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Multilingual education: Lessons from China

Introduction

Multilingualism is a growing phenomenon around the world as globalization facilitates migration and also the rise of strong regional and international languages. For example, Aborigines or a new immigrant to Australia might have a home language and be learning a foreign language as well as developing competency in English as the official national language. The scale of the growth of multilingualism is considerable. The National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum in the UK, for instance, estimates that more than a million schoolchildren speak an additional language to English, and that these additional languages number over 360 (NALDIC, 2013). Education systems have found the new dynamics challenging. Policymakers have to make key decisions regarding languages to be taught in schools or used as the medium of instruction, and the time and resources to be allocated to each. As language policies are closely tied up with issues of identity (Aronin & Ó Laoirie, 2004) and social justice (Mohanty, 2009), they assume a strong ideological character (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004) and can, wittingly or unwittingly, empower some groups and marginalize others (Edwards, 2004). The focus of the articles in this Point and Counterpoint is on trilingual education in the People's Republic of China. The articles review some of the findings of a research project (see Feng & Adamson, forthcoming) that has been studying trilingual education in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Jilin, Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai and Tibet.

Trilingual education policies reflect linguistic priorities and the relative status of the three languages, all of which have political, social and economic implications. In the case of China, the three languages in question are ethnic minority languages, Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua and standard written Chinese) and a foreign language, usually English. The ethnic languages are spoken by minority groups—of which 55 groups, with a population of approximately 106 million people (China National Commission for UNESCO, 2004) are officially recognized by the Chinese government— and they tend to live in remoter, less-developed border areas of the country. Tibetans, Mongolians, Kazakhs, Uyghurs and Koreans are some of the better known minorities. Some ethnic minority people see themselves as strongly assimilated into the mainstream Han culture; others preserve a strong sense of distinct identity while maintaining a high degree of engagement with the Hans; others are inclined to resist what they consider to be Han imperialism and exploitation of their natural resources (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Yi & Adamson, forthcoming). Mandarin Chinese, which is based on the oral and written forms of the language found in

northern China around the capital, Beijing, is strongly promoted throughout the country for national unity and facility of communication. English and other foreign languages are taught in schools for their practical value in enhancing China's economy and international engagement.

Trilingual education policies in China

Trilingual education policies and practices in China have emerged at the implementation rather than policymaking level, with individual schools and, in some cases, local authorities seeking to create coherent models arising from the confluence of three distinct policy streams—one attending to questions of the linguistic and cultural rights of ethnic minority groups, one concerned with nation-building and one addressing the needs of globalization. Four distinctive models of trilingual education are discussed in the article by Dong et al. in this collection. These models reflect a range of local, national and international factors, as shown in the contribution by Zhang et al.

As students of language policy in Australia will attest, the role and status of languages in the school curriculum are by no means fixed. At different times, in terms of foreign languages, the emphasis has been on European or Asian languages according to shifts in political and economic winds. Attitudes towards indigenous languages have also veered between neglect or destruction to appreciation and empowerment. The same is true for China, where the only constant has been the strong promotion of Mandarin Chinese. English only appeared sporadically in the school curriculum in the mid-fifties, as Russian was the preferred foreign language taught in schools in the aftermath of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, given the support received at the time from the Soviet Union. English was promoted during the early 1960s as part of a modernization drive, but then was rejected to a large extent during the decade-long Cultural Revolution. Since the launching of the Open Door policy by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, English has assumed significant importance for the academic and career prospects of young Chinese, to the extent that it is taught in Kindergartens in major cities and from Grade 3 in primary schools across the country. The fortunes of ethnic minority languages have waxed and waned too as they are vulnerable to both national policies and local interpretations (given that many ethnic minority regions have a degree of autonomy in education policy making). At the national level, the swift swings between "red" policies (i.e., those oriented towards radical politicization) and "expert" policies (i.e., those oriented towards economic modernization) have meant that efforts have been made to suppress or support minority languages, while local attitudes and the political stances of key officials can frustrate or divert national policy intentions (Lam, 2005; Adamson & Feng, 2009). Generally speaking, the language policies reflect the social status of the ethnic minorities in that particular locality and their position in relation to the majority Han group, which—particularly in urban areas—often significantly outnumbers the minorities (Adamson & Feng, 2009). Currently, in regions where policies are supportive, the minority language is taught in primary schools, though it is not usually taught higher in the system.

Although the current climate in China is generally supportive of the linguistic and cultural heritage of ethnic minority groups, there are hard choices to be made. Focusing on three languages leads to the exclusion of others in regions where multiple

ethnic minority languages and dialects are spoken. The practical realities, especially the available budget, limit the scope of authorities when it comes to selecting the minority languages to be taught in schools, as appropriate teachers have to be recruited and trained, and teaching materials need to be compiled and published at an affordable cost. The shortage of teachers who can teach English through the ethnic language often results in Han teachers being recruited to teach young students a third language through their second language (Feng, 2007). The investment that is required to support the presence of a minority language in the school curriculum means that the language seldom appears at secondary level and, in some regions, there is a lack of community support for teaching their language in primary schools and a distinct preference for Mandarin Chinese and (to a lesser degree) English because of the social capital and mobility that are associated with these languages.

Benefits of trilingual education

What are the benefits of making a commitment to trilingual education? First, there is the political statement that China recognizes and values diversity. Allowing minority groups to develop a sense of cultural identity with the overarching framework of the Chinese nation might promote social harmony through collaborative rather than coercive policies, to use Cummins' (2004) terminology. Mandarin Chinese provides the cohesion to counterbalance the diversity. Second, there is an economic argument. As noted above, most of the ethnic minority groups live in border regions of the country—indeed some of them straddle the border. Having Mongolia as a neighbour provides the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region with trading opportunities, as does the location of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region close to North Korea and South Korea. Competence in Mongolian (even though the dialect and written forms differ across the borders) and in Korean facilitate and strengthen economic ties. A broader economic rationale applies to the choice of English as the main foreign language being taught in the models of trilingual education. English is also viewed as the international language of science and technology and as the key to modernizing China through a process of grafting—a notion, known as *zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* (Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for utility) that dates back 150 years to the Self-Strengthening Movement in the Qing dynasty (Adamson, 2004). However, the choice of English means that important regional languages, such as Japanese or Malay, can be undervalued in the school curriculum. Third, there is an emerging body of research that suggests that trilingual students have academic advantages accruing from stronger cognition and learning strategies over monolinguals and even bilinguals (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Clyne, Hunt & Isaakidis, 2004; Hoffmann & Ytsma, 2004; Wang et al., this collection; Finifrock & Schilken, forthcoming).

As models supporting the development of trilingualism have emerged, debates have opened up around the inter-relationship of the three languages in the learning process. One position is that trilingual education should view all three languages as equally important and that the ultimate goal should be a high degree of competence in each one. Another position is more functional, as in Luo's (2001) notion of *Duoyu Yitong* (multilingual ability with comprehensive competence in one language. In the case of the latter, one language acts as the central pillar, with students expected to achieve a lesser degree of competence in the other two languages according to their linguistic needs. Each language buttresses the development of the next language. The choice of pillar language is controversial. From a cognitive perspective, the mother tongue or

the students' first language is preferable, as this language is usually the best to foster learning. In this scenario, the goal of trilingualism in minority education would be fluency and literacy (where possible) in the mother tongue, strong competency in Mandarin Chinese, given its vital importance for life opportunities, and peer-appropriate competence in English or other foreign language (Adamson & Feng, forthcoming). However, a socio-political perspective would suggest that Mandarin Chinese might be a better choice for the pillar language, but this raises issues of cultural identity and linguistic sustainability for the minority groups.

Implications for Elsewhere

Strong models of trilingualism (Models 1 and 2 in the article by Dong et al.), in which the three languages are developed in a mutually supportive manner, possess substantial potential to provide students with social, political, economic and educational advantages. Experience of trilingual education in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, described in the article by Zhang et al., demonstrates that strong form in which the Korean language plays a foundational role for linguistic and cognitive development can result in superior academic performance. This superiority cannot be solely ascribed to the strength of Korean arising from the economic capital associated with the language or the affluence of the region. The programme in a relatively poor village in Yunnan Province described by Wang et al. achieved similar results. The mother tongue or first language of the students is the pillar, and the educational needs of the students to learn school subjects through a familiar language are respected.

There are, however, considerable challenges to overcome in establishing strong models of trilingual education. The first challenge is eliciting political will and economic commitment from key stakeholders. Although the rhetoric of state policies might recognize the potential of enhanced social harmony from boosting the self-identity of ethnic minority groups and empowering them with the linguistic tools to access opportunities in mainstream society and in the global community, the grassroots reality is often less coherent as contextual factors come into play. One major concern in the PRC is the possibility that cultivating linguistic and cultural diversity could weaken the integrity of the state. Education authorities, schools and local communities should therefore be encouraged to move towards establishing strong models at a pace that takes into account their capacity to change.

Another challenge is setting realistic goals. It is unlikely that any education system would be able to achieve high levels of proficiency in all three languages across a wide range of social, academic and professional domains unless the contextual factors were unusually propitious. Differentiated outcomes might offer a solution, with a curriculum design that aims to produce strong competence in the mother tongue (in the case of the PRC, this would be the minority language for ethnic students, Chinese for Han); a sound, functional competence in the second language (Chinese for ethnic students, the minority language for Han) and competence in English that matches the national standards set for all students.

It is also unrealistic to expect formal education to cater to all the language needs of the diverse members of society. In China, schools focus their limited resources on

teaching the dominant local, national and international languages. Communities have to provide opportunities for sustaining other languages and dialects.

There are many complex debates surrounding trilingual education, and there are no neat solutions. The articles presented in this Point and Counterpoint seek to make a contribution to the debates by sharing some experiences from China .

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