

Bilingual Education in Qinghai Province , China

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Language carries important cultural knowledge, native languages help minority cultures inherit and preserve their cultural values and beliefs. Evidence shows that teaching students in their mother language [L1] improves overall educational outcomes. However, in a linguistically diverse country, it is also vital for linguistic minorities to speak the national language to improve their access higher education and improved economic status. Consequently, a growing body of evidence has led scholars and international multilateral organizations to advocate bilingual education as the most appropriate educational model for linguistically diverse countries.

1.1 Brief introduction of Bilingual education in China

China is both ethnically and linguistically diverse and the world's most populated country with about 1.26583 billion people. The majority of the population (91.59%) is Han Chinese and the remainders are classified into 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities. The national language of China is Mandarin (Putonghua). However, In China the officially recognized minority groups speak between 61 and 80 languages, of which, 39 of these languages have a writing system.

China's minority language policy has been dictated by its general policy toward minority groups. In the 1950s the Chinese constitution of the People's Republic of China, passed a policy that guaranteed equality for all nationalities within the country and states that "every nationality has the freedom to use and develop its own language", this was further revised in the 1980's. According to the "Decision on Promoting the Development of Minority Education" issued by Chinese State Council(2002), in all primary and secondary schools, there should be a system of minority language curriculum and Chinese curriculum. The right to receive the education in the first language should be respected. Unfortunately, the gap between policy and actual practice and implementation is extensive.

1.2 Brief introduction of SC Bilingual education in Qinghai

Qinghai, a northwest inland province in China, has the total population of around 5.5 million. Many families live in poor, remote areas where many children face difficulties and often cannot access to basic quality education or other basic services. The national government has identified 15 of Qinghai's 51 counties as "National Poor Counties" where the average family income is RMB 1,043 [£66]. 42.8 % population is represented by 43 ethnic minority groups. The largest groups are Tibetan, Hui, Mongolian, and Han. The Tibetans have the largest minority population which stands at approximately 1.1million or 21.89% of the total population.

In an area that has such diverse populations and multilingual settings, the Qinghai provincial education department has tried to address the issues for improved education and language education by initiating and piloting several models of bilingual education. In 2003, Qinghai provincial education department issued *guidance for enhancing and improving the bilingual education in primary and middle schools for ethnic minority students*. The guidelines state that, the bilingual education model can be implemented in two ways:

Model 1. For those areas where the Chinese [putong hua] language environment is not good, using minority language as the medium of instruction, and introducing Chinese as a subject but not the language of instruction

Model 2. For those areas where the Chinese [putong hua] language environment is relatively good, Chinese is the main language of instruction and the minority language as an assisting one.

Unfortunately Model 2 does not support the policy and practice for minority children to receive education in their first language and show respect for minority culture and language.

Actually, there is not any standard on what is good or bad Chinese language environment. All are determined by the education authorities of the prefecture or even the county level. Many pure pasturing areas where the language environment is predominantly the minority language are using model 2.

1.3 The Challenges Facing Bilingual Education in Qinghai

The biggest obstacle to bilingual education in Qinghai is **the desperate lack of qualified bilingual teachers**. According to one investigation¹, in all Tibetan primary and middle schools, there are 8752 teachers, however, only 40% teachers can speak and use both Tibetan and Mandarin. Around 43.5% teachers cannot teach Chinese lessons or use Chinese to teach other subjects. Most teachers use their mother language.

In Tongde County, more than 90% population is Tibetan, and the language environment is predominantly Tibetan. The schools take model 1 as its bilingual education model. At Some primary schools there is not a single full time teacher who can teach Chinese. Almost every school recruits untrained temporary teachers or part-time teachers as a way of filling the gap. Some teachers are not qualified in either Chinese or education and have had only short-term pre-service or in-service training. Because of the lack of teachers each teacher has a heavy workload often having to prepare and teach over 20 lessons per week. This makes it impossible for them to

¹Research Report of Bilingual Teaching Concerning Tibetan and Chinese Languages in Qinghai, by Qinghai Institute of Education Science

study and take part in teacher development activities and training .Overall this impacts on the teaching quality and children's learning.

According to our class observation of Chinese lessons of 4 schools in Tongde, we found that:

- (1) Teachers' Mandarin is extremely poor, and consequently they serve as poor models for students in the aspects especially pronunciation, and words explanation.
- (2) Lessons focused on grammar, vocabulary and readings, whereas the new curriculum requires that each child has a chance to develop holistically.
- (3) Teaching styles are boring. Teachers require students to memorize many grammatical rules in addition to the rote memory of vocabulary and sentences. Such practices have dampened students' interest in learning both Tibetan and Chinese.

Limited recognition of the value of learning Tibetan Language is the risk for the future development of bilingual education. Many schools in Qinghai do not implement bilingual education because there is considerable resistance by some minority parents, government officials and educators to the idea of teaching both the minority language and Chinese. They justify this by claiming that the Han Chinese language is "international" and a language of economy and therefore should be the main education language and medium of instruction. Some resistance to bilingual education comes from Tibetan parents who believe Tibetan may "not help their children's future". Tibetan parents are concerned about their children's ability to pass the qualifying examinations to move on to higher education and thus provide a better economic future for the family. School administrators and teachers also have objections to bilingual education. Some fear that the study of Tibetan will slow the learning of Chinese. Others object because of the lack of textbooks and teaching materials to facilitate the teaching of Tibetan. Even if Tibetan textbooks were available, teachers fear that they will not contain the same curricula as the Chinese language textbooks, needed for the national examinations.

According to our investigation in Tongde, when we asked local people "Do you think Tibetan study has the same importance as Chinese learning?" Only 14.7% said "yes". But when we asked "Do you think it's OK your children not to learn Chinese", only 2.6% said "No."

Limited material resources in Tibetan is another significant problem that has seriously impedes the progress of bilingual education in Qinghai. There are few high-quality learning materials. In 1996, when Qinghai provincial education bureau selected learning materials for students, they found there were no more than forty different kinds of materials in Tibetan languages available in China, and the practice books and matching textbooks even fewer. There are hardly any Tibetan teaching materials, e.g. teaching reference books, posters, teaching aids. Teachers have to refer to the Chinese version of teaching materials which created the burden of reading in a second language and trying to translate these for use.

Teachers and students have to mainly rely on textbooks. But the limited Tibetan language materials are typically based on the Han culture, thus their contents are far removed from Tibetan students' daily life. Because the content is often irrelevant and the texts are too difficult, it is too hard for children to sustain their interest and achieve good learning outcomes.

Of the few materials available in Tibetan most are dull [black and white] and of poor quality and uninteresting, whereas many of the Chinese materials that are now being published are colour, more interesting and of higher quality.

1.4 Save the Children's Education Project Work in Qinghai

In Qinghai, Save the Children initiated an education project named "Qinghai Basic Education Project" in 2006 which aims to improve access to, and quality of basic primary education in Qinghai.

When Save the Children conducted the situation analysis in May 2006, the local partners invited us to do some work on bilingual education. To ensure the bilingual education project fitted in with the real situation of Qinghai, with the support of Qinghai provincial education department, Save the Children carried out a bilingual education research in Qinghai in April, 2007. After the research, Save the Children decided to set up a language learning resource center in Douhesuo primary school, Tongde County as a pilot project to show a different approach to language education.

1.5 The language learning resource center in Qinghai

Based on the analysis of the critical challenges to bilingual education in Qinghai, we designed the center to

- (1) Recognize and supports understanding of Tibetan language and culture,
- (2) Help Tibetan students to improve their Chinese language skills, especially their listening, speaking and reading abilities

Base the teaching and learning on an approach that matches international research which shows that children need to listen and speak BEFORE they can learn to read and write a second language

- (3) Improve students' life skills,
- (4) Promote the overall participation by community in education by involving them in the center's management and running.

The idea of language learning resource center is not only to meet the major challenges facing bilingual education in Qinghai, but also to research advances in language learning and child development.

1.5.1 The importance of Early Language Exposure

It has been proved that there are advantages for individuals to learn second language in early childhood. The remarkable brain flexibility in early development has been documented in many studies showing that child learners are more capable of acquiring a second language, especially in listening and speaking. What's more, young children usually experience less language anxiety during second language learning. Therefore, having exposure of a second language in childhood could be very helpful. More and more researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of childhood exposure to a second language in a natural language environment so children can listen to and learn language that is relevant to them rather than what the text books dictate what they should learn.

1.5.2 Children centred learning community

Constructivism, one of modern learning theories, proposes that students don't passively accept all presented stimuli but seek for what they want actively and develop through their own active construction. It was felt that children needed spaces that could provide them with learning experiences which would develop not only their knowledge but their thinking skills and ability to work together. It is therefore important to set up a child-centered learning environment and enhance peer interaction and child-environment interaction. Particularly in learning a second language, it is of importance to provide children with plenty opportunities of using and practicing language in a variety of situations. On the other hand, it has been documented that there are great differences in information processing mechanisms between adults and children. Children often learn incidentally and unintentional, while adults often adopt a planned, procedural, analytical and logical method for learning. An effective learning program should pay enough attention to children's incidental learning in addition to intentional learning activities.

Based on this, from the beginning we stressed this was not a traditional classroom but a place where children themselves could decide what they could do, and with the volunteers setting up spaces for children to experiment, practice, and learn. Chose to train volunteers rather than the teachers to work in the centre .It as felt they may have used the centre as a further opportunity to continue "teaching" ie lecturing and rote learning methods. Through interesting shared reading activities, listening and speaking games, we wanted the centre to increase second language exposure and give children an opportunity to listen to and practice Tibetan and Mandarin Chinese language in a natural learning environment rather than in a formal classroom situation.

1.5.3 Volunteers as the qualified organizers and facilitators for children's language learning

The shortage of qualified bilingual teachers in schools is a persistent problem as discussed above and teacher tend to revert to the classroom teaching mode when teaching language, we needed to find a group of people who had the language skills

in both Chinese and Tibetan and would be open to finding new ways of working with children in a less formal setting. In the center, we are using volunteers who are fluent both in Chinese and Tibetan. Fifty-three Tibetan volunteers from Qinghai Normal University have been selected for the center. Their main roles are to organize and facilitate students' language learning activities.

The main requirements for volunteers in the center are a passion for facilitating children's learning, advanced skills of playing with children, and basic skills in designing language learning activities and materials. It is easy to find volunteers in the Qinghai Normal Universities because for the student volunteers, it is a good opportunities to learn how to work with children, and to know the real situation of the teaching practice of the remote areas.

In order to prepare the volunteers as qualified facilitators in the center, we conducted an intensive training. The three specific aims of the training were to ensure all volunteers have a common understanding on the function and aims of the center, to improve their skills to play with and work with children, to help them design and plan the language learning activities and materials. The volunteers, in groups, developed lesson plans using local resources, identifying themes relevant to students' local contexts, using an innovative theme based language approach.

1.5.4 Providing meaningful and user-friendly language learning resources

Resources for children's language learning were selected and designed to meet goals:

- (1) To develop children's interest in learning Chinese and Tibetan;
- (2) To offer substantial language input. In this center, we carefully selected a variety of Chinese books especially for children, which have very simple Chinese. We also bought a lot of DVD of children's stories, songs and chants in Chinese and Tibetan. Because there is very few qualified bilingual or Tibetan children books in the market. We trained volunteers with skills to make the bilingual learning materials, such as big books /wall stories using role play and games. With so much existing materials and knowledge on how to make the materials, volunteers now feel more confident about how to facilitate children's learning.

1.5.5 A hub for improving children's life skill and community participation in education

In Qinghai, the life skill of children is very low. In their traditional lessons, there is only Tibetan, Chinese and Mathematic, but no other lessons. Because of the extreme shortage of teachers, not enough attention is paid to the student's overall development only the academic performance and the ability to pass exams.

In Qinghai, schools are often perceived by parents as irrelevant, as not teaching useful skills or conveying useful information and, along with poverty and poor quality of teaching, contributes to the high absenteeism and drop out rate. Teachers in many

schools do not value the potential input of parents. The parents have no opportunities to know and understand the importance of education for their children; they also think it's the full responsibility for schools to educate children.

Based on above, the center could set a good example on how to improve children's life skill by well planned, interesting activities and develop ways to involve communities in school education. In the center, we designed activities to improve children's ability to know themselves, improve their self esteem, and communication skills through providing opportunities to succeed and to communicate with others better.

The activities of the center are developed on the basis of themes. Children were asked about what things they would like to learn about and understand better .All themes are related to the children's real life, e.g. health and hygiene, environment protection Science. In addition, the community people are involved in the whole process, from center design, management and running. The center also provides many books for communities to read, for example, the books on stocks.

1.6 Looking ahead

We carried out a mid-term review in May, 2008. All related parties report positive feedback on the center. The headmaster said" It is great opportunity for our school to have so many young volunteers. They definitely will bring new ideas to our teachers. And for our students, they never have a center to play and learn..." The volunteers said" In the center, we are learning how to work with children. We never had such opportunity to go to a remote school, and observe the lessons..."The students were involved in the designing, naming of center and choosing all the books, facilities. They are really happy to see all come to true.

In this stage, however it's too early for us to see the positive effectiveness of the center on the current teaching practice. Nor can we offer any empirical evidence of the center's impact on children's development. But the center represents a possible approach which will build up skills in both languages. It will offer a simple, practical model which schools can learn from easily in the context of teacher shortage. The local teachers will be influenced by participating the volunteer training, and being involved into the center gradually. The schools principals, education officials and teachers are encouraged visiting, observing the centre and getting involved in activities. The parents are encouraged to be involved into the activities as well.

Despite the above possible benefit of the center, we also are facing many challenges, especially the sustainability. Only several training workshops are not enough for volunteers to obtain all required knowledge on activities design and facilitating. Furthermore, the volunteers will graduate every year, and new volunteers will join it. How to make the training as more regular learning activities for volunteers is a problem. In addition, the cost for the volunteers' support is relatively high. We need to

find out another cost-effective way to ensure the sustainability.

Furthermore, we found there are no opportunities for children to access early childhood education in Tongde. We are planning to integrate the early childhood education into the center.