han group. The methods and tools are consistent in all case studies. Each research team in each region has chosen three sites (mostly counties) according to the same criteria as follows:

- Demographically, the three sites represent the population typology of the region or prefecture. Usually, one is a county or town that is dominated by the minority group; one a mixed community with a (near-)balanced population in ethnic terms; and the third one the capital city with mixed population but usually dominated by the Han majority.
- Geographically, the three sites represent the whole region or prefecture in terms of typography and transportation: one that is the most remote and isolated; one that is close to towns and life opportunities; and one that is the centre with all modern transportation and population mobility.
- Economically, the three sites chosen represent the region or prefecture in terms of GDP (PPP) per capita as well.

In each site, four schools (three primary schools and one secondary) have been chosen using criteria similar to those defined above. Primary schools are as representative as possible in terms of resources, history, demography, geographical condition, and so forth. Only one secondary school (an ordinary school where minority children attend) is chosen because minority children from remote areas tend to go to a secondary school in a town specially catering for minority children. They are unlikely to go to those privileged 'key schools' (*Zhongdian Zhongxue*) dominated by the Han majority children. The research teams include members who are proficient in the minority language and Chinese, or other local language(s). The study includes:

1. Surveys with questionnaires of all the school communities involved in the project
2. Documentary analysis of policies in each region
3. Observation (5-10 per school) of classroom practice with observation sheets\*
4. Interviews with stakeholders such as policymakers, and focus groups of teachers (5-10 per school), parents (10-20 per school) and children (20-30 per school).

Multiple-case studies enable us to explore the phenomena through the use of a replication strategy so as to achieve saturation of data and to enhance validity and reliability of research data and thus the conclusions and generalisability drawn from them. Furthermore, to make the data comparable both between the cases nationally and internationally, our multiple-case studies are carried out by a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods as those used by the researchers in a similar project in Wales.

### Trilingualism in Chinese Education

The main purpose of developing trilingualism is to enhance students' sense of cultural heritage through the mother tongue, identification with the rest of the nation through the national language, and opportunities for

social mobility through better employment prospects afforded by competence in an international language. While there appears to be general consensus regarding the potential benefits of trilingual education, data from the project to date indicate that major tensions have arisen when the policy is implemented. These tensions fall into three categories: political, theoretical and logistic.

While recent efforts of the state to maintain political stability have produced language in education policies that take into account the desire of minority groups to maintain their culture and identity, resulting in efforts to preserve and promote minority languages, a potential tension has arisen as the state also makes strenuous efforts to promote national cohesion through the promotion of standard Chinese as a *lingua franca* (Blachford, 2006). School curricula throughout the PRC now require all pupils, including ethnic minorities, to learn standard Chinese. Meanwhile English has attained prestigious status in the country because of the PRC's desire to play a prominent role in international affairs, such as by gaining admission to the World Trade Organisation (Adamson, 2004; Lam, 2005), and since 2002, English has become a subject to be studied by students from Primary 3, provided that schools are able to offer it.

The theoretical debates focus on the key question: can students cope with learning three languages? There appears to be a general consensus in the literature of trilingualism and trilingual education that bilinguals are normally better at learning a third language in schools than monolinguals are at learning a second language and have a cognitive advantage over the latter (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Clyne, et al., 2004; Hoffmann & Ytsam, 2004). Cenoz (2003) and Cenoz & Valencia (1994) demonstrate with empirical evidence that bilingual students (Spanish and Basque in their case) achieved higher proficiency in English language in schools than monolingual Spanish students learning the same language. As Baker (2006) points out, this can be explained by Cummins' (1986; 2000) interdependence hypothesis that suggests that academic language proficiency transfers across languages in terms of phonological, syntactical and pragmatic abilities. However, in the emerging literature of trilingual education in China, despite occasional reports that give support to the hypothesis, many educators and researchers argue that the reverse is true (e.g., Zhang, 2003; Jiang, et al., 2007). Instead of cognitive advantages, they report various cognitive, cultural and psychological problems minority students experience in learning the third language, in this case English. Some therefore argue that special policies should be made for minority students, such as setting a standard lower than the required levels specified in the New Curriculum for foreign language proficiency (Yang, 2006; Zhang, 2003). In making this argument, these educators seem to neglect the obvious consequence that, once such special policies are made, minority pupils with lower standards in a school subject with increasing importance will inevitably find it even more difficult to compete for academic and career opportunities; and thus they will be further economically, socially and politically marginalized.

Preliminary findings from the current project in three minority dominated regions (Xinjiang, Guangxi and Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan)—reported in Adamson and Feng (2009), Feng (2007; 2008), Feng and Sunuodula (2009); and Sunuodula and Feng (2011)—show that many minority pupils fail to acquire age-appropriate competence either in their minority home language or the majority language (Putonghua) and are unlikely to avoid negative consequences to their social and economic development. Furthermore, while some minority regions have responded to the official 2001 English Curriculum Standards (ECSs) by enhancing English provision, others seem to pay only lip service and their priority remains to further enhance the teaching and learning of Putonghua. The logistical problems in finding suitably qualified teachers of English for the rural areas render the goals of the trilingual policy even more difficult to achieve.

The diverse policies, which include a variety of attitudes towards the ethnic minority language ranging from strong attention to negligence, a piecemeal implementation of English, and consistently strong promotion of Putonghua, reflect linguistic priorities and the relative status of the three languages, all of which have political, social and economic implications. For instance (and at the risk of over-simplification), trilingualism, if implemented effectively, can enable marginalized groups to fully engage in the social and political life of mainstream society and enjoy educational and economic benefits. Poorly conceived and/or ineffectively implemented policies could exacerbate the marginalization and deprivation of minority groups.

The final report of this research will take the results of the nine regional projects and compare them, in order to produce an overall analysis of the policies and the implementation of trilingualism and trilingual education, the forces that shape them, in different parts of China. The results of the comparison will be significant for the formulation of socially equitable trilingual language policies in China, which will also have relevance to other education systems including Hong Kong SAR that have aspirations to foster trilingualism effectively through

schooling.

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